



# ORAL TRADITION

Volume 16, Number 1

March, 2001

Slavica



# ORAL TRADITION

---

Volume 16

March 2001

Number 1

---

*Editor*

John Miles Foley

*Associate Editor*

John Zemke

*Editorial Assistants*

Michael Barnes

Adam Dubé

Kristin Funk

Heather Hignite

Heather Maring

Marjorie Rubright

# Slavica Publishers, Inc.

For a complete catalog of books from Slavica, with prices and ordering information, write to:

Slavica Publishers, Inc.  
Indiana University  
2611 E. 10th St.  
Bloomington, IN 47408-2603

ISSN: 0883-5365

Each contribution copyright © 2001 by its author. All rights reserved.

The editor and the publisher assume no responsibility for statements of fact or opinion by the authors.

*Oral Tradition* seeks to provide a comparative and interdisciplinary focus for studies in oral literature and related fields by publishing research and scholarship on the creation, transmission, and interpretation of all forms of oral traditional expression. As well as essays treating certifiably oral traditions, *OT* presents investigations of the relationships between oral and written traditions, as well as brief accounts of important fieldwork, a Symposium section (in which scholars may reply at some length to prior essays), review articles, occasional transcriptions and translations of oral texts, a digest of work in progress, and a regular column for notices of conferences and other matters of interest. In addition, occasional issues will include an ongoing annotated bibliography of relevant research and the annual Albert Lord and Milman Parry Lectures on Oral Tradition. *OT* welcomes contributions on all oral literatures, on all literatures directly influenced by oral traditions, and on non-literary oral traditions. Submissions must follow the list-of-reference format (style sheet available on request) and must be accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope for return or for mailing of proofs; all quotations of primary materials must be made in the original language(s) with following English translations. Authors should submit two copies of all manuscripts. Most contributions will be reviewed by at least one specialist reader and one member of the editorial board before a final decision is reached. Review essays, announcements, and contributions to the Symposium section will be evaluated by the editor in consultation with the board.

*Oral Tradition* appears twice per year, in March and October. To enter a subscription, please contact Slavica Publishers at the address given above.

All manuscripts, books for review, items for the bibliography updates, and editorial correspondence, as well as subscriptions and related inquiries should be addressed to the editor, John Miles Foley, Center for Studies in Oral Tradition, 21 Parker Hall, University of Missouri, Columbia, MO 65211.

Printed in the United States of America.

## EDITORIAL BOARD

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| Mark C. Amodio<br><i>Vassar College</i><br><i>Old and Middle English</i>                    | Joseph J. Duggan<br><i>Univ. of Cal./Berkeley</i><br><i>French, Spanish, comparative</i> |
| Patricia Arant<br><i>Brown University</i><br><i>Russian</i>                                 | Alan Dundes<br><i>Univ. of Cal./Berkeley</i><br><i>Folklore</i>                          |
| Samuel Armistead<br><i>University of California/Davis</i><br><i>Hispanic, comparative</i>   | Mark W. Edwards<br><i>Stanford University</i><br><i>Ancient Greek</i>                    |
| Richard Bauman<br><i>Indiana University</i><br><i>Folklore, Theory</i>                      | Ruth Finnegan<br><i>Open University</i><br><i>African, South Pacific</i>                 |
| Dan Ben-Amos<br><i>University of Pennsylvania</i><br><i>Folklore</i>                        | Thomas Hale<br><i>Penn. State University</i><br><i>African</i>                           |
| Mary Ellen Brown<br><i>Indiana University</i><br><i>Folklore, Balladry</i>                  | Lee Haring<br><i>Brooklyn College, CUNY</i><br><i>African</i>                            |
| Chogjin<br><i>Chinese Academy</i><br><i>of Social Sciences</i><br><i>Mongolian, Chinese</i> | Joseph Harris<br><i>Harvard University</i><br><i>Old Norse</i>                           |
| Bridget Connelly<br><i>University of Cal./Berkeley</i><br><i>Arabic</i>                     | Lauri Harvilahti<br><i>University of Helsinki</i><br><i>Russian, Finnish, Altai</i>      |
| Robert P. Creed<br><i>Univ. of Mass./Amherst</i><br><i>Old English, Comparative</i>         | Lauri Honko<br><i>Turku University</i><br><i>Comparative Epic</i>                        |
| Robert Culley<br><i>McGill University</i><br><i>Biblical Studies</i>                        | Dell Hymes<br><i>University of Virginia</i><br><i>Native American, Linguistics</i>       |
| Thomas DuBois<br><i>University of Wisconsin</i><br><i>Scandinavian</i>                      | Martin Jaffee<br><i>Hebrew Bible</i><br><i>Univ. of Washington</i>                       |

## EDITORIAL BOARD

- Minna Skafte Jensen  
*Odense University*  
*Ancient Greek, Latin*
- Shelly Fenno Quinn  
*Ohio State University*  
*Japanese*
- Werner Kelber  
*Rice University*  
*Biblical Studies*
- Burton Raffel  
*Univ. of Southwestern*  
*Louisiana*  
*Translation*
- Françoise Létoublon  
*Université Stendahl*  
*Ancient Greek*
- Karl Reichl  
*Universität Bonn*  
*Turkic, Old and Middle English*
- Victor Mair  
*University of Pennsylvania*  
*Chinese*
- John Roberts  
*Ohio State University*  
*African-American*
- Nada Milošević-Djordjević  
*University of Belgrade*  
*South Slavic*
- Joel Sherzer  
*University of Texas/Austin*  
*Native American, Anthropology*
- Stephen Mitchell  
*Harvard University*  
*Scandinavian*
- Dennis Tedlock  
*SUNY/Buffalo*  
*Native American*
- Gregory Nagy  
*Harvard University*  
*Ancient Greek, Sanskrit,*  
*comparative*
- J. Barre Toelken  
*Utah State University*  
*Folklore, Native American*
- Joseph Falaky Nagy  
*Univ. of Cal./Los Angeles*  
*Old Irish*
- Ronald J. Turner  
*Univ. of Missouri/Columbia*  
*Storytelling*
- Susan Niditch  
*Amherst College*  
*Hebrew Bible*
- Andrew Wiget  
*University of New Mexico*  
*Native American*
- Walter J. Ong  
*St. Louis University (Emeritus)*  
*Hermeneutics of orality and*  
*literacy*

# Contents

<i>Editor's Column</i> .....	1
Linda White <i>Orality and Basque Nationalism: Dancing with the Devil or Waltzing into the Future</i> .....	3
H. C. Groenewald <i>I Control the Idioms: Creativity in Ndebele Praise Poetry</i> .....	29
John F. Garcia <i>Milman Parry and A. L. Kroeber: Americanist Anthropology and the Oral Homer</i> .....	58
Anatole Mori <i>Personal Favor and Public Influence: Arete, Arsinoë II, and the Argonautica</i> .....	85
Guillemette Bolens <i>The Limits of Textuality: Mobility and Fire Production in Homer and Beowulf</i> .....	107
Derek Collins <i>Homer and Rhapsodic Competition in Performance</i> .....	129
Stephen A. Mitchell <i>Performance and Norse Poetry: The Hydromel of Praise and the Effluvia of Scorn</i> .....	168
About the Authors .....	203



## Editor's Column

Over this and the next issue *Oral Tradition* will be following a double path it charted a decade and one-half ago and seeks still to follow. The present number houses a miscellany of articles on Basque, Ndebele, ancient Greek, Native American, Old English, and Old Norse traditions, and their authors employ perspectives as diverse as politics and nationalism, comparative anthropology, myth studies, lexicography and semantics, performance studies, and rhetorical theory. In this way we hope to encourage a "polylogue" that avoids the special pleading of disciplinary focus and welcomes a host of divergent viewpoints on what is after all a remarkably heterogeneous species of verbal art.

Linda White begins the colloquy with her examination of the Euskara (Basque) oral genre called *bertsolaritza*, dealing not only with its language and structure but also with the history of its recording and its identity against the political background in the context of a society's "rush to literacy." Next in line is H. C. Groenewald's study of creativity and innovation in the Zulu oral tradition of praise-poetry. Based on ten years of field research, his article shows how the practice of praising involves memorization and recitation, composition, and even the importing of poetry from other cultures. On a different note, John F. García reports on the fruits of his archival research to contend that Milman Parry's groundbreaking work on Homer's oral tradition had deeper roots in his graduate school training than has heretofore been realized, specifically that the anthropological writings and teachings of the Native Americanist A. L. Kroeber were of foundational significance for Parry's theories on ancient Greek poetry.

From anthropology Anatole Mori turns to historical reflections in ancient epic, exploring the link between the real-world Ptolemaic monarchy and the Phaeacian episodes in Homer's *Odyssey* and Apollonius' *Argonautica* against the backdrop of oral tradition. Guillemette Bolens investigates evidence of mobility, a phenomenon she sees as inherently a property of oral as opposed to written, textual expression, and finds evidence of movement and fire associated with Homer's Hephaestus and the dragon in *Beowulf*. Derek Collins reinterprets the Homeric "rhapsodes," once thought to be workaday performers of static versions of the epics, as competitive poets who used fixed texts as a basis for innovations in live performance; in doing so he makes reference to Turkish games of verbal dueling and other analogues.

Finally, we are very pleased to present the Albert Lord and Milman Parry Lecture for 2001, on "Performance and Norse Poetry," by Stephen



Mitchell. Indeed, there is some special justice in Professor Mitchell's having delivered this lecture, since he serves as Curator of the Milman Parry Collection, whose contents Albert Lord initially brought before us, as well as co-editor of the second edition of Lord's *The Singer of Tales*. Here Mitchell advocates a performance-oriented approach to medieval sagas, which of course now exist only as artifacts, and shows convincingly how this approach goes well beyond traditional philology and mythology.

