

# HOMER AND ORAL POETRY

BY

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Who was Homer? When did he live? Was there even a Homer? If so, did he write both the Iliad and the Odyssey? Although the Homeric Question has intrigued scholars for millennia, many uncertainties remain about the true authorship of the epics. In the past century, inquiry has focused on the role of oral composition in the creation of the Homeric texts. Theories of oral poetry composition were created through the observation of modern oral bards in pre-literate societies and applied to the Iliad and the Odyssey. The recent discovery of the prominent role of the oral tradition in the Homeric texts does not, however, eliminate the role played by Homer; his inventiveness is a major part of what makes the epics shine.

In the 1930s, Milman Parry (1902-1935) and Albert Lord (1912-2001) first proposed the theory that the Homeric epics were composed orally. After studying the Iliad and the Odyssey, Parry was convinced that Homer's poems were both traditional tales and creative compositions, despite the apparent contradiction. But how could Homer have both inherited the songs and



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written them himself? Parry answered the question, applying what today is known as oral theory to the Homeric texts to explain epithets and parallelism.

Many of the words in this debate have slightly unusual connotations. *Oral theory* itself is a misnomer – it implies that the bard’s knowledge of oral poetry is theoretical. In fact, the *theory* lies in the affinity of the Homeric texts with scholars’ existing knowledge of oral poetry (Nagy 20). The use of the word *oral* can also be confusing. Usually this word is used in reference to something spoken by one or many persons and heard by others. By modern connotations, *oral poetry* is any poetry recited from memory, even if it was written before the performance. However, scholars do not label the epic poems *oral* merely because they were spoken or sung in performance. Rather, the Homeric poems are *oral* because they were composed at the same time as they were orally performed (Lord 5). This idea cannot be equated with improvisation in the modern sense, as the bards who perform oral poetry have predetermined elements, on which they base their songs. However, the singers are not by any means performing a song they have memorized by rote. The term *oral* is here relevant, not to the final form of the poetry, but to its creation (Nagy 13).

As he examined the Homeric texts, Parry concluded that much of the poems was based on formulas. Previous scholars had seen the epithets used to modify people, gods, and objects as embellishments to heighten the diction and thicken the images (Pope 10)<sup>1</sup> and thought that they were conventions intended to show respect (Pope 14 f). Other scholars used instances in which the epithets seemed to be misused as proof of alteration by later generations. Parry, however, saw these epithets as formulaic expressions that had been handed down from bard to bard and used to fit the meter. The metrical irregularities, cases in which these tags appear to be misused, could be explained by the author’s insistence on using a particular tag for meaning despite its metrical inconsistency. Similarly the instances in which the epithets are

used with seeming indifference could be understood to emphasize meter over meaning (Parry 131 f).

Parry's analysis showed extensive use of these traditional expressions; in fact, he estimated that up to 90% of the works was based on formulas (Lord 142). This is not to say that the bard whose works we have today did nothing but put together songs with pieces of lines handed down over the years. Much of the song still remained under the poet's control, and there can be no doubt that each singer's work reflects his own particular touch.

Parry's theories do not neglect the larger building blocks of epics. The collection of formulaic epithets provides a means for filling the lines, but many parts of any story are also traditional on the thematic level. "Anyone who reads through a collection of oral epic from any country is soon aware that the same basic incidents and descriptions are met with time and again" (Lord 68); the same thing occurs in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Parry noticed parallels in the Homeric texts, similar scenes that recur and often consist of the same details and words (Parry 404). He charted such common passages, including arrival and departure, sacrifice and eating, hesitation before decision, arming and dressing, sleep, journeys by sea or land, oath, bath, and assembly. The results show patterns of "nearly... the same stages of the action in the same order, and nearly... the same verses and verse parts" (Parry 404). Just as formulaic expressions fill the lines of the poems, themes such as the assembly scenes, which are "easily isolated because [they have] an obvious beginning and an obvious end" (Lord 146) fill the body of the epic storyline; for example, seven of these appear in just the first two books of the *Iliad*, and all are variations on the assembly theme.

Parry, thus, identified the basic, repeated components of the Homeric texts. His theories accounted for the phrase repetition and scene parallelism throughout the books. It appeared that the epics were developed through a history of oral tradition, in which formulaic expressions and basic themes were passed down from one



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generation to another. Thus, the epics were retold in basic components that permitted the bard some freedom to compose as he performed. Unfortunately, without actual performances, scholars could not prove the relationship between oral poetry and Homeric literature.

