Designing a metrical database for Greek lyric texts: problems and solutions

Abstract

The study of metre has always been connected with textual criticism. In particular, the metres of lyric parts of Greek drama are more prone to corruption in the course of transmission due to a higher degree of irregularity than stichic verses such as hexameters or iambics. For many of choral odes, extensive philological work has been done to arrive to a text that would simultaneously make sense syntactically and semantically and fit a metrical scheme.

The work behind critical editions is often disregarded when it comes to producing data for the purposes of computer analysis. It has to do not only with the amount of extra work it would need but also with the difficulties that the nature of a critical apparatus in Classics entails (see Damon 2016). Although for some projects textual variants can be disregarded, scholars engaging with metre cannot ignore the history of the text in front of them. Not only is the size of the corpus relatively small, but most importantly, the metrical analysis and textual criticism are interdependent.

Even the existing non-digital tools for working with Greek metre do not always take this difficulty into account. The schemata in editions and commentaries serve a different goal, assisting the reader of a specific text, whereas well-known compilations of metrical analyses (e.g. Schröder 1907–1928; Dale 1971) do not discuss questions of textual criticism. An additional difficulty is the simplification of metrical sequences in the schemata. Turning a sequence of longs and shorts into a concise and meaningful entity (e.g. −○− = “cretic”) is helpful for the user. However, it has two drawbacks: it forces the editor to make a choice which is then imposed onto the readers and it makes impossible a comparison of lines containing similar sequences but analysed differently.

Therefore, scholars working on metres of Greek tragical choruses often have to first disentangle the critical apparatus and then link it to metrical analyses scattered across commentaries, periodicals, and specialist works. In order to solve these two problems and to advance the study of Greek lyric metres, I propose a project which would use computational tools in order to build a metrical database of lyric portions of Greek drama, taking into account relevant textual variants and fully searchable. It would allow researchers to identify patterns of interest in a corpus of annotations which carries as little bias as possible, but at the same time contains information about the history of the text and bibliography of metrical analyses.

In this paper, I will discuss the technical and methodological difficulties that the construction of such a corpus entails. In particular, I will analyse the suitability of using TEI-XML encoding for the matters of metre and textual criticism and suggest that an alternative solution to the problem of overlapping hierarchies, namely using graph structures to represent the annotated text (Piez 2014; Dekker and Birnbaum 2017), might prove more useful.

References