In the next issue of *Oral Tradition* we will honor the other half of our ongoing commitment: to devote an occasional number to a somewhat narrower focus on a single tradition or area. In this case, however, the subject will remain broad and remarkably varied, since the issue will survey the oral traditions of the minority peoples of China. Dr. Chogjin, a Mongolian specialist who spent twelve months at the Center for Studies in Oral Tradition at Missouri, is responsible for recruiting the thirteen authors who have written for this unprecedented collection of essays. Not a few of them are in fact the very first professional scholars their ethnic groups have produced, so the special issue they help to constitute promises to be a landmark publication in many ways.

Let me close by urging our readers to send us their best work, no matter what the particular tradition or approach. We are eager to bring your ideas before the interdisciplinary constituency that is the readership of *Oral Tradition*.

*John Miles Foley, Editor*

Center for Studies in Oral Tradition  
21 Parker Hall  
University of Missouri  
Columbia, MO 65211 USA  
*Telephone: 573-882-9720*  
*Fax: 573-446-2585*  
*e-mail: oraltradition@missouri.edu*

## Orality and Basque Nationalism: Dancing with the Devil or Waltzing into the Future?

Linda White

### The Language Situation in the Basque Country

The Basque Country in northern Spain is comprised of two autonomous communities, also known by the names Euskadi and Navarra, as their respective polities refer to themselves. There are three traditional provinces within Euskadi: Araba, Gipuzkoa, and Bizkaia. There are also three Basque provinces in France, but this discussion will be limited to the Basque Country in Spain.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Interest in Basque language and literature must necessarily awaken interests in other areas as well. Placing the language in its proper cultural milieu exposes us to works by Robert Clark (1979, 1984) and Stanley Payne (1975), and to Joseba Zulaika's *Basque Violence* (1988) for twentieth-century Basque history and the ineluctable impact of events on Euskara (the Basque language), nationalism, and the struggle for Basque autonomy. Migration plays such a large role in the Basque story that this topic as well is soon added to the list of fields of study (Douglass and Bilbao 1975). But even within language and literature and their purlieu, diverse avenues of exploration are constantly emerging, such as Jacqueline Urla's (1978, 2000) studies of the significance of Euskara to Basque identity.

The hegemonic Basque literary histories, including those of Luis Villasante (1961), Luis Michelena (1960), Santiago Onaindia (1975), Ibon Sarasola (1976), Luis Mari Mujika (1979), Jon Juaristi (1987), and Jon Kortazar (1990) inform us about the written variety of Basque literature (although they all mention the oral aspect to some degree). For a closer examination of *bertsolaritza*, there are works by Juan Mari Lekuona (1982) and Manuel de Lekuona (1965) and Joseba Zulaika's *Bertsolarien jokoa eta jolasa* (1985), as well as Gorka Aulestia's works (1995, 2000) on the orality of Basque culture and literature, and by extension, works on the nature of orality itself by Ong (1982) and by Lord (1960). It is impossible, however, to limit one's literary territory to the Basque-specific realm. Contemporary critics such as Javier Cillero Goiriastuena (2000), Iñaki Aldekoa (1992, 1993a, 1993b), Mari Jose Olaziregi (1998), Laura Mintegi (1994), Jesús María Lasagabaster (1990), Ana Toledo Lezeta (1989), and Joseba

The need for a standard written language has been manifest in Basque circles since Bernat Dechepare wrote and published the first book in Euskara<sup>2</sup> in 1545. In two of his poems he urged his readers to take their language into the world and use it there. Three hundred fifty years later, the Basques have a Unified Basque dialect. *Euskara Batua* was created by Euskaltzaindia (“The Academy of the Basque Language”), which was formed in 1918 and has worked tirelessly ever since toward the goal of a unified written dialect. Almost all literacy programs in Euskadi teach the Unified dialect, although there are some holdouts in Bizkaia where the Bizkaian dialect is favored. Linguists in the nineteenth century identified hundreds of individual dialects, but today informed sources, such as the Aulestia and White dictionary (1992), recognize far fewer: Bizkaian, Gipuzkoan, Zuberoan, Labourdin, Behe-Nafarroan (Low Navarrese), and, of course, Batua. The dialect of Araba is virtually extinct.<sup>3</sup>

Today, Euskara is one of four minority languages in Spain.<sup>4</sup> The 1978 Spanish constitution granted three of these languages co-official status with Castilian within their autonomous communities.<sup>5</sup> Ros and Cano state that the relationship between Euskara and Castilian has long been a diglossic one, especially during the Franco years with his vigorous anti-minority-language policies (1987:87-88). Since Franco’s demise and the subsequent 1978 constitution, Basques have been energetically involved in the re-Basquification of their territory and their people.

---

Gabilondo (2000) are increasingly cognizant of current trends in western critical theory as they approach literature in Euskara.

<sup>2</sup> Euskara is the preferred spelling in Unified Basque (“Batua”). However, the word often appears as *euskera*, with an *e*. I capitalize it in this paper in deference to standard English practice. Dechepare’s book of poems (1995) bore the Latin title *Linguae Vasconum Primitiae* (“First Fruits of the Basque Language”).

<sup>3</sup> For greater detail, see Michelena 1960 and 1964, Echenique Elizondo 1984, and Jacobsen 2000. Aulestia and White were forced to select a limited number of dialectal variations for their dictionary (1992), a project that spanned 12 years even under the limitation of six dialects. Dialectal variations can still be found from valley to valley and from village to village.

<sup>4</sup> The others are Catalan, Galician, and Valencian. Valencian, however, was viewed as a dialect of Catalan, so it was not granted any co-official status.

<sup>5</sup> The three are Euskara, Catalan, and Galician. See Mar-Molinero 1995 and 1996 on the politics of language in Spain.

Two organizations were established to wage the Basque literacy wars: HABE and AEK. HABE (*Helduen Alfabetatze Berreuskalduntzerako Erakundea*, “Organization for Adult Literacy and Re-Basquification”) was created by the Basque government (Euskadi) on October 4, 1981, and was approved by the Basque parliament on November 25, 1983. It operates under the wing of the Ministry of Culture and was created to spearhead a literacy and language-teaching campaign among adults within Euskadi.<sup>6</sup> HABE has created its own teaching centers, the *euskaltegiak*. It has created entire programs and masses of language-learning materials on the leading edge of language instruction, including games, audio cassette tapes, video tapes, and slides to help them achieve their goals. It has offered didactic and pedagogical assistance to public and private organizations that have created *euskaltegiak*. And it has built up a group of its own teachers and offers help to other teaching staffs in a variety of ways. The AEK (*Alfabetatze Euskalduntze Koordinakundea*, “Coordinating Group for Teaching Basque and Literacy”) sponsors the *Korrika*, a footrace held every two years in which people pay for the privilege of running or walking a few meters or several kilometers, depending on their ability, in order to fund literacy programs in the Basque language.<sup>7</sup> AEK is not a government organization, and there is much competition between AEK and HABE for potential students in their classes.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> In the words of 1995 General Director José Joan G. de Txabarri, “Since it was created by the Basque Government, HABE has adopted the dream of many Basques as its own: to make *euskara*, the language that gave a name and an essence to our country, once again the language of the Basque Country” (taken from promotional material issued by HABE in 1995).

<sup>7</sup> See del Valle 1994 for an in-depth study of this phenomenon and its significance in Basque culture.

<sup>8</sup> Municipalities often dedicate city money to public relations for the language, as in Donostia-San Sebastián, where the people at Euskararen Udal Patronatua (“City Patronage of Euskara”) distribute a weekly magazine, *Irutxulo*, in Basque. The 1994 head of the Patronatua, Imanol Galdos, implemented a series of radio spots entitled *Euskara, zeure esku* (“Basque, your right”) that dramatized real-life situations in Basque and encouraged people to live in the language. In Galdos’ opinion, the battle to provide instruction in Euskara has been won, but the next stage of the struggle looms even greater, that of convincing the population to use Euskara in their everyday dealings with the plumber, the clients in the front office, and the people in the shops.

Even with all this effort to save the language, I find that in the cities I must make my own opportunities to speak Euskara. Outside the *euskaltegiak* and the *barnetegiak* (“boarding schools for learning Basque”), the municipal environment is overwhelmingly

Today, although Euskara putatively shares co-official status with Castilian within Euskadi, the vast majority of Basque speakers are still unaccustomed to reading in Euskara. According to the *Euskal Herriko soziolinguistikazko inkesta 1996* (1996 Sociolinguistic Survey of the Basque Country)<sup>9</sup>, *erdera* (Spanish in the south, French in the north) was the first language for 77.7 percent of the population of the Basque Country *over age 15*, while 18.8 percent claimed Euskara as their first language. The remainder, 3.5 percent, grew up bilingual. Although the numbers differ somewhat if we break the territory down into Navarra (89.8 percent), Euskadi (75.8 percent), and Iparralde (the Basque Country in France, 68.5 percent), we can see that within the Basque regions of Spain, Spanish was the first language for over three-quarters of the population.

Translated into numbers of people, the figures for the over-fifteen age group in 1996 (the most recent year for which figures are currently available) show 456,300 monolingual native speakers of Euskara and 84,700 bilingual native speakers, for a total of 541,000 (*Euskal Herriko* 4:4-5). This figure does not reflect the changes in language status that occurred over the lives of the surveyed population, but it gives us a feel for the body of native speakers within the Basque Country.

