

The Muses' Playground 3

Performing artifice

Traces of oral tradition in 'Homer'

- We know that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were transmitted orally for a significant period of time prior to being written down
 - 13th C BC / 8th C BC
 - On a fluid vs fixed tradition, cf. Dowden, 1996
- The text we study today was largely shaped in Athens in the 6th through 4th centuries, pulling together a range of different versions, and further edited in Alexandria in the Hellenistic period

Features of oral poetry in Homer

- The following features of Homer's poetry tend to be identified as resulting from the oral tradition:
 - Meter
 - Set epithets for characters and places
 - Not always appropriate for the context

Hom. *Il.* 15.1-5

But when the Trojans in their flight had passed over the palisade and the trench, and many had been vanquished beneath the hands of the Danaans, then beside their chariots they stayed, and were halted, pale with fear, terror-stricken; and Zeus awoke on the peaks of Ida beside Hera of the golden throne.

Variable epithets

Αγαμεμνων

κρειων Αγαμεμνων

Ατρειδης Αγαμεμνων

αναξ ανδρων Αγαμεμνων

Ευρυ κρειων Αγαμεμνων

ηρωσ Ατρειδης ευρυ κρειν Αγαμεμνων

Features of oral poetry in Homer

- Type situations
- (Extended) similes with no or little immediate connection to the topic on hand
- Catalogue sections
- ‘A maid brought water in a beautiful golden jug and poured it out over a silver basin, for them to wash their hands; and she set a polished table beside them.’

Homer scholarship and orality

- The links between oral storytelling and the shape and form of the Homeric epics were first indicated by Parry in the 1920s
- This change in perspective on Homer also follows naturally from the 18/19th century fascination with folktale and tradition
- Parry based his analysis of Homer on fieldwork in the Balkans, and collection of contemporary, oral storytelling, demonstrating the features mentioned previously
- 2nd half 20th C reaction against the emphasis on the mechanics of the oral composition to highlight the artistry of the performer/poet (again, cf. Foley 1996)

Literature and orality at Rome

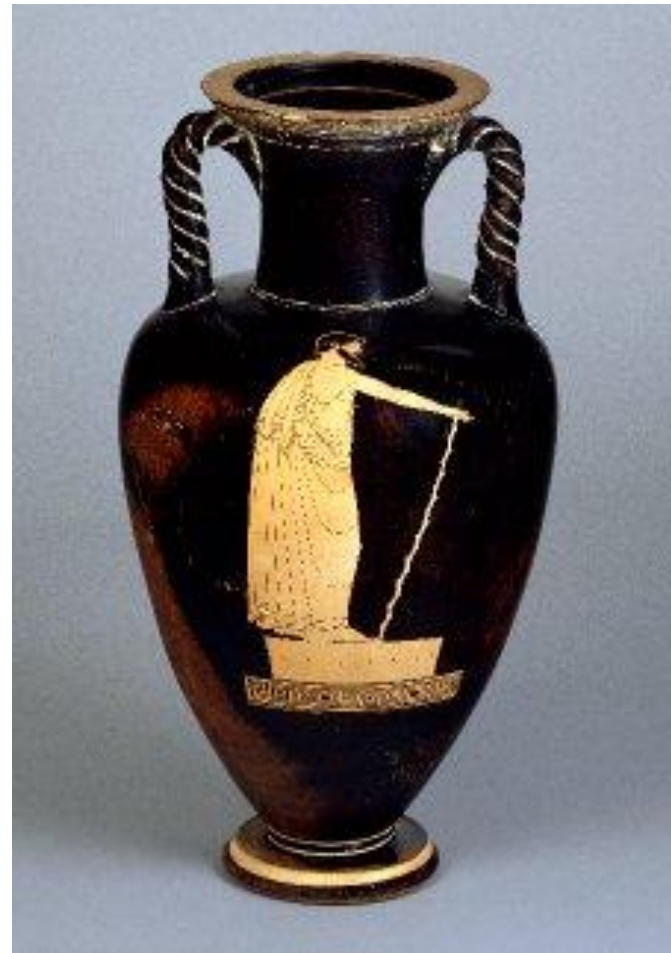
- *Virgil can sing of Actium's shores that Phoebus watches over, and of Caesar's brave ships: he, who brings to life the battles of Aeneas of Troy, and the walls that he built on Lavinium's coast. Give way you Roman authors! Give way you Greeks! Something more than the Iliad's being born.* (Prop. 2.34)
- Recitation part of the gradual publication process
- Poetry and prose was read aloud, if possible by a slave – the literary experience was one of audio, not of vision
- Juv. 1.1-6
- *What? Am I to be a listener only all my days? Am I never to get my word in—I that have been so often bored by the Theseid of the ranting Cordus? Shall this one have spouted to me his comedies, and that one his love ditties, and I be unavenged? Shall I have no revenge on one who has taken up the whole day with an interminable Telephus or with an Orestes which, after filling the margin at the top of the roll and the back as well, hasn't even yet come to an end?*

