

NON-ASSESSED ASSIGNMENT 1. ANALYSIS OF THE ROLE OF BARDS IN HOMER

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MYTH IN GREEK AND ROMAN EPIC (HPAH7007)

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Human societies are made from remembrance and mnemonic elements that bound them as individualized and unique cultures. Orality is the most accessible form of transmitting information among a more or less large crowd and, as such, it is but an instrument for the expressing of a variety of tales, differing both in length and content, present in most of the Ancient and pre-industrialized societies – like the Greek case – but still preserved in our time – as it is the case of the Galician *cantigas* or the Balkan epic tales performed by *guslars*.

Just as the term *guslar*, in Ancient Greece epic orally based poems were so widespread that there was a term for one who sung them, *aoidos*, derived from ἀοιδή, “song”, making the term *aoidos* mean, simply, “one who sings”. These so-called bards performed and transmitted tales and odes from generation to generation preserving these stories – these would later be defined as being gifts from the Muses¹. This way, each new generator of *aoidoi* had a larger *corpus* of tales to work with, gifted to them by their predecessors as a complex interwoven tapestry². By the time Homer fossilized parts of these odes onto their famous poems somewhere along the 8th century BCE, this *corpus* must have been substantial in volume.

Bards in Ancient Greece sung “not about the new (the created), but about the old (the known)”³, recalling the past and making it their own⁴. In the Homeric poems, there is a very specific image of a bard painted onto the script; that of a freeman who works for the Mycenaean palaces as a singer for the ruling class that entertains kings and their courts⁵ with tales of Gods and heroes⁶.

There are two main distinctions between narrators and bards in the Homeric epics: 1) the bard is knowledgeable about the doings of the Gods at Olympus in detail, whereas the average narrator would only know what they can perceive or experience; and 2) bardic narrative is not intentional by nature nor seeks to manipulate their audiences, generating a degree of impartiality and impersonality unknown in the narrations of the poems⁷. These ideas will be further explored and exemplified below.

¹ Baños Álvarez, 2001, p. 5; Otto, 2005, p. 33

² López Eire, 2017, p. 16.

³ Vélez Upegui, 2018, p. 34.

⁴ Vélez Upegui, 2018, p. 34.

⁵ Vélez Upegui, 2019, pp. 85-6.

⁶ Vélez Upegui, 2018, p. 52.

⁷ Scodel, 1998, pp. 172, 179.

The *Iliad* is surprisingly scarce in bards. Only in two occasions does Homer include the presence of a bard, and in none of them not even a name is provided. In the first instance, on 18.569-71, the word *aoidos* is nowhere to be seen, and the reader must interpret it as such by the elements described by the narrator: “and in their midst a boy made pleasant music with a clear-toned lyre, and to it sang sweetly the Linos song with his delicate voice⁸”. Here, the inclusion of φόρμιγγι in verse 569 is a clear indicator that this “boy” is none other than a bard, as the lyre and similar musical instruments were an indicator of their job; whereas a warrior could be identified by a sword or lance or a king by a scepter, lyres were *aoidoi*’s identificatory utensils.

The second and final bard – or, should I say, *bards* – to appear on the *Iliad* has a drastically different context; whereas the previous “boy” was singing in an almost bucolic image on Achilles’ shield, in here (24.720-22) Hector’s body has just been returned to Troy: “... and by his side set singers, leaders of the dirge, who led the song of lamentation – they chanted the dirge, and to it the women added their laments”. Thankfully, here we get the “singers” named as what they are, ᾠδοῦς (line 720).

It is interesting to note how none of these *aoidoi* sing of Gods and heroes, but specific songs associated with precise moments in life; the *linos* – associated with the harvest and the joy it brought to the people – in the first example, and the *trenos* – a funerary chant – in the second one⁹. Could this be the reason why these bards are poorly described, not even a name being provided, in the same book that offers us detailed depictions of forty-four generals and more than two hundred and forty-five deceased soldiers¹⁰?

The *Odyssey*, unlike the *Iliad*, is rich in bards: four of them appear throughout the poem, and two of them get a name and their own stories. They are all in palatial contexts under the patronage of Mycenaean kings: the first two, unnamed, are under Agamemnon and Menelaus’ wing, while the other two appear in Alcinous and Odysseus’ palaces¹¹.

