Performances of Greek epics customarily began with a hymn to a god or goddess—as Hesiod’s Theogony and Works and Days do. A collection of thirty-three such poems has come down to us from antiquity under the title Hymns of Homer. This new Loeb Classical Library volume contains, in addition to the Hymns, fragments of five comic poems that were connected with Homer’s name in or just after the Classical period (but are not today believed to be by the author of the Iliad and the Odyssey). Here too is a collection of ancient accounts of the poet’s life.

The Hymns range widely in length: two are over 500 lines long; several run only a half dozen lines. Among the longest are the hymn To Demeter, which tells the foundational story of the Eleusinian Mysteries; and To Hermes, distinctive in being amusing. The comic poems gathered as Homeric Apocrypha include Margites, the Battle of Frogs and Mice, and, for the first time in English, a fragment of a perhaps earlier poem of the same type called Battle of the Weasel and the Mice. The edition of Lives of Homer contains The Contest of Homer and Hesiod and nine other biographical accounts, translated into English for the first time.

Martin West’s faithful and pleasing translations are fully annotated; his freshly edited texts offer new solutions to a number of textual puzzles.

My Personal Review:
Back in 1914, the Loeb Classical Library issued, as volume 57 of the series, “Hesiod, The Homeric Hymns and Homerica,” edited and translated by Hugh G. Evelyn-White. A revised and expanded edition of 1920 included a substantial appendix of newly published fragments from Greek papyri; this appendix received a further supplement in 1936, edited and translated by D.L. Page. The volume was reprinted at intervals thereafter (my copy is from 1967), but without updating.
Now Martin L. West, already known for his editions and translations of Hesiod and the early lyric poets, not to mention a recent edition of the "Iliad," has re-edited and re-translated part of the material as a new Loeb volume, "Homeric Hymns, Homeric Apocrypha, Lives of Homer." He offers it as the first part of a three-volume replacement for the Evelyn-White edition.

Although modern text editions (with very nice ZephGreek type) and better translations are welcome, one's first response is a grimace at buying three new books to replace a single old one. A closer look shows that this is really a good idea after all.

The Homeric Hymns (to the major Olympians, and some minor gods, in Homeric hexameters) are presented with superior textual readings, incorporating almost a century of additional research, and some of West's own suggestions. The prose translations are far easier going than their predecessor in the old Loeb edition, without being excessively colloquial. [I have now discussed the Hymns in more detail in reviews of three translations, by Athanassakis, Cashford, and Rayor.]

To the standard comic "Apocrypha," the poems "Margites" (references and fragments on the adventures of a fool, a sort of anti-Odyssey), "Cercopes" (ape-like opponents of Herakles, references only), and "The Battle of the Frogs and Mice" (references and fragments; a mock-Iliad) are added references and possible quotations for "Epikichlides" (a mock-erotic piece), and "The Battle of the Weasel and the Mice." This last is a fragment from papyri, first published in 1983; although nowhere attributed to Homer, it, or something very like, is clearly alluded to in the "canonical" "Frogs and Mice."

Then comes the big change, concentrated in the final section. A modern edition of the story of "The Contest of Homer and Hesiod" is supplemented by important additions not found in Evelyn-White's volume. In place of his collection of pseudo-Homeric "Epigrams," we get them in their literary context, the "On Homer's Origins, Date, and Life," which tries to pass itself off as a work by Herodotus. This survey of traditions and fictions is followed by the other ancient "Lives" of Homer, including the excerpts and summaries found in medieval Greek writers. These works, often alluded to, have not been available in English before (and in fact most have not been all that easy to find in Greek, either). Some of them are amusing, and all illustrate that the genre of "celebrity biography" is very old, and has never let a lack of facts get in the way.

Finally, there are two indexes, one to the Hymns and Apocrypha, the other to "Lives".

Similar expansions are promised for the Hesiodic material (Theogony, Works and Days, Shield of Herakles, and numerous fragments) [still
forthcoming], and the summaries and fragments of the Epic Cycle (the other stories of the Trojan War, and the Wars with Thebes) [now published]. Despite the expense, I look forward to them.

[Note: taking another look at this review, I find that I either omitted, or at some point deleted, mention of the interesting treatment of the volume by R. Scott Garner, in the on-line "Bryn Mawr Classical Review" (written and edited by professional classicists, although the contents are -- mostly -- intended to be accessible to serious lay readers.) Garner raises a number of specific objections, but concludes that "on the whole this is a volume that is quite worthy of one of the top individuals working in the field today and a welcome addition to the Loeb Classical Library in general."]

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