Oral poetry continuum?

- Given the practice of reading aloud, there is a continuum of oral performance of (e.g.) narrative in antiquity
- However, once writing re-emerged in Greek culture from the 9/8th C onwards, the epic poetry also comes to rely heavily on there being a physical copy of the text, and changes accordingly
 - On this, cf. Foley, 1996.
- Traces of oral transmission imitated but not present for any other reason but audience expectation
 - This becomes gradually more prominent over time

Catching a glimpse of the bard

- We can approach the oral setting and performance of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* only gradually
 - Via depictions of poetic performance within the epics themselves
 - Via limited archaeological evidence
 - Via comparison with performance of oral tradition today



'As once in Tiryns...'
(490-480 BC)

Bardic performance in Homer

- Two characters described as professional performers of poetic narratives are particularly useful here
- Phemius, Hom. *Od.* 1.325-327; 22.330-377
 - The bard's fame
 - The cyclic nature
 - The element of praise as crucial
 - Is the real word for 'epic' 'kleos'?
 - Responsiveness to audience
- Demodokus, Hom. *Od.* 8
- Phemius singing to the suitors (1.325-327)
- *There the famous bard was singing for them, and they sat in silence, listening. He sang of the homecoming of the Achaians, the painful return which Pallas Athene had laid on them from Troy.*
- *'Phemius, you know many other ways to charm men's ears – deeds of men and gods that poets celebrate. Sing of one of these to the suitors here [...]*

Phemius the clue

- Has at his disposal a considerable repertoire to fit any given audience
- ‘You will regret it in future time if you kill a bard like me, who sings for gods and men. I am self-taught, and god has implanted in my mind every pathway of song.’ (*Od.* 22.344-348)
- Has significant standing (he *is* spared by Odysseus) and claims to have received knowledge from the gods

Openings

- The wrath sing, **goddess**, of Peleus' son, Achilles, that destructive wrath which brought countless woes upon the Achaeans, and sent forth to Hades many valiant souls of heroes, and made them themselves spoil for dogs and every bird; thus the plan of Zeus came to fulfillment, from the time when first they parted in strife Atreus' son, king of men, and brilliant Achilles.
- **Muse**, tell me of a man: a man of much resource, who was made to wander far and long, after he had sacked the city of Troy.
- Both Phemius and Demodocus rely on knowledge passed to them from the Muses
- The invocation to a goddess of song in the proem has indeed sometimes been noted as a typical feature of epic
 - Other genres will interact with this type of programmatic statement later on, but also find different methods of discussing their poetry and biography
- This corresponds to practice observed in our texts and explicitly discussed elsewhere:

Hesiod, *Works and Days* 1.22-34

- *And one day they taught Hesiod glorious song while he was
shepherding his lambs under holy Helicon, and this word
first the goddesses said to me — the Muses of Olympus,
daughters of Zeus who holds the aegis: “Shepherds of the
wilderness, wretched things of shame, mere bellies, we
know how to speak many false things as though they were
true; but we know, when we will, to utter true things.” So
said the ready-voiced daughters of great Zeus, and they
plucked and gave me a rod, a shoot of sturdy laurel, a
marvellous thing, and breathed into me a divine voice to
celebrate things that shall be and things that were
aforetime; and they bade me sing of the race of the blessed
gods that are eternally, but ever to sing of themselves both
first and last.*