The 1996 survey also examined the linguistic competence of the same population group (as opposed to simply how many learned Euskara as a first language). Within Euskadi (and in Iparralde, as well), one in four people is bilingual in Euskara and *erdera*, while in Navarra the figure falls to one in ten. This means that 25 percent of the population of Euskadi is capable of some level of linguistic competence in Euskara. But that 25 percent excludes most of those whose knowledge is minimal or passive, those who can speak a little bit in Basque or who at least understand it “rather well” if they do not speak it. We can include this category of passive bilinguals in our numbers of possible readers of Euskara and obtain a figure of 899,400 people aged 16 and over who are capable of communicating at some level in the language (*Euskal Herriko* 18-19).<sup>10</sup>

---

Spanish. Often in the shops, more English than Basque is heard because the piped music is Sinead O'Connor or Boyz II Men. In the small villages Euskara is still heard on the streets, but in Donosti, Bilbo, Gasteiz, and Iruna you must look for it and insist on it, and that constant effort wears you down.

<sup>9</sup> Volume 1, *Euskal Herriko*.

<sup>10</sup> This figure of 899,400 people capable of some level of communication in Euskara is for all of Euskal Herria: Euskadi, Navarra, and Iparralde. It does not include speakers living abroad, but those numbers would not significantly alter the total. Tejerina

Although the literati are striving to create a written literary heritage where none existed a hundred years ago, new generations of readers have not yet been created. Of the numbers discussed above, Mendiguren Elizegi has estimated that perhaps 100,000 were capable of reading Euskara with some facility, but he added that the number who read Basque literature for pleasure is very small, perhaps as low as 1,500 individuals (1998:46), although Cillero Goiriastuena (2000:101) would caution us against making any generalizations and reminds us that this is a difficult quality to measure.

### **The Oral Art Form Known as *Bertsolaritza***

In this milieu, the oral art form known as *bertsolaritza* is thriving. The artists (*bertsolariak*), often called “Basque troubadours,” perform in competitions broadcast on television and become regional celebrities. The audience does not need to read Euskara in order to enjoy the “sport of words,” as it is called.

*Bertsolari* Xabier Amuriza calls it the “sung word of the people” (Aulestia 1995:21).<sup>11</sup> *Bertsolaritza* is a competitive art form in which the artist/performer/poet stands before an audience and sings extemporaneous lyrics to folk melodies. The subject matter of these verses, as well as the tune to be used, is provided by a *gai jartzaile* (“imposer of subjects”), who also serves as a master of ceremonies. The performances—including creativity, wittiness, and technical aspects of the *bertsoak* (“verses”)—are judged by a panel of knowledgeable people, and one of the participating *bertsolariak* is proclaimed the winner at the end of the competition.

The traditional venues for these competitions were folk festivals, weddings, and other social events. The modern *txapelketak* (“championships”) began in 1935 with the first Day of the Bertsolari. During the last two decades of the twentieth century, committees were established to choose judges and moderators for the competitions, to decide what the rules would be, and to pick the themes for the *bertsolariak*. Loudspeakers and microphones are now ubiquitous, and performances are recorded and videotaped for later transmission via radio and television

---

Montaña and MacKinnon 1997 both offer a great deal of valuable information and insight on the language situation in Euskadi.

<sup>11</sup> Several books are available on this topic for those who read Spanish or Basque, including: Canton et al. 1992, Eizmendi 1984, J. M. Lekuona 1982, M. Lekuona 1965, and Zulaika 1985. In English, Aulestia 1995 provides a wealth of information.

(Aulestia 1995:41, White 1996 69). But thus far at least, no amount of end-of-millennium technology is able to accurately record the *bertsolaritza* experience. As Ong puts it, most of us are “so resolutely literate that we seldom feel comfortable with a situation in which verbalization is so little thing-like as it is in oral tradition” (1982:11).

Within Basque circles, the survival of the *bertsolari*'s art has historically been touted as a unique phenomenon, but a more realistic view would place *bertsolaritza* in a category of oral forms of literature from different languages that have survived to a greater or lesser extent down through the ages. Today in the Basque Country, the magazine *Bertsolari* runs features on the conferences being held to bring together artists and practitioners of all these art forms to perform for each other and for attentive audiences in large celebrations of the oral art.<sup>12</sup>

### *Language of the Bertsolari*

The language of the *bertsolari* is much closer to the spoken language of the people than it is to written Basque. This is due in part to the creation of the standard dialect known as Euskara Batua (“Unified Basque”), which is used in official communications, in the media, and in textbooks and classrooms; it is even spoken by those who acquire it as a second language. Native speakers educated in Batua often speak one of the dialects at home. However, regardless of the dialect used by the artist, the Euskara produced by the *bertsolari* differs from the language heard in normal speech in four ways: rhythm and rhyme, structure, tonality, and level of metaphorical content.

### Rhythm and Rhyme

The verses created by the *bertsolari* must comply with specific rhyme patterns.<sup>13</sup> When aficionados discuss *bertsolaritza*, such rhyme patterns are

---

<sup>12</sup> Examples of these other art forms include Galician *regeifas*, Argentinian *payadores*, Cuban *décimas*, and so forth. See further Aulestia 2000.

<sup>13</sup> The most common types of verses discussed in this way are *zortziko handia* (“long eight”), *zortziko txikia* (“short eight”), *hamarreko handia* (“long ten”), *hamarreko txikia* (“short ten”), and *bederatzi puntukoa* (“nine rhymes”), the latter generally considered to be one of the most difficult verses to perform well. *Zortziko handia* is a verse of eight lines in which the odd lines contain ten syllables and the even lines contain

often at the center of their evaluation of an artist's creative production. To the novice, it can often seem as though these oral artists are faced with the onerous task of counting rhymes and syllables as they versify. However, the rhyme patterns and syllable counts per line are an intimate part of the melody being used for a particular verse, and the music is what makes it possible for a *bertsolari* to keep all these schemes in mind during performance.

We can demonstrate this dynamic by picking a popular folk melody and humming the tune. Although we are not conscious of how many notes there are per line, or how many beats per measure, we do know whether the tune is hummed correctly. We are aware of mistakes in the length of the notes, and variations in the melody are glaringly obvious and usually unwelcome. If we make up words to the melody and our line of verse is too long for the musical phrase, we will be forced to fit several syllables into a note that should logically carry only one. If we have too few words, then we must sing one word for a duration of several notes, dragging the word out in order to allow for the singing of all the notes of the melody. Some people are very adept at this lyric-to-music match, and some are not. But nearly everyone can discern whether another person is doing a good job of making the match, which is the skill involved in extemporaneous versifying. Discussions of the number of syllables per line and the patterns of the rhymes at the end of the lines can be very misleading if we lose sight of the lyric-to-music matching that underlies the performance of the *bertsolari*'s art.

### Structure and Syntax

The syntax of the versifier is not more flexible, per se, than that of everyday speech, but the *bertsolari* manages a syntactic flexibility beyond the scope of those engaged in normal conversation. Verbs are often omitted. The highly inflected nature of Euskara allows for great variety in sentence structure with little or no confusion resulting from variable word placement.

---

eight (a syllabiatic pattern of 10/8). The even lines carry the rhyme (ab cb db eb). *Zortziko txikia* is also an eight-line verse, with a syllabic pattern of 7/6 and the same rhyme pattern as above. *Hamarreko handia* is a verse of ten lines with a syllabic pattern of 10/8 and the rhyme again on the even lines (ab cb db eb fb). *Hamarreko txikia* differs in that the syllabic pattern is 7/6. *Bederatzi puntukoa* is a fourteen-line verse with the syllabic pattern 7/6 7/5 7/6 7/6 6/6/6/6 7/5 and the rhyme pattern ab cb db eb bbbb fb. For more detailed information on the structure of these verses, see Aulestia 1995:22-27.



This same highly inflected quality, combined with the postposition nature of Basque declensional endings, eases the task of rhyming.

### Tonality

The words of the *bertsoak* are sung, not spoken, so as the performer creates a line or a verse the creation is shared with the listeners via musical tone. Tonality plays a greater or lesser role in speech production, depending on the language being spoken. Certain Asian languages (in which tonality plays a much lesser role in the differentiation of meaning, or rather where the range of tones used in this manner is more limited), for example, are perceived as musical by the Western ear. Although we would not ordinarily refer to a melody as a tonal quality of language, in the *bertsolari's* art, certain melodies are selected as the foundation for a *bertso* based on emotional impact or shades of meaning that the melody itself will connote for the listener.

### Level of Metaphorical Content

A *bertsolari's* speech in performance is often metaphorical in the extreme. In a different context, such condensed speech could be inappropriately elliptical, if we concur that the goal of normal speech is most often communication; speech that hinders comprehension is at the very least discouraged, and at the other end of the spectrum can even be life-threatening. The highly metaphorical speech of the *bertsolari* is framed by a context that does not require total comprehension, where failure to understand will not result in economic misfortune or physical danger. The *bertsolari* is free to pack as much meaning as possible into his or her work, and the audience is free to interpret, translate, or decipher as much of that meaning as each individual is capable of doing.<sup>14</sup>

### *Inadequacies of Recording the Bertsoak*

Although the modern *bertsolari's* verses are recorded on audio and video tape, and even transcribed and published in books, the art form itself is

---

<sup>14</sup> John Miles Foley describes this phenomenon with eloquence and specificity in his discussion of metonymy and traditional referentiality (1991:7).

not accurately or truthfully represented by those attempts at record-keeping. In the case of recordings, the sound of the *bertsolari*'s voice and words are more accurately transmitted than they are in a written record, but even so the acoustic inscription does not truly reflect a *bertso* and its creation. Watching a performance on video tape is the next best thing to attending a live competition, although the interactivity between *bertsolari* and audience cannot be fully experienced in this format. However, video is an excellent medium for observing the structure of a *bertsolari* competition and witnessing how quickly the artists respond to each other's verses.

