

The genre of Aristotle's lyric commemorating his friend Hermeias (842 *PMG*) has been a subject of debate almost since it was composed around 341 BCE. Athenaeus (696A-697B) attests to a long-standing controversy over whether the poem was a skolion, a paeon, a hymn, or some novel mixture of forms. He also repeats, possibly drawing on Hermippus, a remarkable story according to which the question as to genre almost cost Aristotle his life: after the death of Alexander, we are told, anti-Macedonian agitators in Athens cited the song as proof of Aristotle's impiety—because it praised Hermeias as if he were a god. In effect, the capital offense was that the Prince of critics had confused encomium with hymn!

This song and the traditions of its reception thus present a doubly rich field for exploring Greek conceptions of poetic genre: they raise both the question of how (and why) we are to classify Aristotle's song as "belonging" to one genre and not another, and of how we are to make sense of the discrepant interpretations given to the self-same set of words across different interpretative communities. My discussion will start by arguing that the position of Aristotle's prosecutors is intelligible and historically credible, both in terms of the social and political context of the time and in relation to what can be hazarded about the notion of genre in that crucial but little known period between the *Poetics* and the founding of the Alexandrian Museum.

I shall then take up the song itself and distinguish between what can be called "essentializing" approaches to classification and more recent, contextually inflected conceptions of genre. The essentializing approach, which one can see already in Athenaeus and in a number of modern continuators (e.g. Bowra, Renehan), looks for objective, usually formal properties that mark a work as "really" belonging to genre X or Y, or X crossed with Y. By contrast, recent approaches (e.g. Rutherford, Käppel) suggest that formal cues were often optional or negotiable, and could in any case be overridden by context-based ideas about the "right" song for a given occasion. Each perspective, I argue, has merit, and I use Aristotle's song as a case study to inquire whether a poem composed for one context (a one-off ritual performance at a small, private ceremony, according to Wilamowitz) can be said to have changed its genre when it was transferred to another (such as the Lyceum, where it was reportedly performed "daily" after meals). Indeed, we should ask as well whether the song changed genre yet again when it was transcribed into the pages of Athenaeus.