BARDIC PERFORMANCE AND ORAL TRADITION IN HOMER

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AS HOMERIC EPIC REPRESENTS EPIC PERFORMANCE, song is distinct from the narrative performances of characters who are not bards. Song, despite its traditional content, does not depend on oral tradition for its transmission, and singers, although members of the audience may request or object to a particular song, do not adapt their narratives for individual audiences. Much recent Homeric scholarship, however, minimizes differences between bardic and other narratives, treating Odysseus as epic poet and Demodocus or Phemius as narrators like Odysseus. This scholarship is not misguided or wrong. The epic poet identifies with his hero, and when the narrator's point of view is close to that of Achilles or Odysseus, the distinction between character and poet may blur.[1] Narratologically, there are many useful similarities between bardic and other narratives, and naturally scholars try to exploit these.[2] Still, in emphasizing these aspects of Homeric poetics, we can too easily forget others. This danger is particularly strong where scholars have deliberately ignored or deconstructed the distinctions Homer maintains in order to make visible those elements in the Homeric, literary context that represent possible historical relationships among performers, their traditions, and their audiences.[3] These distinctions, precisely because

[1]Martin 1989; Rose 1992, 114–16. It should be remembered, though, that this identification is far from complete—for example, the *Iliad* identifies its plot with the Plan of Zeus, which does not fulfill Achilles' expectations.

[2]Doherty (1995, 70–71) explicitly defends her use of speeches "whose content is elsewhere identified as a theme for epic song" in examining internal audiences. Segal, thoughtful and perceptive as his essays are (1983, 1992), avoids the problem of the representation within epic of nonepic tradition. E.g.: "the glory of heroic deeds exists only through song" (1983, 205)—but the "only" is clearly not true, even though song is the privileged medium for glory.

[3]Svenbro (1976, 16–35), Olson (1995, 1–23), and Ford (1992, 91–129) all in different ways bring out the "realities" that Homer avoids: Svenbro emphasizes social pressure, Olson oral tradition, and Ford competition among bards.

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they are fragile, define the special authority Homeric epic claims for itself, and when we too rapidly demystify them, we fail to see how the epic sees itself.

To be sure, both bardic performances and other narratives, when fully successful, enchant their audiences, who listen in silence. The idealized bards of the epic are preeminently skilled at such enchantment, so that Eumaeus compares Odysseus to a bard because his tales are so enthralling (17.518–21). Odysseus is compared to a bard three times, twice by characters—Eumaeus, and Alcinous at 11.362–76—and once by the poet, at 21.406–9, when Odysseus bends the bow with the ease of a bard who strings a lyre. Thematically, the simile develops the contrast between Odysseus and bard, since the feast is about to conclude with death instead of entertainment.[4] Similarly, the authority of Alcinous' praise of Odysseus as bardlike, because not "tricky" (ἐπίκλοπον, 11.364), is perhaps undercut by Athena's later praise of him as precisely the contrary, and by his many elaborate lies (13.291–92).[5] In any case, although Odysseus is indeed bardlike in his narrative skill, the comparisons themselves indicate that such similarity between bards and other storytellers cannot be taken for granted.

There are two important differences between bardic and other narratives. First, in the world depicted in the epic, "ordinary" narrative derives its authority either from personal experience or from human report, whereas epic performers are informed by the Muse, and do not depend on ordinary sources. This divine source for bardic knowledge results in only one significant practical difference between bardic narratives and those of less authoritative characters: the bard's freedom to report the doings of the gods. Nonetheless, the Homeric narrator insists on it. Second, narrative outside the frame of epic performance normally either answers a request for information or serves an explicit paradigmatic function. It is occasional and specifically motivated, serving a specific communicative need within the social relationship of speaker and hearer(s). Bardic narrative, by contrast, ordinarily does not seek to manipulate its audience; it is essentially disinterested. Although the bard's song may have special significance for the audience, or some members of the audience, on a particular occasion, the singer does not intend these effects. Audiences without a personal connection to the bard's

[4]On the importance of the feast see Seaford 1994, 53–65; Saïd 1979.
[5]Goldhill 1991, 47–48.

subject simply enjoy the song, although hearers who feel personally touched may be deeply moved; in contrast, since nonbardic narrative takes place within an affective relationship, even a hearer with no connection to the events may express pity.

These two distinctions are closely related. Narrative as the epic represents it may be seen as a continuum. At one extreme lie bardic performances, based on information provided by the Muses, potentially meaningful far beyond their immediate contexts, but with the details of content not specific to particular occasions, even if the subject of the song has been requested by a member of the audience. At the other extreme are the false tales that have in the past deceived Penelope and Eumaeus (14.379–85), invented stories that served only the greed of those who told them. In between are the lying tales of Odysseus, and the various paradigmatic and autobiographical tales that fill the two epics, which their narrators have acquired from personal experience or oral tradition and adapted to their immediate needs. 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.

Andrew Ford has stressed how Homeric representations of poetry suppress the real process of transmission, even as the *Odyssey* portrays the oral tradition as it is created.[6] When the ambassadors find Achilles singing the κλέα ἀνδρῶν at *Iliad* 9.186–89, the poet expands by narrating how he acquired his lyre, not by describing how he learned to use it. Phemius, in particular, boasts of being αὐτοδίδακτος, even though his patronymic Terpiades (22.330) hints that his father was also a bard; it is a god who has planted all kinds of songs in his mind (22.347–48).[7] Nowhere does the narrator or any character acknowledge that bards learn their repertory from other bards, and, indeed, the proem to the Catalogue of Ships sharply distinguishes the actual knowledge of the Muses,

[6]Ford 1992, 90–130.