For example, on a video of the *Hitzetik hortzera* television program, recorded in the early 1990s, Maialen Lujanbio, a young woman of about seventeen, competes against Peñagarikano, a middle-aged male veteran of the art. They are given the theme of a failed date around which to build their *bertso*.

The *gai jartzaile* explains that Peña and Maialen have a date for 10:00 p.m., but he falls asleep. When he shows up at midnight, he learns that Maialen has gone out with someone else. Peña sings *bertsoak* from the wounded male's perspective, and Maialen responds (using the same melody and verse structure) from the woman's point of view. There is a lively chemistry between these two performers, and responses begin almost before the last note of the previous verse has faded. The elapsed time between *bertsoak* is often as brief as one second. Three seconds "feels" like a long time between *bertsoak* when watching a competition, and *bertsolariak* who take too long before responding are penalized by the judges.

Peña begins by accusing fickle Maialen of "looking for a pastry to her liking." Maialen responds that if he does not like the way she acts, he can leave and that he will regret what he said to her. Peña comes back with a lament that their two-year relationship should not end because of the two hours he overslept. Maialen replies that he suspected that she would wait around for him to show up, but she went out for her eleven o'clock turn (implying that he missed his ten o'clock slot and that she had other gentlemen standing in line).

The last two verses of their exchange are transcribed here in Euskara (to provide an example of the rhyme pattern) with English translation.

*Peña:*

Sines zazue ez nengoela  
holako errezelotan.  
Hara zer gauza gertatu zaidan  
gaur egoteangatik lotan.  
Barkatu baina esango dizut  
nik zuri momentu hontan:

aizu zure zai egon izan naiz  
ni behin baino gehiagotan.

‘Believe me, I did not  
have such suspicions.  
Look what has happened to me  
for being sleepy today.  
Excuse me, but I will tell you  
at this moment:  
hey, I have been waiting for you  
more than once.’

*Maialen:*

Barkatu baina esan bezela  
ez zera etorri garaiz.  
Beste batekin juana naiz ni  
ta oso aurpegi alaiz.  
Beste batzutan zu ’re nere zai  
egoten omen zera maiz.  
Hortze itxoiten jarraitu zazu  
noizbait etorriko naiz.

‘Excuse me, but as I said  
you did not come on time.  
I went with someone else  
and I did so happily.  
You say you also waited for me  
quite a few times.  
Well, keep waiting,  
I’ll come back someday.’

(White 1996:95-96)

Maialen responded so quickly with this last verse that even Peña was surprised, and the audience was delighted.

To fully experience a *bertso*, the audience must be present at the moment of creation. The art of the *bertsolari* requires an audience. If Peña and Maialen had been practicing alone in a room with the same theme, the result might have been very different, for there was no audience to please and entertain. The audience participates in the creation of the *bertso*, both vocally (as when they deduce the punchline of the verse before the *bertsolari* arrives at it, and then sing it along with the performer as it is produced) and non-vocally (by their mood, responses, level of excitement, anticipation, comprehension, shared cultural referent, and even physical appearance).

In performance, there is a symbiosis between performer and public, a mutual sanctioning, a reciprocal discipline, that demands the *bertsolari*'s best efforts while requiring the audience's attention to such a degree that it often seems that they are singing in silent duet with the performer, as if the impromptu words falling from the *bertsolari*'s lips were being experienced simultaneously in the minds of the audience. I have elsewhere described the process as follows (1996:68):

Bertsolaritza is a public sport. Without an audience, a *bertsolari* cannot perform. Singing improvised verses with no audience is merely practice, not the art itself.

A *bertsolari* must have the wit and language facility to improvise rhyming lyrics of consistently high quality and content to entertain a group of informed, discriminating listeners. They, in turn, provide the artist with instantaneous feedback, and in some cases they may even anticipate the last lines of a *bertso* and sing it along with the performer.

Being in the audience, feeling the anticipation and the tension between the competitors, adds to the emotive power of the *bertso* itself. When a *bertsolari* is able to craft a poem so cogent and pertinent that the last line is an unavoidable conclusion, and as a result the audience is able to sing the line along with the *bertsolari* (because they were able to follow the line of thinking to its completion), then that *bertsolari* has won the audience completely. This is important because audience response can also affect the judges' decision when they award points to the competitors.

With all this in mind, it becomes evident why the transcription of a verse is not a *bertso*.<sup>15</sup> A transcribed verse is several stages removed from the intended form. It is not even an echo of the original, because no sound is produced on the page. Rhythm is lost, tonality (music) is lost, spatial reference (location of the performance) is lost, audience is lost; indeed, everything necessary to the *creation* of a *bertso* is lost. All that appears on the page is a semantic shell composed of symbols (letters) that represent the individual words uttered during performance. This semantic shell cannot accurately transmit the *bertsolari*'s meaning. The quality of the *bertsolari*'s voice, the melody chosen to carry the words, the choice of key (major or

---

<sup>15</sup> There are *bertso-paperak*, *bersto-jarriak*, and *bertso-berriak*, each of which refers to verses that have been written down. Aulestia describes the first two as "popular verses that are transcribed" and the third as "written verses common in Gipuzkoa during the nineteenth century" (1995:231). But these written versions are attempts to record the words of the verses, not necessarily an attempt to create actual *bertsoak*, which must, by definition, be sung extemporaneously before an audience.

minor), and the artist's physical bearing, facial expressions, and appearance all combine to influence the audience and their reception of the verse.

On the other hand, the audience of the transcription is a reader, and the reader is the only source of orality for the transcribed *bertso*. The quality of the "mental" orality brought to the work by its readers depends on many factors, including the readers' dialect of Euskara, their status as native or non-native speakers, their familiarity with the art form and its components, their knowledge of the Basque melodies used for creating *bertsoak*, and their cognizance of current events in Basque society (because the sounds of certain names or words can evoke entire scenarios connected with those sounds in the larger socio-political context). Although an informed reader is capable of bringing many of these factors to the textual representation of a *bertso*, the fact remains that no remnant of the artist's orality survives on the written page.<sup>16</sup>

### **The Rush to Literacy and the Written Word**

Sadly, the Basque culture's rush to literacy (deemed necessary to insure the survival of the language) has also affected its scholars, such as Aulestia in his *Improvisational Poetry from the Basque Country* (1995) and Juan Mari Lekuona in his *Ahozko euskal literatura* (1982), both of whom study *bertsolaritza*. Basque written literature, for all intents and purposes, has only been a serious proposition for a hundred years (Lasagabaster 1990:4). Since oral literature survives and thrives in Basque culture, it is surprising that there are few truly successful descriptions of the oral phenomenon in print. Those who attempt to describe it (myself among them) cannot overcome the ineluctable difficulty of using the language of and about the written word to re-create an art form intended to be experienced at the moment of creation. The lexicon of the written word is simply inadequate to the task.

*Bertsolaritza* is an art of immediacy, an art for an oral culture, an art that is still vital in the lives and sentiments of modern Basques. The difficulties involved in describing or discussing *bertsolaritza* stem from the tradition of classifying it as literature. Or rather, such difficulties stem from the loss of orality in other literatures (in the major languages) and the effect that loss has had on the vocabularies devoted to discussions of literature. The literary metalanguage of the major Western tongues lacks appropriate

---

<sup>16</sup> Again, Foley's discussion of traditional referentiality is pertinent here.

terminology for describing a literary genre that incorporates spontaneity, music, and the spatial cohabitation of artist and audience/“reader.”

A partial remedy lies in borrowing terms used for discussing music. This strategy enables us to speak of major and minor keys, rhythm and tempo, reader as audience, and so on. But even here, certain terms are inadequate. For example, the word “listener” works very well for an audience of music, but it is much too passive to transmit the level of involvement that an audience of *bertsolaritza* brings to the creative act. The word “reader” is equally weak and assumes that we are talking about a literary genre. Ironically, the term “genre” itself so strongly suggests the written word that it, too, may prove inadequate in reference to *bertsolaritza*. However, in the second half of the twentieth century, the use of “genre” to discuss film has expanded the set of connotations that accompany the word, making it at least adequate to the discussion of *bertsolaritza*.

Perhaps the solution to the general inadequacy of terms pertaining to *bertsolaritza* lies in limiting such discussions to Euskara, but unfortunately Euskara itself has been influenced by the pervasive written-word mentality rampant in the major Western cultures. The result has been the creation of a written literature and the adoption of written-word terminology with which to discuss and describe that literature. Even if discussions of *bertsolaritza* were limited to Euskara, similar problems would be (and are) encountered with regard to vocabulary choices available in Basque. What bitter irony, that the orality of Basque culture should remain strong enough to preserve and maintain—and even foster evolution in—the art of *bertsolaritza* while losing the lexicon needed to precisely and appropriately discuss it.

On the other hand, perhaps Euskara never contained such a lexicon because there was no need for it. The immediacy and ephemerality of the *bertsolari*'s artistic production resists critical discussion, an activity that requires “close” and repeated “readings” of a text. The *bertso* is intended to be heard at the moment of creation and thereafter remembered (or forgotten) by the audience. *Bertsolariak* do not reproduce existing works in concert. Their performances are fashioned not to endure, but rather to be experienced. In this sense, critical discussion as we know it with regard to written literature is inappropriate in the case of the *bertso*.

Excellent work has been done in the area of describing *bertsolaritza*,<sup>17</sup> but critical discussion of form and content is never quite satisfying. The informed reader of such discussions experiences the critic's frustration while applying theories and methods designed around written literature to the oral

---

<sup>17</sup> Aulestia 1995; J. M. Lekuona 1982; M. Lekuona 1965; Zavala 1964, 1984; Zulaika 1985.

genre. (Joseba Zulaika does not do this. He discusses *bertsolaritza* in an anthropological, as opposed to literary, context, and as a result the overall effect is, in a way, more gratifying.<sup>18</sup>) At best, one comes away with a sense of the grandeur of a performance art that cannot quite be explained on a page. At worst, the *bertsolari*'s work is diminished by attempts to frame its form and content in the lexicon of written literature.