The special connection - authority

- *Then the herald approached leading the loyal bard. This was a man the Muse had loved more than any other, but she had given him both good and bad: she had robbed him of his eyes, but gave him the gift of sweet song. (Od. 8.62-66)*
- *Demodokos, there is no one in the world whom I praise with admiration more than I do you. You must have studied under the Muse, Zeus' daughter, and under Apollo, - with such a sense of order [kosmos] do you sing the return of the Achaeans with all their sufferings and adventures. If you were not there yourself, you must have heard it all from some one who was. (Od. 8.491ff*
- The successful bard has knowledge that may outshine that of eyewitnesses – cf. Odysseus praise of Demodocus in 8.491
- However, scholars have pointed out that the praxis of bardic performance is unlikely to be accurately represented here – no learning curve, no practise
- Other narratives make reference to why their information is well-founded

Bards and other narrators

- The bard's narrative is also generally detached and not aimed at invoking any particular emotions or responses in the audience
 - Other narratives (e.g. Odysseus' lying tales) serve to provoke a specific reaction from the listener(s)
 - Odysseus compared to a bard – does this highlight difference or similarity?
 - Implicitly, this difference should also be connected to the scope of epic as offering truthful discourse on wide themes
- *'Character narratives may be truthful, vivid, and entertaining, but bardic narratives are reliably so, because they are undistorted by the needs of a particular speaker on a particular occasion. In the implicit poetics of Homer, bards are independent of their performance context.'*
(Scodel, 1998, 173)

Bards and audience pressure

- In practice, scholars believe that the details of a narrative would be adjusted by the performer to please a particular audience...
 - E.g. insertion or expansion of sections in catalogues
- ...and that the authority lent by the Muses in proems (in parallel to what we see *in-text*) also reflects favourably on the patron of the bard
 - Cf. Wheeler 2002
- Studies of contemporary oral literature (orature) show that such considerations are commonplace:

Relating to the audience: then and now

- On oral epic:
- It is direct; addresser and addressee are face to face. They can see, hear, smell, and touch each other, and they mutually influence each other as the performance proceeds. The experience is shared, and joy, melancholy, fear, or aggression is contagious among the participants. The success of a singer depends on his ability to catch the interest of his audience and keep it. He is intent on meeting their demands and is all the time attentive to their reactions. If they show signs of being bored, he introduces something exciting or, on the contrary, abbreviates his narrative and hastens to the end. The more often he performs the same narrative, the better he knows what will make people laugh or cry, and the experienced singer is skilled at manipulating the feelings of his audience. **But when asked, listeners say that they have been moved by the truth of the tale.**

(Skaftø Jensen, 2005)

Responsiveness of oral literature

- Ancient Greek performance of oral literature would have included an element of competition
 - Cf. how bards in the *Odyssey* are repeatedly described as 'better' or 'best' – presupposing a *comparandum*, and cf. Aristotle's praise of Homer
- Performers quick to respond to new circumstances while using the accustomed material would excel – so for instance performers of Hilali epic in today's Egypt now add a running commentary making ancient material intelligible and relevant today

To take away

- Orality plays a part in ancient literature and particularly epic from the very beginnings of Greek literature through to late antiquity
 - Oral tradition
 - Recitation
- We identify traces of orality in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, but must note that depictions of performed narrative also obscure much of the actual processes of oral tradition
- The influence of oral tradition, and comparisons with oral traditions today, can only highlight the changeability and adaptability of the genre

Further reading: Brill E-Books

- King, N. (2007) ‘“SUMMONING TOGETHER ALL THE PEOPLE”: VARIANT TELLINGS OF THE MWINDO EPIC AS SOCIAL AND POLITICAL DELIBERATION’, In: *Politics of Orality: Orality and Literacy in Ancient Greece*, Vol. 6, ed. S. Cooper, Leiden.
- Teffeteller, Annette. "Orality and the politics of scholarship." Politics of Orality: Orality and Literacy in Ancient Greece, Vol. 6. Ed. C. Cooper. Brill, 2007.