Parry, therefore, chose to gather relevant information in the modern world and check his conclusions from the examination of the Homeric texts. Although works on oral poetry had been published, “he was too thorough a scholar... and too devoted to method to rely upon the observations of others when it was possible

for him to observe the phenomena of oral poetry himself” (Parry 468). He tested his ideas by traveling to Yugoslavia to study illiterate bards. He made two trips, the first during the summer of 1933 and the second, on which he was accompanied by Albert Lord, during the academic year 1934-1935. Parry and his assistants brought back to America approximately 3,580 phonographic recordings and more than 12,500 texts. Not all were epic songs: a few even record instrumental music of the region. Women’s songs, short lyrical songs sung by women or young people at social gatherings or for their own enjoyment, fill approximately 11,000 of the recorded texts and about 250 of the phonograph records. Another set of recordings consists of conversations with the bards about their lives and how they learned to sing. Although scholars examined all of the texts and recordings, they focused on the texts of “narrative poems of adventure,” which, although fewer, are much longer than the women’s songs (Parry 473 f).

By combining the study of the Homeric texts with

his observation of Yugoslavian bards, Parry created his own oral theories. Previously, scholars thought that if the texts were composed before writing, they had been passed down strictly by rote; changes would naturally occur due to faulty memory. Parry argued that the poems were actually composed over generations by illiterate bards, based on inherited themes. A bard would learn the general storyline by listening to several performances. That bard, in turn, would perform the song, but his performance would be far from identical to what he had previously heard. In fact, each performance would be unique.

The reason for this lies in the songs' transmission. Rather than memorizing a long poem word for word, a bard would learn oft-repeated themes, like arrival or departure. These themes would become part of the inventory around which he would construct the song out of formulae such as "swift runner Achilles," or "lord of men Agamemnon" (Homer). Not even these formulae were strictly set; they "[were] capable of change and [were] indeed frequently highly productive of other and new formulas" (Lord 4). Each character or object in the book has several possible epithets;<sup>2</sup> this pattern provides further evidence for oral theories, as bards would need several formulae to match different metric configurations.

Scholars in the past failed to realize that the Homeric bard needed to compose as he sang. Without writing, and even with enhanced memory, it would be extremely difficult to memorize several poems as long as the *Iliad* or *Odyssey*: they are so lengthy that their performances would encompass several days apiece. And a bard's repertoire would certainly not be limited to two songs! Thus, predetermined formulae became vital, allowing the bard to assemble a coherent song similar in all important aspects to earlier versions, giving him the opportunity to think ahead to the next scene. Themes most likely developed as memory aids, as "familiarity with a uniform sequence of elements in a scene reduces the danger of omitting some important action" (Edwards 71).

Yugoslavian evidence confirmed Parry thesis. As would be expected, when different singers sang the same tale, the versions shared vital components, themes, and phrases they had learned from their predecessors and peers but also carried the distinctive marks of the individual bards: it seems that traditional formulae do not eliminate the need for creativity and ingenuity. Similarly, Homer was a master of techniques he had inherited from many generations of bards, which he modified in his composition; he “adapted the standard scenes and phraseology developed by his predecessors” (Edwards 3) for his unique performances.

Important to consider, however, are oral theory’s implications for the role of Homer himself, or whichever bard wrote down today’s Iliad and Odyssey. The use of themes and formulae by no means eliminates the singer’s creativity and ingenuity. In the years since the oral theory was first published, deviations from the model, which highlight the poet’s individuality, have been carefully studied. These include the frequent use of long similes and the apparent contradictions, reconciled by the bard.

The use of similes in Homeric texts is atypical among epics and shows the individual creativity of the composer: “Whenever Homer wants to say something important he slows down the pace of the narrative” (Mueller 217) by applying one. Two primary types of similes have been observed in the texts. The first is the short simile, as in “like a god,” “like a lion,” “like a storm-wind,” or “like man-slaying Ares” (Edwards 102). These similes are used like the epithet. Far more unique, however, is the long simile, such as “like fawns / done in from hightailing over some big meadow, / winded and teetering, / heart inside them spent. / Standing there dazed...” (Homer IV.278-281). As long similes often use the short similes as starting points, they likely developed from the latter; long similes, however, elaborate on the comparison. Other types of long similes first build the picture, only later explaining the comparison. What is

remarkable about these poetical devices, however, is that “though there are some two hundred of these long similes in the Iliad and about forty in the Odyssey, all but six in the Iliad and two in the Odyssey are unique in wording” (Edwards 102). Such a variety of lines contrasts sharply with the prevalence of formulaic epithets.