For an example of a critic who impresses us with the grand scope of the art but who is nevertheless limited by the lexicon, we need only peruse Gorka Aulestia's highly informative *Improvisational Poetry from the Basque Country* (1995). Aulestia speaks in terms of "verse models" (22), and although he makes a valiant effort to impress the reader with the oral and musical aspects of *bertsolaritza*, his message is suppressed by his medium—the printed word.<sup>19</sup> The opening paragraph mentions melodies serving in a supporting role and reminds the reader that a major or minor key can be used to substantiate and bolster the feeling that the *bertsolari* is trying to express, but the description is ineluctably framed by the lexis of written poetry. He speaks in great detail of rhyme patterns and rhythms (meter), providing us with a treasure of information unavailable elsewhere to the anglophone audience. He presents famous examples of *bertsoak* and analyzes them for content and form, revealing much about the Basque worldview and the complexities and shadings that can be achieved by a skilled *bertsolari* in verses of deceptively simplistic structure.

As a native Basque speaker, Aulestia is in a position to reveal double-entendres and nuances that the *euskaldunberri* ("new speaker of Basque") might miss. If Aulestia neglects to emphasize sufficiently the enormous role that music plays in providing the artists with the rhythm and rhyme patterns they will be using, the fault lies with the paucity of terms available in written language for describing an oral phenomenon. In addition, since oral literature is foundational to much of Basque poetry as it has evolved over the years, and since for Basques the link between "verses" and singing is so strong that modern poets will publish written verses and append the name of the melody that can be used to sing them, it is not surprising that the musical dimension of the medium might be assumed by native experts like Aulestia. A non-native, unfortunately, can easily lose track of the musical element of *bertsolaritza* through discussions such as these. Even though Aulestia later spends considerable time emphasizing the musical elements of *bertsolaritza*,

---

<sup>18</sup> See further Zulaika 1985, 1988, 2000.

<sup>19</sup> I employ Aulestia for this example because of my great respect for his work and because I am most familiar with it, having translated the book referred to here.

the milieu of the presentation—written words on a page using language that has been co-opted by written literature to describe written poetry—renders the experiential nature of the art form opaque.

When we speak of the rush to literacy shifting emphasis from orality to the written word, the elements of the oral art that suffer are the intangibles such as the rapport between artist and audience. Moreover, literary critics find it increasingly difficult to discuss the oral phenomenon without resorting to a scrivener's lexis. No written method yet exists that would allow us to *de-scribe* the oral experience. Let us now examine the relationship between Basque orality (*bertso* and Euskara) and the Basque nationalist movement.

### **The “Language and Nationalism” Waltz**

As a movement, Basque nationalism was officially born at the end of the nineteenth century when Sabino Arana Goiri set down his principles of nationalism and founded the Basque Nationalist Party (Partido Nacionalista Vasco), commonly called the PNV. Antonio Elorza explains nationalism as a reaction against the demographic, economic, and cultural changes linked to industrialization, and he calls Arana's nationalism “una religión política de la violencia” (“a political religion of violence,” 1995:33). The ability to speak Euskara was high on Arana's list of necessary qualities in a good Basque nationalist, but his primary requirement was Basque blood and lots of it.<sup>20</sup>

The three most important qualifications for being a good Basque, according to Arana, were to be of the Basque race, to speak the Basque language, and to be a good Catholic. These priorities carried the nationalist movement through the years of the Primo de Rivera dictatorship, through the Spanish Civil War, and on through the 1940s. But during the 1950s, there ensued a heavy immigration of non-Basques seeking employment into the Basque Country. They spoke no Euskara and, as they intermarried with the local population, the emphasis on Castilian in the home was rising. But language was not the only issue. The swelling numbers of working-class residents worried the political thinkers of the day in other ways as well. How were they going to integrate these people into their social agenda for the Basque Country? How could they justify including racially non-Basque

---

<sup>20</sup> For in-depth information about Arana's nationalism, see Arana Goiri 1965, Corcuera Atienza 1979, Heiberg 1975 and 1989, and, of course, Elorza 1995.



immigrants in an agenda designed for and by the Basque nationalist movement?

At the same time that workers were flocking to the two most industrialized regions of Spain, the Basque Country and Catalunya, Franco was spending money on less developed areas in the hopes of making things better for those groups. This economic policy proved disastrous for the Basque Country. Basques had to deal with pollution, urban decay, inadequate schools and hospitals, congested transportation, and cramped housing (Clark 1984:18). Per capita incomes fell and Basques began emigrating while non-Basques were immigrating.<sup>21</sup> The consequence, as Clark observes, was the radicalization of the Basque working class (20): “Not surprisingly, then, there emerged an entirely new movement, one centered on revolutionary socialism blended with intransigent Basque ethnicity.”

Forming their political consciousness at this time was a group of young Basque nationalists that included the writer José Alvarez Enparanza, or “Txillardegi” as he is widely known.<sup>22</sup> During the fifties, this group called itself Ekin. They were publishing clandestine material and advocating that Euskara be made the sole official language of a new and independent Basque republic. Sabino Arana’s Basque Nationalist Party thought that this was an unreasonably utopian goal, considering how many areas within the Basque territory had lost the language completely. By 1959 the young Ekin members could no longer restrain themselves as their impatience with the old guard increased. At last on July 31, 1959, the organization Euzkadi ta Askatasuna (Euzkadi and Freedom) or ETA was founded (Clark 1984:27).

---

<sup>21</sup> The shock to the Basque economy was foregrounded against a history of strong international economic relationships with major world powers. Joseba Zulaika notes (2000:265) that “foreign investment in the iron and steel industries, railroads, and harbor facilities was crucial to the region’s industrialization. International companies extracted 40 percent of Bizkaia’s iron during the 1880-1890 period. What is remarkable is the symbiotic relationship between foreign and Basque capital. Historians estimate that between 60 and 75 percent of all profits remained in the pockets of Bilbao’s industrial elite. . . . By 1929, although Basques constituted a mere 3 percent of Spain’s population, Basque capital represented 25 percent of Spanish banking resources, 38 percent of the investment in shipyards, 40 percent of the funds dedicated to shipping companies, and 62 percent of the monies invested in steel manufacturing.” Zulaika goes on to explain that the boom mentality is once again in full force in Bilbao.

<sup>22</sup> The use of nicknames is common among Basque writers and political figures. The early *bertsolariak* were frequently known by these *ezizenak* (“nicknames” or, literally, “not names”), and modern performers often continue the tradition.

As Tejerina Montaña observes, with the formulation of ETA Euskara acquired preeminence over purity of race as the basic component of collective Basque identity (1992:125).

The Basque language had become the single most important factor in identifying Basqueness. Young people with no Basque blood or with one Basque grandparent or parent could now be equally Basque if they spoke the language. Such, at least, is the Basque nationalist point of view.<sup>23</sup> As an art form intimately related to the everyday lives of the people and impossible to separate from the language employed by the artists, *bertsolaritza* has also been held in high esteem as a uniquely Basque phenomenon.<sup>24</sup>

Since nationalism of any flavor depends on difference to set the ethnic group apart from others, language and ethnic minority literatures are almost always featured as vital elements in any nationalist self-identification kit. Manuel Castells (1997) expounds at length on these characteristics of nationalism, including its predilection for the past, looking for some golden historical heyday that may or may not have existed for the people in question. Thus, it is natural for Basque nationalists to cling to Euskara and to the traditional and “unique” art form of the *bertsolari* when seeking attributes that will set the Basque people apart from all others. The *bertsolari* himself<sup>25</sup> has often been equated with Basque patriotism, and the

---

<sup>23</sup> There are, of course, Basques who are native speakers of Euskara and who do not happen to be Basque nationalists. Some of them even attribute little or no import to the possession of the language. These people are not interviewed in studies of Basque nationalism, or, if they are, their viewpoints are seldom included.

<sup>24</sup> The survival of oral literature is not unique to the Basques, however, as even a cursory examination of the field reveals. For varieties of oral literature within Spain, see Caspi 1995. For a broader world-view, see Foley 1981, 1985, 1998, and earlier issues of *Oral Tradition*. In the Basque Country as well, other forms of oral literature are acknowledged and conferences are held to allow various artists from different cultures a chance to perform for each other and to allow scholars the opportunity to experience their art.

<sup>25</sup> The use of the male pronoun is deliberate. Only recently have women entered (or been allowed to enter) the public realm of the *bertsolari*. See White 1996:63-108 for more about female *bertsolariak*. In December 1997, Maialen Lujanbio became the first woman *bertsolari* to reach the finals of the Basque Country’s championship competition (Iturbe 1998:60). In the same article, Lujanbio observes (59-60): “Nik uste jendea ohitu egin dela neskak ere bertsoetan ikusten” (“I think people have gotten used to seeing girls also creating verses”). For women *bertsolariak* in history (there were a few), see Larrañaga Odriozola 1999 and more recently Larrañaga Odriozola 2000. For a succinct overview of women in Basque literature, see White 2000.

names of certain individuals, such as “Bilintx,” who died as a result of wounds received during the Second Carlist War, can evoke *abertzale* (“patriotic”) sentiment in the Basque breast regardless of which side one’s ancestors fought for.<sup>26</sup>

Just as Euskara has been considered the “secret language”<sup>27</sup> of the Basques, so has *bertsolaritza* served a similar function in times of turmoil. This reality was brought home to me in a very personal way by a Basque friend’s story of her arrest and detention by the Guardia Civil in the early seventies. While attending a university-sponsored conference, J. was rounded up with the rest of the participants and transported to jail. The men and women were separated from each other and housed in different cells in different parts of the facility. There was much anxiety, although J. reported that she was relatively well treated. She was nineteen at the time and was merely slapped around by the Guardia Civil. She said others in her group fared much worse. When no news from their captors was forthcoming regarding the status of the men in their group, the women began singing *bertsoak*, couching their questions for the men in their verses: Where are you? Who has been questioned? Who has been taken away? Has anyone been released? The men could hear the women singing, and they replied by creating their own verses. In this way, the groups maintained contact and kept each other’s spirits up throughout the ordeal.