[7]Heubeck ad loc. denies that αὐτοδίδακτος really means "self-taught," on the odd ground that Odysseus, who had no teachers himself, would be unimpressed. He argues that Phemius claims exactly what I argue Homer suppresses, "an innate capacity to *apply* the traditional repertory of inherited poetic craft to the particular case relevant to the audience of the moment." Would such a claim not make Odysseus likelier to kill him, as he has just killed the priest who, he insists (22.321–25), has doubtless prayed for Odysseus' death?

which the poet asks them to transmit directly to him, from the mere report available without them: ἡμεῖς δὲ κλέος οἷον ἀκούομεν οὐδέ τι ἴδμεν (2.486). He thereby denies that he depends on human report.[8] Scholars, though, have not often paid close attention to how often both *Iliad* and *Odyssey* identify the source of narrative authority for character–narrators.[9] Many, of course, speak directly about personal experience and so do not require external authority: in the *Odyssey,* Odysseus in the Apologos and in his lying tales does this, of course, and so do Nestor, Menelaus, and Helen in the narratives they deliver to Telemachus. Nestor's narratives in the *Iliad* tell (mostly) his own deeds, not those of another.

Contrast nonautobiographical narratives. In the *Iliad,* when Phoenix tells the story of Meleager, he first speaks of having "heard" (ἐπευθόμεθα, 9.524) of how earlier heroes were placated with gifts. The first person plural marks the shared transmission. When he tells the story of Meleager in some detail, however, he seems to claim some personal knowledge: μέμνημαι τόδε ἔργον ἐγὼ πάλαι, οὔ τι νέον γε ("I remember this event from long ago—it is certainly not recent," 9.527). Pisistratus defers to Menelaus' personal knowledge of Antilochus' excellence to confirm what people say, since he himself did not know his older brother (*Od.* 4.200–202). Agamemnon tries to rouse Diomedes by insisting that Tydeus was always among the forefighters:

> ὣς φάσαν οἵ μιν ἴδοντο πονεύμενον· οὐ γὰρ ἔγωγε
> ἤντησ' οὐδὲ ἴδον· περὶ δ' ἄλλων φασὶ γενέσθαι. (4.374–75)
>
> So they said who saw him in action. For I never met him or saw him. But they say that he was superior to others.

When Diomedes himself cites his father's might as the basis of his own authority at 14.110–27, he recites his genealogy, following his assertion that Tydeus was the best spearfighter among the Achaeans with the words τὰ δὲ μέλλετ' ἀκουέμεν, εἰ ἐτεόν περ ("You surely know whether it is true," 14.125). Athena, in contrast, speaks about Tydeus to Diomedes without any such allusions to tradition, since she was personally involved (5.800–808).

[8]Pucci (1980, esp. 180–81) analyzes the anxieties revealed by the invocation.

[9]Olson (1995) discusses oral tradition in the *Odyssey,* with especially good comments on how narrators establish authority (1–23).

Reciters of genealogies often stress the likelihood that the hearer is already familiar with the information. Glaucus agrees to provide his to Diomedes, πολλοὶ δέ μιν ἄνδρες ἴσασιν ("And many men know it," 6.151). While this may be intended snidely, as a hint that Diomedes ought to know Glaucus' ancestry as well as others do—Richard Martin calls it a "veiled insult"—the parallels show that Glaucus may also be insisting that the genealogy is accurate, since it is widely known.[10] Aeneas insists that he and Achilles know each others' parentage through report:

> ἴδμεν δ' ἀλλήλων γενεήν, ἴδμεν δὲ τοκῆας,
> πρόκλυτ' ἀκούοντες ἔπεα θνητῶν ἀνθρώπων·
> ὄψει δ' οὔτ' ἄρ πω σὺ ἐμοὺς ἴδες οὔτ' ἄρ' ἐγὼ σούς.
> φασὶ σὲ μὲν Πηλῆος ἀμύμονος ἔκγονον εἶναι . . . (20.203–6)
>
> We know each others' ancestry, we know each others' parents, since we hear the famed tales of mortal men, though you have never seen mine with your eyes, nor I yours. They say you are the offspring of blameless Peleus . . .

Like Agamemnon, Aeneas here lays an apparently superfluous emphasis on his never having seen the addressee's parents. Asteropaeus refers to report for his parentage itself: the River Axius begat "famous" Pelegon, τὸν δ' ἐμέ φασι γείνασθαι ("and they say he begat me," 21.159–60).

Flyting can take the form of denying the plausibility of such familiar genealogical information. Tlepolemus claims that Sarpedon does not behave like a son of Zeus:

> ψευδόμενοι δέ σέ φασι Διὸς γόνον αἰγιόχοιο
> εἶναι, ἐπεὶ πολλὸν κείνων ἐπιδεύεαι ἀνδρῶν
> οἳ Διὸς ἐξεγένοντο ἐπὶ προτέρων ἀνθρώπων. (5.635–37)
>
> They lie when they say that you are the child of aegis-carrying Zeus, since you are far inferior to those heroes who were born of Zeus in the time of earlier people.

His example of such a hero is, naturally, his own father, Heracles—ἀλλ' οἷόν τινά φασι βίην Ἡρακλείην / εἶναι ("but such as they say mighty Heracles was," 5.638–39)—and specifically Heracles' sack of Troy. Sar-

[10]Martin 1989, 128.

pedon, though, counters by saying that Heracles was able to destroy Troy only because Laomedon had acted foolishly in mistreating Heracles after Heracles had benefited him (5.648–51). He too is well informed about Trojan history, and he disagrees with Tlepolemus' version as Tlepolemus argued against his own genealogy.