Furthermore, the picture in the similes is often not of the ancient heroic world of the Trojan War, but rather of Homer’s own world. The details of Greek homelands and countryside are exact; some scenes, such as those describing an Asian meadow or west winds from Thrace, can even be traced to the Ionic shore. Indeed, the characters in the similes are not heroes and kings, but rather other ordinary men and women, familiar to the audience. Homer’s personal creativity and ingenuity are demonstrated by the similes. It is unlikely that a bard would have memorized two hundred specific similes for one poem: thus, he would have needed to generate the images himself, using what was familiar to him and to his audience. The poet’s role in making creative additions cannot be underestimated by focusing on the role of traditional content and formulas.

Oral theory and the bard’s role account for many, but not all, of the discrepancies found in Homeric texts. Over time, different and contradictory versions of particular scenes of the stories would have arisen, and the skilled poet would have needed to reconcile them. For example, Chromios is somehow killed not once, but three times in the course of the Iliad (Page 305); after generations, however, how could a bard determine which death was correct? The final composer whose work we have today would have been forced to reconcile these variants; Homer’s job was to make traditional stories flow more smoothly without critically changing them.

Other less explicable and far more noticeable conflicts do, however, occur. A prime example is the embassy scene in book nine of the Iliad, which may never be reconciled. In the scene, Nestor suggests that Agamemnon “let [old Phoenix] lead the way. / Then giant Ajax

and tactful royal Odysseus” (Homer IX.202-203) with two heralds, Odius and Eurybates. This makes the embassy a party of five; however, in the lines that follow, the Greek dual form, which applies to exactly two people, is used several times.

An old theory suggested that Phoenix had been sent ahead of Odysseus and Ajax, but when the latter two approached, “Achilles, startled, / sprang to his feet, the lyre still in his hands, / leaving the seat where he had sat in peace” (Homer IX.232-235). An Achilles who had been prepared by Phoenix would not have been startled (Page 299). Another theory maintained that the dual form might have been used as a simple plural form; although this explanation has generally been disregarded, some have argued that “the dual forms conveyed to the poet not so much a rigid grammatical duality as an air of honorable antiquity, so that the solecism was not so apparent to him and his audience as it is to us” (Edwards 219). This theory merits particular consideration, because many archaic forms are found in the poems.

An additional theory suggests that “the two of them” refers to the heralds, whereas, when Achilles greets two dear friends, he is greeting Phoenix and Ajax (someone as sly and cunning as Odysseus cannot be considered Achilles’ friend) (Nagy 139 f). In that case, the dual form would be used, first, because of the two heralds and, second, to snub Odysseus; according to the theory, the apparent strangeness may also result from variant stories. Perhaps an earlier version of the story had a two person embassy; perhaps one version snubbed Odysseus openly, while another did not. Homer, as a skilled bard, would have tried to combine these stories so that each was recognizable. For example, Homer could have used the dual form when the party met Achilles to spurn Odysseus subtly, so that those who knew that version would recognize it, while those who did not would miss it.

Achilles’ discussion with the embassy itself, especially Phoenix’s advice, seems to contradict the rest of the story by suggesting the gods will punish Achilles if

he does not aid the Greeks. Some critics have used it to support the theory of multiple authorship and later addition. Alternately, however, it can explain Homer's creative role in reconciling contradictory traditions. Thus, the role of the individual bard is established within the context of traditional storytelling. The need for creative ingenuity, despite the structure of themes and formulas, cannot be stressed enough, nor can the poet's role in reconciling variant ideas. The written texts in existence today are doubtless part of a long tradition but are also the product of individual genius.

The role of Homer in oral poetry goes further, however, than his own individual genius. Until the Iliad and the Odyssey were written down, they could continue to change and grow. Once a hard copy existed, the process of mutation became much more difficult, possible only through deliberate manipulation or transcription errors. Homer is remembered as the author of these epic poems, and if it is his version which survives, our memory of him is true: his story was the most lasting in a long line of epic tradition. The Iliad and the Odyssey are the result both of many poetical geniuses and of one, and we must underestimate the value neither of Homer as an individual, nor of the tradition to which he belonged.

<sup>1</sup> Pope, in particular, attributes these expressions to the creative genius of the poet.

<sup>2</sup> For example, Achilles can be "swift runner," "brilliant," or "blazing."

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