### **Dancing with the Devil?**

Now that the central government in Madrid no longer persecutes minority-language use within the autonomous communities, some young people are finding it more difficult to expend the time and energy necessary to learn Euskara. Others have grown up in a non-Euskara speaking home with parents who are not ethnically Basque, and yet these young people

---

<sup>26</sup> “Bilintx” was the nickname of Indalecio Bizkarrondo (1831-76). A chain of bookstores bears his name today. Another bookstore, Urretxindor, is named after *bertsolari* Kepa Enbeita. Ironically, “Bilintx” had a weak voice and was self-conscious about his physical appearance; as a result he is better known for his written verses than for his public performances (Aulestia 1995:83-84).

<sup>27</sup> As far back as the conquest of the Americas, Basques recognized each other by means of their language. The first Bishop of Mexico, Juan Zumarraga, communicated in Euskara when he wanted to maintain confidentiality (Mallea-Olaetxe 1998:148).

identify themselves as Basque through means other than the language.<sup>28</sup> However, the reclamation of the language has been significantly successful; anthropologists Joseba Zulaika and Sharryn Kasmir have both remarked that acquisition of Euskara is today independent of ethnic background, and that opportunities for learning it extend throughout the school system (Zulaika, personal communication; Kasmir 2000:200). The death of the language no longer looms on the horizon, and those who wish to do so can demonstrate a more blasé attitude toward Euskara, finding a basis for Basque self-identification in other areas. But for all that the language remains a powerful nationalistic talisman. Young nationalists who are not fluent in the language will still listen to Basque rock. Those who know very little Euskara will cultivate simple phrases, such as “Zorionak!” (“Congratulations!”) and “Gero arte” (“See you later”), as shibboleths of solidarity with the cause. And those who cannot understand what the *bertsolariak* are singing about will attend a *bertsolaritza* performance and support the cultural phenomenon because of what it represents.<sup>29</sup>

For these non-speakers, the language and its acquisition have become the devil of Basque nationalism. Now that Franco is dead, some Basques no longer feel the need or the political compulsion (based on the threat to the existence of the language) to spend long hours studying Euskara. But many still dance with the devil, working toward fluency, for reasons that may have more to do with economics (and the ability to qualify for a position in the

---

<sup>28</sup> Sharryn Kasmir’s study of Basque punk explores the self-identification process of a group often omitted from studies on Basque identity—those who have no Basque blood and no Euskara (2000:180-81): “Approximately half of Arrasate’s population of 25,000 are immigrants, their children, and now their grandchildren. The first generation came to Arrasate in the 1960s, when cooperative and private factories drew labor forces from rural and underdeveloped regions of Spain. They lacked ethnic features of Basqueness—lineage, language, cultural traditions—yet some became Basque through other means. The women bartenders of Jai are not representative of all immigrants and their children, many of whom say they do not feel fully “integrated” into Euskadi and some of whom identify themselves as non-Basque; nor is their Basqueness equal in every context. However, they are not unusual in asserting their Basqueness, and the construction of their identities and their ways of being Basque are critical to our understanding of national identity in the decades following Franco’s 1959 Stabilization Plan.”

<sup>29</sup> This is true in America as well. During the 1999 Renoko Aste Nagusia, a Basque culture week sponsored by the Reno Basque Club as a forerunner of the July meeting in that city of the North American Basque Organization, *bertsolariak* from the U.S. and from Euskal Herria performed for an audience of 200. Fewer than one-third of them actually understood the lyrics.

autonomous government) than with nationalist sentiment. Whatever the current reasons are for learning Euskara, it is clear from the healthy condition of the local and regional *bertsolari* competitions that the link between Basque nationalism and the language and literature has benefited Basque oral literature.

*University of Nevada, Reno*

### References

- Aldekoa 1992                    Iñaki Aldekoa. *Antzarra eta ispilua (Obabakoa-en irudimen mundial)*. Donosti: Erein.
- Aldekoa 1993a                    \_\_\_\_\_. *Antología de la poesía vasca: Euskal poesiaren antologia*. Madrid: Visor.
- Aldekoa 1993b                    \_\_\_\_\_. *Zirkuluaren hutsmina (Jatorrizko erromantizismotik euskal poesia modernora)*. Irun: Alberdania.
- Arana Goiri 1965                Sabino Arana Goiri. *Obras completas*. Bayonne: Sabindiar-Batza.
- Aulestia 1992                    Gorka Aulestia. *Basque-English English-Basque Dictionary*. Reno: University of Nevada Press.
- Aulestia 1995                    \_\_\_\_\_. *Improvisational Poetry from the Basque Country*. Trans. by Lisa Corcostegui and Linda White. Reno: University of Nevada Press.
- Aulestia 2000                    \_\_\_\_\_. "The Basque *Bertsolari* in the New Millennium." In *Basque Cultural Studies*. Ed. by William A. Douglass, Carmelo Urza, Linda White, and Joseba Zulaika. Reno: Basque Studies Program. pp. 227-44.
- Aulestia and White  
1992                                \_\_\_\_\_ and Linda White. *Euskara-Ingelesa Ingelesa-Euskara Hiztegia*. Donostia: Elkar.
- Canton et al. 1992                B. Beatriz Canton, Nieves Diaz, and Maria de Pablo. *Euskal Herriko bertsolariak*. Donostia: Kriselu.
- Caspi 1995                        Mishael M. Caspi, ed. *Oral Tradition and Hispanic Literature: Essays in Honor of Samuel G. Armistead*. New York: Garland.

- Castells 1997 Manuel Castells. *The Power of Identity*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Castells 1998 \_\_\_\_\_. *End of Millennium*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Cillero Goiriastuena 2000 Javier Cillero Goiriastuena. "Contemporary Basque Fiction Revisited." In *Basque Cultural Studies*. Ed. by William A. Douglass, Carmelo Urza, Linda White, and Joseba Zulaika. Reno: Basque Studies Program. pp. 84-106.
- Clark 1979 Robert Clark. *The Basques: The Franco Years and Beyond*. Reno: University of Nevada Press.
- Clark 1984 \_\_\_\_\_. *The Basque Insurgents: ETA, 1952-1980*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Corcuera Atienza 1979 Javier Corcuera Atienza. *Orígenes, ideología y organización del nacionalismo vasco (1876-1904)*. Madrid: Siglo XXI de España.
- del Valle 1994 Teresa del Valle. *Korrika: Basque Ritual for Ethnic Identity*. Trans. by Linda White. Reno: University of Nevada Press.
- Dechepare 1995 Bernat Dechepare. *Linguae Vasconum Primitiae*. Trans. by Patxi Altuna et al. Bilbao: Euskaltzaindia.
- Douglass and Bilbao 1975 William A. Douglass and Jon Bilbao. *Amerikanuak: Basques in the New World*. Reno: University of Nevada Press.
- Echenique Elizondo 1984 María Teresa Echenique Elizondo. *Historia lingüística vasco-románica: Intento de aproximación*. n. p.: Caja de Ahorros Provincial de Guipúzcoa / Gipuzkoako Aurrezki Kutxa Probintziala.
- Eizmendi 1984 Iñaki "Basarri" Eizmendi. *Bertsolaritzari buruz*. Tolosa: Auspoa.
- Elorza 1995 Antonio Elorza. *La religión política: "El nacionalismo sabiniano" y otros ensayos sobre nacionalismo e integrismo*. Donostia: R&B Ediciones.

- Euskal Herriko* *Euskal Herriko soziolinguistikazko inkesta 1996*. 4 vols. n. p.: Eusko Jaurlaritza Kultura Saila; Gobierno de Navarra; Institut Culturel Basque.
- Foley 1981 John Miles Foley, ed. *Oral Traditional Literature: A Festschrift For Albert Bates Lord*. Columbus, OH: Slavica.
- Foley 1985 \_\_\_\_\_. *Oral-Formulaic Theory: An Introduction and Annotated Bibliography*. New York: Garland. Rpt. 1988. Available online with updates at [www.oraltradition.org](http://www.oraltradition.org).
- Foley 1991 \_\_\_\_\_. *Immanent Art: From Structure to Meaning in Traditional Oral Epic*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Foley 1998 \_\_\_\_\_, ed. *Teaching Oral Traditions*. New York: Modern Language Association.
- Gabilondo 2000 Joseba Gabilondo. "Bernardo Atxaga's Seduction: On the Symbolic Economy of Postcolonial and Postnational Literatures in the Global Market." In *Basque Cultural Studies*. Ed. by William A. Douglass, Carmelo Urza, Linda White, and Joseba Zulaika. Reno: Basque Studies Program. pp. 106-33.
- Heiberg 1975 Marianne Heiberg. "Insiders/Outsiders: Basque Nationalism." *Archives Européennes de Sociologie*, 16, ii: 169-93.
- Heiberg 1989 \_\_\_\_\_. *The Making of the Basque Nation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hollier 1995 Denis Hollier. "On Literature Considered as a Dead Language." In *The Uses of Literary History*. Ed. by Marshall Brown. Durham: Duke University Press. pp. 233-41.
- Iturbe 1998 Arantxa Iturbe. "Hamar urteei sei begirada." *Emakunde*, 30:58-63.
- Jacobsen 2000 William H. Jacobsen, Jr. "Basque Language Origin Theories." In *Basque Cultural Studies*. Ed. by William A. Douglass, Carmelo Urza, Linda White, and Joseba Zulaika. Reno: Basque Studies Program. pp. 27-43.