To be sure, not every citation of genealogical or other information footnotes the oral tradition. Idomeneus states his descent from Zeus through Minos and Deucalion as simple fact at 13.459–53. Diomedes knows the story of Aeneas' horses—that Zeus gave horses to Tros as recompense for Ganymede, that Anchises secretly bred his mares to Laomedon's stallions, that he bred six horses, and kept four (presumably as breeding stock), giving two to Aeneas (5.265–73). Perhaps he does not give the source of this knowledge precisely because it is more precise than oral tradition might be expected to convey. Similarly, at 13.374–82 Idomeneus knows all about Orthryoneus' promise to drive the Achaeans from Troy in return for Cassandra, even though Orthryoneus has only recently come (13.364). Evidently the poet is not attempting to depict the working of gossip and story realistically. Homeric speakers refer explicitly to oral tradition as a source of knowledge only when the reference is rhetorically useful. In the *Odyssey* Nestor knows about the suitors from the oral tradition but does not mention them until Telemachus does (3.211–13); his (partial) knowledge allows him to ask why Telemachus has allowed this situation to come about, and to suggest that he could change it. Athena–Mentes and Nestor both tell Telemachus that he must already have heard about Orestes' killing of Aegisthus (1.298–99, 3.193–94), because the paradigm is all the more effective that way. Orestes has won fame by taking vengeance—fame that has reached even faraway Ithaca.

This oral tradition is clearly not the same as the epic tradition itself.[11] When Glaucus recites his genealogy to Diomedes, although as an epic character his narrative is epic performance, and although it is clearly an oral performance within the mimetic world, it is not, within the mimetic world, epic performance. Indeed, since such verbal performances are genres of discourse, the audience must have recognized

[11]Nagy (1974, 248) calls *kleos* "the formal word" for epic song. To be sure, κλέα ἀνδρῶν is the regular term for the contents of heroic song; but epic performance is not the only medium for *kleos*. Similarly, Nagy (1979, 271) identifies the oral tradition with poetry, connecting the "I did not myself see" topos with the theme of the blind poet.

them as epic adaptations of independent forms.[12] Diomedes does not sing about his ancestors. Sometimes genealogical recitations are barely performances at all: Nestor describes how Peleus asked him for the genealogies and parentage of all the Argives, πάντων Ἀργείων ἐρέων γενεήν τε τόκον τε (7.128). Nestor mentions the incident within a paraenetic speech, trying to rouse the leaders by implying that they are not sustaining the expectations their genealogies raise. In the earlier situation he describes, however, he and Peleus are critical spectators of the Argives, not contestants. In the world depicted within the Homeric poems, the transmission of oral tradition outside poetry is for the most part perfectly straightforward. It originates in recitals of personal experience; Nestor, as a very old man, is especially suited to attest to the truth of genealogies. This information then becomes common knowledge, and survives as long as people are interested in repeating it.

Not all features of this oral tradition are naturalistic, of course. Diomedes can learn of his father's deeds not only from those who have received them through oral tradition, but also from Athena. Menelaus can describe the final fate of the Lesser Ajax because he has heard it from Proteus (*Od.* 4.499–511), even though Ajax drowned without human witnesses. Odysseus provides a vast treasure of genealogical information through his conversations with the heroines of the past in the underworld (*Od.* 11.229–327). Furthermore, autobiographical narrative tends to drift into omniscience. This is most conspicuous in the case of Odysseus.[13] He reports speeches he did not hear (10.31–45, 210–43), although they could have been repeated to him later, and his ethnographic comments on the Cyclopes and Laestrygonians surely exceed what he and his men could have learned during their visits. In many ways, he comes close to the main narrator. However, Odysseus is not unique. When Achilles recounts his quarrel with Agamemnon to his mother, he follows an abbreviated version of the main narrative, including the feelings of Chryses and Agamemnon (*Il.* 1.366–92). While Achilles does not exceed the possible limits of inference, he speaks with full authority.[14] Nor is the phenomenon confined to the most important heroes, with whom the poet perhaps identifies. Eumaeus' tale of how he was enslaved stretches the limits of first-person autobiographical narra-

[12]Martin 1989, 42–47.
[13]Suerbaum 1968.
[14]De Jong 1985.

tive, since it reports more than a small child would be likely to understand, and in any case provides, in direct speech, conversations at which he was not present (15.390–484). Oral tradition does not fully respect the limits of first-person narrative, but these excessive accounts are not thereby unreliable.

The Muses are therefore only one method of access to knowledge beyond that naturalistically available to human beings. Nor is it automatically superior to others, despite the polemic tone of the proem to the Catalogue of Ships (*Il.* 2.484–86), which contrasts "mere" κλέος, oral tradition, with the full knowledge of the Muses. Odysseus praises Demodocus for singing about events in Troy as if he had been present at them, or had heard them (from an eyewitness): ὥς τέ που ἢ αὐτὸς παρεὼν ἢ ἄλλου ἀκούσας (*Od.* 8.491). He has learned, Odysseus thinks, from the Muse or Apollo (8.488). The praise itself indicates that not all bards would do as well, so that bardic knowledge, being dependent on the gods' love for a particular performer, is not always so reliable. In any case, even Demodocus' knowledge is not better than Odysseus'. It is perhaps not surprising that Odysseus regards his own eyewitness knowledge as a standard for evaluating the bard's performance, but the standard even includes a rendition at second hand. This potential superiority of nonpoetic oral tradition to the poetic, as long as the line of transmission is very close, may seem to contradict the *Iliad*'s disparagement of κλέος. The oral tradition of the Trojan War, however, is far more remote than even a secondhand report from the perspective of the *Odyssey* and its audience. If the events are far away in time—as in the nonmimetic world of Homer's audience, they were—direct access through the Muses is better. Bardic performance offers the possibility of unmediated and independent access to otherwise inaccessible knowledge. Odysseus' praise, after all, emphasizes that the Muses or Apollo can replace human knowledge.

Furthermore, both Odysseus as eyewitness narrator (*Od.* 11.328–29) and the *Iliad*-poet (*Il.* 2.488–92) acknowledge that a complete catalogue of heroes or heroines is not physically possible.[15] For the performing bard, though, the Muses, who know the complete account, are always present; only the individual performance is confined. Odysseus, in contrast, is a mortal. Those heroines whom he does not name could be lost to memory in the oral tradition, if he never tells about them. So

[15]Ford (1992, 67–87) discusses the problem of selection.

the individual performer, on each occasion, is imagined as selecting from the entire memory of the Muses, rather than from oral tradition, which has inevitably already winnowed what any individual can hear and learn.