We only learn about the first *aoidos*, the Agamemnon one, through Nestor’s words in 3.266-72. In there, this unnamed “minstrel¹²” (ᾠιδός, line 267) was appointed as Clytemnestra’s protector while the king was away at Troy, only to be assassinated by Aegisthus shortly after. No further details are given about this first bard, but the sparse information we get here serves as a testimony for *aoidoi*’s importance during Mycenaean and Submycenaean times. However, Agamemnon’s case could very well just be an exception, as nowhere else it is said that protection was among the duty of bards¹³. This bard could have had a special relationship with the king, or maybe his appointment as

⁸ Trans. A. T. Murray, Rev. William F. Wyatt, 1925.

⁹ Vélez Upegui, 2018, p. 48.

¹⁰ Vélez Upegui, 2018, p. 47.

¹¹ Vélez Upegui, 2019, p. 86.

¹² Trans. A. T. Murray, rev. George E. Dimock, 1999.

¹³ Vélez Upegui, 2019, p. 86.

protector is a testament to Agamemnon's ineptitude and is a sort of mockery of the usual personnel safeguarding the queen and other important royal members.

The only other unnamed bard, the Sparta one, is only given a few verses: "...and among them a divine minstrel was singing to the lyre" (18.17-8)¹⁴. Not much can be said about this *aoidos*, only that it is a perfect example of what an ideal bard would have been: an entertainer in the background of social meetings, unbothered and unassuming.

Demodocus (Δημόδοκος) and Phemius (Φήμιος) are the two most well-known bards in the Homeric poems. Demodocus' name translates to "the one who is accepted by the community"¹⁵, and he appears as the appointed bard for king Alcinous' court. He is characterized as a man blinded by the Muses but also beloved by them, and as such they had gifted him with the "ability to move with his songs the hearts of the people"¹⁶. He is seen mostly in book 8, after he is invoked by the Phaeacian's king to sing some songs as entertainment. By virtue of coincidence, his first song (8.72-82) verses about the Trojan War and the events of the *Iliad* – linking the two poems together¹⁷. Of course, among the greater narrative structure, this song – as well as the one about the Trojan Horse he sings (8.499-520) after a request by Odysseus himself (8.487-498) – are vital for the progression of the story, as they will provoke a reaction out of Odysseus and prompt the *Apologia* for books 9 to 12.

Demodocus sings another long and hefty ode in 8.266-366, exploring the myth of the love affair between Ares and Aphrodite and Hephaestus' response to it. Therefore, he explores the two main topics of bardic performance: the deeds of heroes and the tales about the Gods. These songs constitute an impressive metadiegetic act¹⁸ that serve as wonderful examples for the more mature and complex writing the *Odyssey* has in contrast to its predecessor.

Nevertheless, even if it has a narrative "ulterior motive", within the narration Demodocus is not singing with the intent of praising Odysseus or making him purposefully weep, as he does not know him and his songs are portrayed as impartial¹⁹.

Finally, Phemius, whose name means "the rumorously"²⁰, is the appointed bard for the Ithaca palace. His context is very different from Demodocus', as he is forced to sing to entertain Penelope's suitors, not getting the freedom that the Phaeacian *aoidos* seemed to have. He sings at the beginning and at the end of the poem: at first, in 1.154-5 only the circumstance of his singing is given, "under compulsion" (ἀνάγκη, line 154); it isn't until further into the book, in 1.325-27, when we finally know the content of this forceful song: Phemius sings about "the return of Achaeans" (ὁ δ' Ἀχαιῶν νόστον, line 326), which prompts the appearance of Penelope. Once more, a bardic song propels the story without

¹⁴ Segal, 1994, p. 117.

¹⁵ Vélez Upegui, 2019, p. 86.

¹⁶ Grimal, 1981, p. 133.

¹⁷ Vélez Upegui, 2018, p. 57.

¹⁸ Vélez Upegui, 2017, pp.56-7.

¹⁹ Scodel, 1998, p. 184.

²⁰ Vélez Upegui, 2017, p. 57.

an intent to do so from the *aoidos*' part. He is once more mentioned as performing for the suitors in 17.262-3, although no further details are provided.

“The Homeric bard is a singer rather than a maker, an *aoidos* rather than a *poietaes*, because he is the voice and the vehicle of an ancient wisdom²¹”. The material in their repertoire is not as important as the context in which it is performed, serving to the narrative structure of the larger poem but differentiating itself from the other narrators in order to create striking pulses of lyricism within the epic poems. Thanks to Homer – whomever they might have been –, their voices and legacies were never lost and, as such, their mnemonic cycle follows until our days.

²¹ Segal, 1994, p. 139.

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