- Jameson 1990 Frederic Jameson. *Postmodernism; or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Juaristi 1987 Jon Juaristi. *Literatura vasca*. Madrid: Taurus.
- Kasmir 2000 Sharryn Kasmir. "From the Margins: Punk Rock and the Repositioning of Ethnicity and Gender in Basque Identity." In *Basque Cultural Studies*. Ed. by William A. Douglass, Carmelo Urza, Linda White, and Joseba Zulaika. Reno: Basque Studies Program. pp. 178-204.
- Kortazar 1990 Jon Kortazar. *Literatura vasca: Siglo XX*. Donosti: Etor.
- Larrañaga Odriozola 1999 Carmen Larrañaga Odriozola. "Mujeres bertsolaris en la historia." *Hika*, 98:44-45.
- Larrañaga Odriozola 2000 "Teatralidad y poética alternativas: El bersolarismo y las mujeres." In *Breve historia feminista de la literatura española (en lengua catalana, gallega y vasca)*. Vol. 6. Ed. by Iris M. Zavala. Rubí (Barcelona): Anthropos. pp. 399-424.
- Lasagabaster 1990 Jesús María Lasagabaster. *Contemporary Basque Fiction*. Reno: University of Nevada Press.
- J. M. Lekuona 1982 Juan Mari Lekuona. *Ahozko euskal literatura*. Donostia: Erein.
- M. Lekuona 1965 Manuel Lekuona. *Literatura oral vasca*. San Sebastián: Auñamendi.
- Lord 1960 Albert Lord. *The Singer of Tales*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 2000.
- MacClancy 1996 Jeremy MacClancy. "Bilingualism and Multinationalism in the Basque Country." In *Nationalism and the Nation in the Iberian Peninsula: Competing and Conflicting Identities*. Ed. by Clare Mar-Molinero and Angel Smith. Oxford: Berg. pp. 207-20.
- MacKinnon 1997 Kenneth MacKinnon. "Minority Languages in an Integrating Europe: Prospects for Viability and Maintenance." In *Language Minorities and Minority Languages in the Changing Europe*. Ed. by Brunon Synak and Tomasz Wishekiewicz. Gdansk: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Gdanskiego. pp. 93-108.



- Mallea-Olaetxe 1998 Jose Mallea-Olaetxe. "Juan Zumarraga, Bishop of Mexico, and Basques: The Ethnic Connection." Unpub. Ph.D. diss., University of Nevada, Reno.
- Mar-Molinero 1995 Clare Mar-Molinero. "The Politics of Language: Spain's Minority Languages." In *Spanish Cultural Studies: An Introduction: The Struggle for Modernity*. Ed. by Helen Graham and Jo Labanyi. Oxford: Oxford University Press. pp. 336-42.
- Mar-Molinero 1996 \_\_\_\_\_. "The Role of Language in Spanish Nation-Building." In *Nationalism and the Nation in the Iberian Peninsula: Competing and Conflicting Identities*. Ed. by Clare Mar-Molinero and Angel Smith. Oxford: Berg. pp. 69-88.
- Mendiguren Elizegi 1998 Xabier Mendiguren Elizegi. "Gogoeta demografikoa." *Jakin*, 109:44-47.
- Michelena 1960 Luis Michelena. *Historia de la literatura vasca*. Madrid: Minotauro.
- Michelena 1964 \_\_\_\_\_. *Sobre el pasado de la lengua vasca*. San Sebastián: Editorial Auñamendi.
- Mintegi 1994 Laura Mintegi. *Nerea eta biok*. Tafalla [Nafarroa]: Txalaparta.
- Mintegi 1998 \_\_\_\_\_. "Subjektibitatea Nobelagintzan: Stephen Crane-ren *The Red Badge of Courage*." Unpub. Ph.D. diss., University of the Basque Country.
- Mujika 1979 Luis Mari Mujika. *Historia de la literatura euskérica*. San Sebastián: Haranburu.
- Olaziregi 1998 Mari Jose Olaziregi. *Bernardo Atxagaren Irakurlea*. Donostia: Erein.
- Onaindia 1975 Santiago Onaindia. *Euskal literatura*. 6 vols. Bilbao: Etor.
- Ong 1982 Walter J. Ong. *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. New York: Methuen.
- Payne 1975 Stanley G. Payne. *Basque Nationalism*. Reno: University of Nevada Press.

- Ros and Cano 1988            Maria Ros and J. Ignacio Cano. "Language and Intergroup Perception in Spain." In *Language and Ethnic Identity*. Ed. by William B. Gudykunst. Philadelphia: Multilingual Matters. pp. 87-103.
- Sarasola 1976                Ibon Sarasola. *Historia social de la literatura vasca*. Madrid: Akal.
- Tejerina Montaña 1992      Benjamín Tejerina Montaña. *Nacionalismo y lengua: Los procesos de cambio lingüístico en el País Vasco*. Madrid: Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas.
- Tejerina Montaña 1996      \_\_\_\_\_. "Language and Basque Nationalism: Collective Identity, Social Conflict and Institutionalization." In *Nationalism and the Nation in the Iberian Peninsula: Competing and Conflicting Identities*. Ed. by Clare Mar-Moliner and Angel Smith. Oxford: Berg. pp. 221-36.
- Toledo Lezeta 1989          Ana Maria Toledo Lezeta. *Domingo Agirre: Euskal elebarriaren sorrera*. [Bilbao]: Bizkaiko Foru Alderdia.
- Urla 1987                    Jacqueline Urla. "Being Basque, Speaking Basque: The Politics of Language and Identity in the Basque Country." Unpub. Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley.
- Urla 2000                    \_\_\_\_\_. "Basque Language Revival and Popular Culture." In *Basque Cultural Studies*. Ed. by William A. Douglass, Carmelo Urza, Linda White, and Joseba Zulaika. Reno: Basque Studies Program. pp. 44-62.
- Villasante 1961              Luis Villasante. *Historia de la literatura vasca*. Bilbao: Sendo.
- Wellek and Warren 1956    Rene Wellek and Austin Warren. *Theory of Literature*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World.
- White 1996                  Linda White. "Emakumeen Hitzak Euskaraz: Basque Women Writers of the Twentieth Century." Unpub. Ph.D. diss., University of Nevada.
- White 2000                  \_\_\_\_\_. "Escritoras vascas del siglo XX. Aproximación histórica." In *Breve historia feminista de la literatura española (en lengua catalana, gallega y vasca)*. Vol. 6. Ed. by Iris M. Zavala. Rubí (Barcelona): Anthropos. pp. 265-83.

- Zavala 1964                      Antonio Zavala. *Bosquejo de historia del bertsolarismo*. Tolosa: Auñamendi.
- Zavala 1984                      \_\_\_\_\_. *Euskal jokoak bertsotan*. Tolosa: Auspoa.
- Zirakzadeh 1991                Cyrus Ernesto Zirakzadeh. *A Rebellious People: Basques, Protests, and Politics*. Reno: University of Nevada Press.
- Zulaika 1985                    Joseba Zulaika. *Bertsolarien jokia eta jolasa*. Donostia: La Primitiva Casa Baroja.
- Zulaika 1988                    \_\_\_\_\_. *Basque Violence: Metaphor and Sacrament*. Reno: University of Nevada Press.
- Zulaika 2000                    \_\_\_\_\_. “‘Miracle in Bilbao’: Basques in the Casino of Globalism.” In *Basque Cultural Studies*. Ed. by William A. Douglass, Carmelo Urza, Linda White, and Joseba Zulaika. Reno: Basque Studies Program. pp. 262-74.

## **I Control the Idioms: Creativity in Ndebele Praise Poetry**

**H. C. Groenewald**

### **Introduction**

#### *Creativity, Innovation, Emergence in the Southern African Context*

With its official eleven languages and many more local varieties, South Africa provides an enormously fertile place to observe the whole spectrum of creativity in verbal art. The many forms of verbal art in a wide variety of contexts might possibly reveal the whole spectrum of artistic language use from, to use Richard Bauman's words, "accurate rendition of ready made figures" to emergent language use (1978:18). With reference to the analysis of Ndebele praise poetry that is the subject of this article, "creativity" will refer mainly to two aspects of language use, namely (a) the ability of praise poets to constantly renew well-known formulaic expressions by linguistic adaptation and (b) a more innovative aspect: the coinage of new metaphors, the forte of praise poets in Southern Africa. We will then pose the question as to whether these aspects of creativity are enough to sustain the tradition of praising in Ndebele.

The question of creativity is an interesting one when we consider the position of the present-day South African praise poet. How is the creativity of contemporary poets affected as they are subjected to and participate in contextual changes? Context—which here includes the complete "story" of a performance or a text: history and culture as well the physical situatedness of actual performances—is clearly an important determinant for verbal art. If verbal art originates and thrives in a certain context, it stands to reason that when that nurturing context changes or disappears, the verbal art associated with it may likewise change or disappear. There are many examples to illustrate this "law": initiation songs and other genres linked to this practice among Zulu men have long since ceased because the practice of initiation had already been terminated by the time of the Zulu king Shaka.

Songs that accompanied the communal eradication of locusts have become defunct because the practice itself has become redundant. Folktales are no longer performed in the granny-children-fireside situation because the “informal” educational and recreational context has been supplanted by another system. On the plus side, in recent years King Zwelithini of the Zulus has revived certain customs that have been extinct for many decades. One could cite the so-called Reed and First Fruits ceremonies as examples. Since the original verbal art associated with these ceremonies is not known, songs belonging to other events (such as weddings) have to be imported to make these occasions work. They are performed in addition to the praise poetry that now also forms part of such ceremonies.