The gap between bardic knowledge and oral tradition is remarkable. Not only do poets not learn from other poets, they do not learn from anyone, except the gods.[16] Nonetheless, performers within the mimetic world, although their information comes from the gods, do not actually stray beyond what oral tradition could plausibly tell them about human affairs. Nobody asks Phemius to report on the whereabouts of Odysseus. Demodocus can sing about Odysseus' deeds at Troy, which took place in the presence of the army, but he has evidently not sung Odysseus' post–Trojan adventures. Of course, the Ithacan books could hardly exist if the Muse would tell Phemius Odysseus' location, and the Apologos would be silly if the Phaeacians had heard all this material before. Still, there is a practical reality here. The Homeric bard is not clairvoyant. It may not be a meaningless formulaic variation that Hesiod claims that the Muses gave him song ἵνα κλείοιμι τά τ' ἐσσόμενα πρό τ' ἐόντα ("so that I might make famous things to be and things past," *Theog.* 32), omitting the present. The present is not open to bardic intrusion.

The singers do not know anything others might not also know, with one important exception: they know events on Olympus in detail. Demodocus can sing about events at which only gods were present, just as the great epics themselves regularly present Olympian scenes. By contrast, though Odysseus slips into omniscience at various points in the Apologos, he is generally careful not to show excessive knowledge of divine matters: he explains that Calypso told him Helius' complaint to Zeus (12.374–90, esp. 389–90). Usually, he follows the standard rules that govern human speech about the gods.[17] We can perhaps assume that Ariadne would have been able to guess and so tell Odysseus of the mysterious role of Dionysus in her death (11.324–25), just as Achilles can assume that Apollo has caused the plague at *Iliad* 1.64, and the Calydonian boar shows that Artemis is angry in the Meleager story (535–40). Agamemnon's speech of apology at *Iliad* 19.78–144 tests the

[16]Finkelberg (1990) argues that the Muses allow more creativity to the individual performer than is permitted in South Slavic epic, where only the tradition sanctions contents.

[17]Jörgensen 1904 is the standard analysis of these rules.

limits of a mortal speaker. Telling how Hera tricked Zeus at the birth of Heracles, Agamemnon includes speeches of both Hera and Zeus.[18] The story is treated as so familiar that Agamemnon need provide no authority for telling it.[19] However, he may also be asserting his own authority by asserting unusual narrative power, in order to emphasize his status in a situation that threatens his prestige.

The representations of bardic knowledge in the poems are thus largely a mystification, but a completely transparent one. In a demystified account, we would say that bards adapt oral tradition by including the Olympian level, which is only extraordinarily available to mortals other than bards (the underworld is included under the same rule). Precisely because oral tradition does not usually attempt to describe the part played by divine powers, except when the gods act openly or mortals can infer their involvement, bards freely go beyond the spoken tradition when singing about the gods. Otherwise, however, even as the bards recount those stories that have achieved wide popularity, Homer never overtly acknowledges any connection between oral tradition and song.

This fiction is related to the second great fiction about bardic narrative: its disinterestedness. Most nonbardic narrative is sharply goal–directed: most often, narrators try to influence the actions of others. Odysseus' lies are blatantly manipulative, but so are "true" narratives. Battlefield genealogies seek to intimidate, mythical paradigms exhort to appropriate behavior. Although narrative may also serve as entertainment, as do the narratives Menelaus and Helen tell Telemachus (*Od.* 4.234–89), even such narratives are usually self–interested. Helen and Menelaus ostensibly speak in order to praise Odysseus for the benefit of his son, but Helen's tale is self–justifying, Menelaus' a rejection of her self–justification. At the extreme, such storytelling becomes *ainos,* like Odysseus' story to Eumaeus about the ambush at Troy, a scarcely veiled request for an extra blanket that provides Odysseus with a test of Eumaeus' hospitality (14.459–506).

Narrators who do not tell their stories in order to test or manipulate their audiences are typically responding to straightforward requests

[18]Page (1959, 313) heaps scorn on the passage ("the laws of the Epic art lie in fragments at our feet").

[19]Σ bT on 101 already has this explanation.

for information—or at least to what they believe are straightforward requests for information. Telemachus asks Nestor and Menelaus about his father, and indeed uses an elaborate formula of entreaty (*Od.* 3.98–101 = 326–31); their stories answer this request, and they provide genuinely useful information for Telemachus. The oral tradition thus depends on what is useful for particular individuals. Stories that respond to curiosity about the teller come closest to bardic narratives. The Apologos responds to Alcinous' direct request to Odysseus to identify himself, so that he can be taken home (8.550–56); to tell the story of his travels and those he met wandering (572–76); and to explain why he has wept at songs about Troy (577–86). One motive for the request for autobiography is therefore completely practical, while another is personal curiosity: Alcinous expects the narrative to explain Odysseus' odd behavior. The length of the narrative is thus justified by the fullness of the request. Odysseus' narrative is, in any case, gently manipulative, and his voice is distinct from that of the external narrator, more emotional, more given to explicit judgment.[20] He begins by implicitly apologizing for refusing to marry Nausicaa by celebrating the love of one's native place, and stressing how he rejected two goddesses. His narrative encourages the Phaeacians to avoid being bad hosts by taking him home.[21] He flatters Arete by giving considerable time to cataloging the heroines in the underworld.[22] On the other hand, the central moral is one the external narrator obviously endorses, and the Phaeacians endorse it, too—they have already promised Odysseus his return when he tells his tale. Also, allusions to various details scattered throughout the *Odyssey* prove that Odysseus is a reliable narrator. The narrative is obviously very successful, since Arete urges that the Phaeacians not hasten to send him away, and that he receive more gifts, since he is so impressive a guest-friend, and is in need, οὕτω χρηΐζοντι (11.336–41).

When Alcinous endorses this proposal, Odysseus offers to remain for as long as a year, if this would mean receiving more gifts (11.358–61). This frank greed is unbardlike, yet it is to this remark that Alcinous reacts when he praises Odysseus and compares him to a bard:

[20] De Jong 1992.
[21] Most 1989.
[22] See Doherty 1995, 93–99.

ὦ Ὀδυσεῦ, τὸ μὲν οὔ τί σ' ἐΐσκομεν εἰσορόωντες
ἠπεροπῆά τ' ἔμεν καὶ ἐπίκλοπον, οἷά τε πολλοὺς
βόσκει γαῖα μέλαινα πολυσπερέας ἀνθρώπους
ψεύδεά τ' ἀρτύνοντας, ὅθεν κέ τις οὐδὲ ἴδοιτο·
σοὶ δ' ἔπι μὲν μορφὴ ἐπέων, ἔνι δὲ φρένες ἐσθλαί,
μῦθον δ' ὡς ὅτ' ἀοιδὸς ἐπισταμένως κατέλεξας . . . (11.363–68)

Odysseus, in no way as we look at you do we reckon that you are a trickster and a cheat, as the black earth feeds many people who are all over the world and invent lies whose source one could not find at all. But the proper form of words lies upon you, and a good mind is within, and you have told your tale through competently, like a bard.

Odysseus is bardlike because his tale is arranged artistically rather than with a view to persuasion. Alcinous may be understood to have taken Odysseus' remarks as ironic: in offering to remain for a year for the sake of gain, Odysseus has implied that the audience's request that he wait puts him in the position of a begging storyteller, someone who might tell lies for profit. By comparing him to a bard, and simultaneously asking him to talk about his companions from Troy (11.371–72), Alcinous insists that he does not place Odysseus in this category.

Similarly, Odysseus asks Eumaeus to tell the story of how he was enslaved (15.381–88), and Eumaeus agrees, since he has been asked, the night is long, and people enjoy speaking even of their troubles, when these are over (15.390–402). Odysseus first asks about his own parents; he knows that his mother is dead, but we can assume that he genuinely wants information about his father, and asks about both for verisimilitude. Eumaeus' reply makes it clear that he grew up in the household, so again Odysseus' disguise makes his questioning verisimilar. He could be expected to be curious about his interlocutor, as Alcinous is, and he introduces his request for more information by showing himself moved by the pathos of Eumaeus' early separation from his home and parents (*Od.* 15.381–82). Odysseus surely knows the story already, but elaborately affects ignorance, asking whether Eumaeus' city was sacked, or whether he was captured in a cattle raid (*Od.* 15.381–88). After Eumaeus tells his story, he acknowledges Eumaeus' misfortune and expresses sympathy, using the same formulae Eumaeus used in response to his own (false) story (14.361–62 are almost identical to 15.486–87). Yet he claims that Eumaeus' story has a relatively happy ending, while his own condition is worse (15.491–92): there is an implicit competition

in pathetic storytelling, a competition that only makes sense because the winner is entitled to the most pity.

Such interest in the narrator is foreign to poetic narrative. At epic performances, audiences either feel unalloyed pleasure (the Phaeacians), or feel pain because they feel personally involved (Odysseus, Penelope). Some critics have thought that the Phaeacians' cheerful response to epic is peculiar to this exceptionally privileged community.[23] Yet the speech in which Telemachus rebukes his mother for interfering with Phemius' performance would seem to indicate that such painless enjoyment is the norm: the bard must be allowed to delight his audience as his mind directs him (τέρπειν, 1.347). Telemachus weeps when reminded of his father at 4.185, so he is not insensible on all occasions. He can speak as he does because delight and performance are closely linked. Nobody shows the slightest curiosity about the bards themselves, apart from their professional function, and the bards do not sing in order to achieve immediate personal ends. Achilles sings, apparently, only for his own pleasure (*Il.* 9.189–91); Patroclus waits in silence for him to finish, but is not said to be listening. Nobody in the poems recites nonpoetic narrative to himself or herself for pleasure. (The nearest is Penelope, who tells the story of the daughters of Pandareus while praying to Artemis at *Od.* 20.66–78.)

To be sure, all songs potentially serve the cause of social control, simply by reminding their hearers that their actions may be remembered and judged. Penelope tells the disguised Odysseus that how she treats him will affect her reputation in oral tradition (*Od.* 19.325–34). Agamemnon and Hector both assume that how one imagines people in the future will view one's actions should influence what one does: it will be shameful for them to hear that the Achaeans failed to take Troy (*Il.* 2.119), and Hector hopes before dying to achieve a deed that will be worthy of remembrance (22.305). Song is the most powerful form of memory. Agamemnon left his wife in the care of a bard, probably because she would be deterred from wrongdoing by the constant reminder that human actions, good and bad, are remembered in song (*Od.* 3.267–68).[24] Indeed, Clytemnestra, according to the dead Agamemnon, will be

[23] Cf. Walsh 1984, 1–6.

[24] Kraus (1955, 69) suggests that the bard would protect the queen through his power to relieve anxiety; Marg (1956, 38) seems to suggest that the bard's frequent visits

the subject of "hateful song" (στυγερὴ . . . ἀοιδή, *Od.* 24.200), whereas the gods will create a lovely song for Penelope (197–98). Specific songs, however, do not serve immediate practical purposes.

This is quite clear in the case of Demodocus' two songs about Troy, for the topic is remote from most of the audience. The quarrel between Odysseus and Achilles (8.75–82) is relevant to the context in which Demodocus sings it, but not in ways the singer can intend. Up to this point, the *Odyssey* has not displayed Odysseus' fierce temper, but this aspect of his character will soon be prominent in his anger with Laodamas (8.152–57), and the ensuing quarrel with Euryalus. The song also prepares for the thematically important contrast between Achilles and Odysseus as candidates for "best of the Achaeans" (and thereby of the *Odyssey* as candidate for the greatest of poems), a contrast the Nekyuia will develop.[25] The internal audience, however, cannot appreciate these resonances. Demodocus' song of the Wooden Horse certainly is performed in response to Odysseus' request, and serves to prepare the audience for Odysseus' own narrative. It can serve Odysseus' needs, however, precisely because Demodocus is not singing with the purpose of praising a known patron. Demodocus has no axe to grind; his praise of Odysseus therefore rings true.[26]

Phemius sings among the suitors of the bitter return of the Achaeans:

> ὁ δ' Ἀχαιῶν νόστον ἄειδε / λυγρόν, ὃν ἐκ Τροίης ἐπετείλατο Παλλὰς Ἀθήνη. (*Od.* 1,326–27)
>
> He sang the unhappy return of the Achaeans, which Pallas Athena enjoined when they came from Troy.

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make him intimate with the household ("weil er als Unterhalter viel beigezogen wird"). Page (1972) sees the bard's role as a relic of an earlier function in which the poet was also priest and wise man. Svenbro (1976, 31) suggests that the bard sings about Agamemnon himself; Clay (1994, 41–42) suggests a song about a faithful wife—a playful self-reference to the *Odyssey* itself. West (in Heubeck/West Hainsworth 1988 ad loc.) discusses the possibility that the ἀοιδός is a eunuch. Scully (1981) sees the bard as the voice of social norms, whereas Anderson (1992) argues that Homeric bards do not enforce moral standards and that the bard's death marks Agamemnon's loss of glory.

[25]This contrast is the subject of Edwards 1985.

[26]Ahl and Roisman (1996, 74–75, 81–82) suggest that Demodocus may have recognized Odysseus, but I find coincidence not only truer to the text but poetically more meaningful.

Svenbro has argued that Phemius has selected this theme to please the suitors, and that indeed the "real" subject is the death of Odysseus.[27] One may well guess that the topic would please the suitors, but the point needs careful qualification. Since the song names Athena, the song's subject is presumably either the celebrated storm that drowned many and sent Odysseus off course, or possibly the death of Agamemnon, which Athena caused by inciting the quarrel that led Agamemnon and Menelaus to go home separately rather than together (*Od.* 3.132–36). Penelope says that the bard knows "many other enchantments of mortals, deeds of gods and men, which bards make famous" (1.337–38), so that this choice of subject is unnecessary. Unless, then, we assume that the bard has ignored most of his repertory since the suitors arrived, Phemius regularly sings a variety of material, even though he has evidently sung this theme before, since Penelope says that it "always" causes her pain.[28] Penelope, in directing her complaint to the bard, does not blame pressure from the suitors for the bard's choice. The song hurts her, because grief has come to her more than to anyone (με μάλιστα, 1.342), because she remembers and longs for such a man as Odysseus. Her very complaint thereby acknowledges that her grief, though extreme, is by no means unique. Her complaint need not imply that the song touches her grief directly. Alcinous thinks that Odysseus may have wept at hearing songs about Troy because he lost an in-law or a good friend there (*Od.* 8.577–86)—that is, he assumes that for someone grieving for a friend who died at Troy, any song about the war would cause pain, even if it did not directly concern the friend's death.

Telemachus' response also points away from the song's being distorted in order to please the suitors:

> οὔ νυ τ' ἀοιδοὶ
> αἴτιοι, ἀλλά ποθι Ζεὺς αἴτιος, ὅς τε δίδωσιν
> ἀνδράσιν ἀλφηστῆσιν, ὅπως ἐθέλῃσιν, ἑκάστῳ.
> τούτῳ δ' οὐ νέμεσις Δαναῶν κακὸν οἶτον ἀείδειν.
> τὴν γὰρ ἀοιδὴν μᾶλλον ἐπικλείουσ' ἄνθρωποι,
> ἥ τις ἀκουόντεσσι νεωτάτη ἀμφιπέληται.

[27]Svenbro 1976, 24–31. Pucci (1987, 195–208, 228–35) does not follow Svenbro but still treats Phemius as singing "false" songs.

[28]"Always" probably means "whenever I hear it"; otherwise, Penelope's use is an example of the common hyperbolic "always" and "never" of Homeric speakers (MacLeod 1982, 96, on 62–63 and 72–73).

σοὶ δ' ἐπιτολμάτω κραδίη καὶ θυμὸς ἀκούειν·
οὐ γὰρ Ὀδυσσεὺς οἶος ἀπώλεσε νόστιμον ἦμαρ
ἐν Τροίῃ, πολλοὶ δὲ καὶ ἄλλοι φῶτες ὄλοντο. (1.347–55)

The bards are not to blame, but Zeus is somehow to blame, who gives to barley-eating people as he wishes, to each. It is not cause for just anger for the bard to sing the miserable fate of the Danaans. For people most make the song famous that comes around as the newest to those who hear it. Let your heart and mind endure to hear it, since Odysseus was not the only one who lost his day of return at Troy, but many other men died.

First, Telemachus insists that Zeus is responsible, not the bards. Zeus rather than the singer can be to blame only if the events have really happened, so Telemachus here, in effect, says that the song is true. It is therefore an appropriate part of the repertory. Since, however, that would not explain why the bard should select this subject rather than another, he denies that the bard's motive is inappropriate—people celebrate new songs, and the bard, presumably, is entitled to give the audience what it desires. Quite apart from the familiar irony of Homer's calling this subject "new," Telemachus insists on judging the song not as it affects a particular audience, whether Penelope or the suitors, but more generally, in terms of what "people" like. He thus implicitly denies that this topic serves the interests of the suitors. Finally, he answers Penelope's assertion that her grief is beyond that of others by using the traditional formula of consolation to exhort her to endurance: Odysseus was not the only one who died in the Trojan campaign. If the song were actually about Odysseus, it would be hard to comprehend both Penelope's emphasis on the particular excellence and fame of Odysseus as causing her grief beyond that of others and Telemachus' insistence that she accept her loss as one among many. If, however, the song reminds Penelope of Odysseus, but it is not about him, the use of the language of consolation makes excellent sense. Telemachus is urging her to use the song itself, with its reminder of how widespread was the suffering caused by the Trojan War, not as food for more grief, but as consolation.

That is the point: songs are by no means without moral implications, but these are not explicit or self-interested, as those of non-bardic narratives usually are. Phemius does not tell his audience how to respond, and his song is capable of multiple uses.[29] Indeed, the sum-

[29] As Edmunds points out (1996, 419–20), ordinary character-narratives often have meanings beyond those intended by the speaker: these, however, reflect ironically on the speaker.

mary of the song can be turned directly against the suitors, since it is a tale of divine vengeance. Athena gives the Achaeans a bitter return because they had offended her, and the suitors will soon suffer too, under Athena's direction. The song can help justify the suitors (Odysseus, like so many others, doubtless died) or warn them (the gods do concern themselves with mortals, who had best therefore follow social norms). The suitors force Phemius to sing, but never praise his singing, whereas Penelope and Telemachus both do.[30] While it is typical of the suitors that they do not behave graciously or recognize what is socially appropriate, their failure to praise the bard may also mark their failure to listen properly.

The song of Ares and Aphrodite is, like Phemius' song, a controversial case. Braswell and others have seen a parallel in the quarrel between Ares and Hephaestus, one physically attractive and swift, the other ugly and crippled, to the dispute between Euryalus and Odysseus, the one good-looking but foolish, the other unprepossessing to look at but with qualities that do not appear on the surface.[31] There can be no question that the song could apply to the immediate situation, particularly in its hint that appropriate compensation can heal even the worst of quarrels. And it is suggestive that just as the song emphasizes Ares' speed against Hephaestus' lameness, Odysseus announces that he will compete in any event except the footrace. Still, there are difficulties with interpreting the song as a direct and intentional comment on the quarrel. Surely it would hardly be courteous to compare an honored guest, one who has already been offended, to a cuckold, even if the cuckold receives compensation. Hephaestus appears ridiculous; he is angry and vexed (ἀκάχημαι, 8.314), while the other gods are laughing (8.325).[32] If Odysseus understood the song as a comment on himself, he would surely be angered further, instead of being appeased. Further, Odysseus is not physically unprepossessing. Laodamas has invited Odysseus to compete, probably intending no insult, in the belief that he looks like an athlete (8.145). Alcinous surely does not consider him unattractive when he considers him as a possible husband for his daughter (7.312), and Arete praises his looks at 11.336–37. Only after Odysseus

[30] Rüter 1967, 233.

[31] Bliss 1968; Braswell 1982.

[32] To be sure, Brown (1989) argues convincingly that this laughter is directed at Ares and Aphrodite, and represents a mechanism of social control, like charivari. Even though the gods are not laughing at him, however, Hephaestus himself does not find the matter funny.

has indignantly refused to compete does Euryalus claim that he looks like a merchant, not an athletic aristocrat (8.159–64).[33] In throwing the discus, Odysseus has not shown himself to be crafty, like Hephaestus, but has triumphed by physical prowess. The Phaeacians do not yet know his identity, of course, so they do not have any reason to connect Hephaestus' cunning with the stranger's. Furthermore, Alcinous' order to Euryalus to give Odysseus a gift does not respond directly to the song, but to Odysseus' praise of the performance, which confirms that the Phaeacians are the best at singing and dancing, even though they are not the best at games (8.382–84).

Indeed, the song seems so clearly linked to the main plot of the *Odyssey* that it would be rather a distraction for the external audience to try to apply it too closely to its immediate context. As a song about adultery and cunning, it points more to a success over the suitors than to the events that immediately surround it.[34] It could misdirect the external audience, inviting them to imagine the possibility that even after adultery has been committed, compensation could control a husband's anger—and that therefore compensation could settle Odysseus' quarrel with the suitors (as Eurymachus indeed will briefly hope it may, 22.55–59). On the other hand, within the whole plot as it stands, the song shows, as do so many divine scenes in the *Iliad,* that the lives of the gods are simply not serious as human lives are.

All these possible implications, however, are available only to the external audience, not to the Phaeacians, and not to Demodocus. The song is relevant to Odysseus, certainly, but it is not intended to be. The only instance where a song is truly directed at a specific audience is the song of the Sirens. The Sirens represent a sort of anti–song, which can define normal song by what it is not. They address Odysseus by name as his ship approaches (*Od.* 12.184) and offer to sing precisely what might most interest him from their all–inclusive repertory:

> ἴδμεν γάρ τοι πάνθ' ὅσ' ἐνὶ Τροίῃ εὐρείῃ
> Ἀργεῖοι Τρῶές τε θεῶν ἰότητι μόγησαν·
> ἴδμεν δ' ὅσσα γένηται ἐπὶ χθονὶ πουλυβοτείρῃ. (12.189–91)

[33]See Garvie 1994, 264 (on 1323–57) and 268–69 (on 158–64).

[34]On connections between the song and the Ithacan plot see Burkert 1960, Newton 1987, and Olson 1989.

> For we know everything that the Argives and Trojans suffered in broad Troy by the will of the gods. We know everything that happens on the earth that feeds many.

Their knowledge of Odysseus' identity confirms this claim. Goddesses themselves, they apparently do not require the help of the Muses to sing. And, of course, those who listen to them without precautions die. They thus bring together the extreme ends of the narrative continuum. Like the devious liars, they match their song precisely to a specific audience in order to profit by manipulating the hearer. Yet they have the full knowledge of remote events characteristic of true bards. Only because they are goddesses is this possible, because for a mortal singer the Muses guarantee not only that the song is accurate, but that it is innocent. Independence from oral tradition and from social context serves the same purpose, a narrative without ulterior motives.

The independent and impartial nature of bardic performance has one important consequence for the characters within the poems. Lying and deception are common, and characters in the *Odyssey* are rightly afraid of being deceived by false stories. Nobody, however, worries that his or her deeds will fail to receive appropriate praise. The characters assume great deeds will be remembered. Because the Muses guarantee that they cannot be forgotten, there is no worry about the corrupting effects of time and distance in themselves.

Hesiod's *Theogony* implies a similar poetics in its emphasis on the capacity of bardic performance to induce forgetfulness of everyday troubles (98–103). The famous deeds of "people of the past" (προτέρων ἀνθρώπων, 100) and the praise of the blessed gods provide a social benefit not by commenting on the present, but by distracting the audience from it. To be sure, Hesiod's Muses inspire not only bards but kings, to whom they provide the eloquence that enables them to settle disputes amicably (80–93); yet Hesiod stresses that kings "are from" Zeus, while the Muses and Apollo are responsible for bards (94–96). The speech of the kings, moreover, though it is located in specific, present situations, is fair and impartial. Although the kings help the injured, and so must actually take action for one side or the other in a case, Hesiod emphasizes the ease and authority with which the king settles a dispute:

> ὃ δ' ἀσφαλέως ἀγορεύων
> αἶψά τε καὶ μέγα νεῖκος ἐπισταμένως κατέπαυσεν.

τοὔνεκα γὰρ βασιλῆες ἐχέφρονες, οὕνεκα λαοῖς
βλαπτομένοις ἀγορῇφι μετάτροπα ἔργα τελεῦσι
ῥηϊδίως, μαλακοῖσι παραιφάμενοι ἐπέεσσιν. (85–90)

And he, speaking unerringly, immediately settles even a great quarrel competently. That is why kings are "intelligent," because they accomplish acts of restitution in the public square for the injured, easily, persuading with gentle words.

There is some tension in this description between μετάτροπα ἔργα, actions which reverse an earlier injustice, and the passage's emphasis on how easily and quickly the king ends a dispute. Although the king's judgment must favor one of the contending parties, his persuasion causes them to agree, so that restitution, apparently, ends the quarrel without bitterness. The kings' speech is different from that of the bard in being fitted to an immediate situation, but the Muses are appropriate inspirers for kings because they are, like bards, neither self–serving in what they say nor servants of any faction, but of the good of all. The distance between poetics and reality, already clear enough in Homer, is even clearer if we imagine that this passage has as one of its purposes flattery of the most powerful members of the poet's audience.[35]

By defining different kinds of narratives, Homer defines distinct modes of appropriate reception. The narratives of oral tradition demand a particular kind of competence of their audiences: the adept listener is canny and suspicious, always considering the narrator's personal ends. The audience of epic performance, on the other hand, should apparently evaluate the narrative by the pleasure it provides, without worrying about being manipulated. This unsuspicious reception is possible only because the Homeric tradition so rigorously defines its subject matter as the heroes of the past. Homeric epic, despite its representations of bards who sing of their contemporaries, does not praise the living.[36] The narrative's claim of "truth" is not a claim to literal, historical accuracy, but is largely a claim to reward great deeds with the praise they deserve, and thus to a disinterested account.[37] Occasional poetry, not surprisingly, completely avoids the Homeric claim to be

[35]As is the view of West (1966, 44–45). (He suggests further that the emphasis on the power of poetry to distract the grieving is also fitted to performance at Amphidamas' funeral games.)

[36]See Nagy 1990, 147–50.

[37]See Pratt 1993, 37–42.

independent of circumstance. In *Works and Days* the poetic speaker makes no claims of impartiality, though he insists that he represents justice. One could indeed argue that Pindar, for example, makes much stronger truth–claims than Homer precisely because he cannot distance himself from immediate social claims.

Real epic bards in any tradition must learn their stories from other bards or other storytellers, or make them up. Equally, real performers are never as universally praised as those of Homer. Different audiences could have very different kinds of interest in a performance. The aristocracy as a whole could very well have preferred uncritical treatments of the heroes of the past, as models for themselves, while popular audiences may have preferred to view the heroes with some irony. Significantly, though, there is considerable disagreement about the precise affiliations of the Homeric poems.[38] The history of the political use of Homer shows how a particular poem, or detail in it, could please or offend a polis as a whole. The Megarians had to accuse the Athenians of interpolation (Arist. *Rhet.* A15.1375b30) and Cleisthenes had to forbid rhapsodic performances (Hdt. 5.67.1), because a canonical repertory already existed, but the pressures these stories imply must have existed before either individual compositions or the canon as a whole took shape. Yet what is truly remarkable is the success of the tradition in achieving wide authority across the boundaries of class and locality. The Megarians claimed interpolation, not pro–Athenian bias on Homer's part.

For Svenbro, the Muse hypostasizes social control; for Nagy, her "message is equated with that of creative tradition."[39] I would suggest that she represents an attempt to finesse the impossible complexity of potential claims, and that the care with which Homer presents bardic performance as uncontaminated and free, even as he shows the forces that would realistically limit its freedom, reflects a serious anxiety. Each performance had to negotiate its way through competing pressures. The fiction of complete independence offered space to maneuver. A cunning enough bard could provide a song that allowed members of the audience with quite different desires and interests to feel satisfied. For the

[38]Morris (1981) treats the poems as propaganda for the established social order. Rose (1992, 43–91) argues that the treatment of aristocracy, particularly of claims of birth, is ambiguous, and indeed critical (see also Rose 1997). Stanley (1991, 248–96) connects the *Iliad*'s irony towards and distance from its heroes with written composition.

[39]Svenbro 1976, 16–35; Nagy 1979, 16.

audience, it was worthwhile to accept the bards' fiction of independence, since only by believing that they did not tell the bard what to sing could they receive the song as confirmation of their beliefs instead of as a reflection of their own power. The past is only usable to the extent that it is believed to be the past, and the Homeric performances provided a supremely usable past. The poems could be most effective in the social world by pretending to ignore it.

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