*Praise Poetry Scholarship and the Art of Praising*

In South African universities praise poetry scholarship has, until recently, been produced by African language departments, where, generally speaking, formalism seems to be a way of life. The traditions of praising that have attracted the most attention by far are Xhosa and Zulu, and not without reason; these languages boast the most speakers, and praising is correspondingly the most diversified and developed in these traditions.<sup>1</sup> Apart from the fact that languages other than Xhosa and Zulu have been more thoroughly studied lately, the genre of praising has also attracted the attention of scholars in other departments, and with it diverse critical questions have been applied to the practice of praising. For instance, when dealing with oral art Michael Chapman observes: “The oral voice places the critic under an obligation—I shall argue—to interpret oral tradition as retaining a contentious capacity: as a usable past” (1996:18). The question can then be posed as to “how usable” this art form is in the lives of the people, and to what extent the practice of praising is something of the past.

That Chapman is thinking of praising not only as something intensely concerned with history is clear from this statement: “The ‘imbongi’ glories in the command of royal performance, and while it is easy to be swept along by the recitation of accumulated images into a past age of blood and thunder, questions persist as to whether the ancient panegyric should, or can, be recovered as anything but a curiosity” (60). While for some observers—African and non-African language speakers alike—praising may

---

<sup>1</sup> In this introductory part of the paper terms such as *ukubonga* (“praising, to praise”), *imbongi* (“praise poet”) and so on, will be shunned as far as possible so as to avoid the canonizing of culture-specific terms.

be little more than a curiosity, what cannot be denied is the fact that this ancient form of verbal art remains a vibrant, highly developed genre in Southern Africa. Every scholar who has studied the genre has at least acknowledged that the praise poem “has remained resilient in its potential for renewal and relevance” and that “the praise poem is in fact Southern Africa’s most characteristic form of literary expression which, prior to its written recordings in the nineteenth century, has been observed as early as the seventeenth century at the court of a Shona king” (Chapman 1996:55).

If the praise poem is Africa’s most characteristic form, it has gained this reputation by the sheer diversity of performance situations in which it occurs and its host of diverse types. Praise poems in Southern Africa can be found anywhere from the private bedroom to the public political meeting, from the family occasion to the trade union gathering, and on subjects from toddlers to recently deceased elders. A few examples will suffice. Among other types, Alec Pongweni (1996) gives many examples of gender- and clan-specific sexual praise poems recited only after sexual intercourse. Predictably, this sort of poem for the male is characterized by images of conquering, a topic that is also prevalent in the praise poetry for kings or chiefs and political leaders (Gunner 1999). Indeed, the extolling of different kinds of “warriors” is probably the most visible type of praise poetry in South Africa. In recent years we have seen how leaders of all the major political parties were praised during their campaigns for the 1998 election. President Mbeki was honored by poets of the major African languages at his inauguration in July 1998. When the delegation of the international football federation (FIFA) visited South Africa in 2000 to evaluate its ability to host the 2006 soccer world cup, it was entertained by a praise poet. The praise poem for kings and chiefs has also been adapted to serve the trade union movement (Kromberg 1993).

The highly revered clan praise poem is indispensable at gatherings of a liminal nature—moving into adulthood, passing from one marital state to another, or at burials. An individual can thus be the beneficiary of more than one kind of praise poem. In the past it was quite common for Zulu mothers to compose *izangelo* for a child after its birth. *Izangelo* is “praise poetry” in the sense that it is composed for a specific child but actually provides an opportunity for the mother to lament aspects of her married life and to reminisce the circumstances of the child’s birth. As a child grows he or she may acquire praise names for certain achievements; these names form the basis of the praise poem “proper.” Zulu *izigiyo* are short praises, particular to a certain person, uttered when that person performs the vigorous *giya* dancing at festive occasions.

The most common *raison d'être*, in my view, is the proclaiming of the individual's uniqueness, regardless of what feature makes that individual unique. This explains why in *izihasho*—the Zulu praise poetry for common people (Turner 1990)—and even in *izibongo zamakhosi*, Zulu praises for kings or chiefs, a person can be praised using items that range from peculiar little incidents to the most vulgar characteristics. In praise poetry for the ruling Zulu monarch, King Zwelithini, one can find the following lines (Mkhize 1989:108):

*Mfula kaNdab' ogobhoz' ekhanda  
LikaMatanzima kwelaseKoloni  
AmaXhos' onke' anway' izimpandla  
Athi yini liyanetha mfondini  
Kanti kugoboz' uMageba.*

River of Ndaba that flows on the head  
Of Matanzima of the Cape Colony,  
All the Xhosas scratch their bald heads  
Saying is it raining my brother?  
In fact it is Mageba who is flowing.

These lines refer to a seemingly insignificant incident, namely that while flying over the former Transkei, King Zwelithini had to use the restroom. Similarly, a certain Nomsa is praised as follows (Turner 1990:118):

*Uvovo liyavuza  
Kadlulwa zindaba  
Kadlulwa bhulukwe  
Umathanga akahlangani  
Uyazivulukela uma ebona ibhulukwe.*

Strainer is leaking,  
No news passes her by,  
No trousers pass her by,  
Lady Thighs they don't meet [= she doesn't sit discreetly],  
She just opens when she sees trousers.

Praising is not directed at people only. Molefe (1992) gives an account of the praises of 16 kinds of domestic animals where the poems for the pig are the longest at more than 40 lines. The praising of divining bones and the ancestors is a focus for some *izangoma* (Zulu healers) as they conduct their sessions.

### *Formal Conventions*

A comparison of the different praises mentioned so far would reveal how similar they are in terms of formal conventions. Invariably, the enigmatic characteristics and deeds of the subject are clothed in metaphor, the trope that rules supreme in the praise poem. These metaphors range from relatively simple equation (expressed in a single noun) to extensive syntactical and multiple semantic layering. The nature and extensive use of metaphor is the result of praise poetry's peculiar reference system, as Karin Barber (1999:29-30) has shown: "the conventions of the genre require or encourage various kinds of oblique, opaque or far fetched attachment of meaning. It is as if composers and listeners are playing a game of signification, in which meanings are generated, secreted, and withheld or retrieved according to definite and specialised conventions, and where access to these meanings may be highly restricted, filtered or layered."

This way of referring to people, events, and places (though hardly ever dates) has strong bearing on how praise poetry deals with history, one of the issues of interest in the study of the genre. In a study on a hitherto unknown corpus of praises, namely that of the Hananwa in the Northern Province of South Africa, Annekie Joubert and J. A. Van Schalkwyk (1999:46) take the view that the praise poem they analyze "gives a comprehensive account of the 1894 siege of Blouberg. It narrates the same historical information, but from the point of view of an 'insider'." Later on they confirm as follows: "It also demonstrates the historic competence of the oral poet. The diachronic course of the events of the war as narrated in the poem is logical and tallies with other orally transmitted versions. By assimilating all the cross references among the proxemic markers, the listener is able to reconstruct a clear picture of the events of 1894" (*ibid.*:46). However, when one looks at the poem, referential clarity is extremely hard to find. When the authors speak of "the same historical information," their statement must by no means be understood as "historically accurate or clear data." The poem understandably does not capture historical details precisely and comprehensively—for example, there are no dates in the poem, and the politician who ordered the war is simply referred to as Paul.

The important point is that a history of the war is presented from the viewpoint of the subjugated. It is the *experience* of and *reactions* to events that must not be forgotten; in the words of Leroy Vail and Landeg White (1991:64) the praises *are* the history. Vail and White thus speak of history as metaphor (as opposed to history as code) and history as drama (73), while



Duncan Brown (1998:108) speaks of history as rhetorical presence. Barber aptly summarizes this kind of signification as follows (1999:41): “This is a mode that seems to be founded on the flight into metaphor, not cancelling literal truth—rather, retaining fact as its guarantor and bedrock—but simply evading specification.” Thus the metaphors in praise poetry “tend to draw attention not to specific, idiosyncratic features of the subject in question but to a generalised value such as strength, beauty or value” (*idem*). And remembrance of this kind is best activated through public performance.

Formal equivalence (repetition), although less in evidence than metaphor and other tropes, rhythmically punctuates the excitement created by the action motifs. Repetition can be found in sounds and syllables, verb and noun stems (commonly called linking), complete words and phrases, grammatical and semantic structure (referred to as parallelism), and the recurrence of popular action motifs, which are shared even across different languages. For instance, the formulaic expression “run ye along all the paths” (Gunner and Gwala 1991:19, 54) shows that this expression occurs in the Zulu praises of Shaka, Chief Albert Luthuli, and those of the present Zulu monarch, King Goodwill Zwelithini. The latter’s impending ascent to the throne is described as follows (see especially the underlined section):

*Nani magundwane ahlala eyikhotheni kwaNongoma  
gijimani nge ‘ndlela zonkana niyobikela abangake-e-ZW-A!  
Nithi “Lukhulu luyeza luyanyelela,  
silufanisa nendlovu emnyama yasoBhalule  
luzoshis’ i’khotha zakwaNongoma.”*

And you rats that live in the long grass at Nongoma  
run along all the paths and go and announce to those who haven’t HE-A-ARD!  
Say “Something big is coming, it is sneaking up,  
we compare it to the black elephant of Bhalule  
it will burn the long grass of Nongoma.”

The formulaic expression appears at least six times in Ndebele praise poetry, including three times in a poem by King Mayisha II himself (or Prince Cornelius, as he was known when the research was done) on Mabhoko, the nineteenth-century Ndebele chief.<sup>2</sup>

There are, of course, many other poetic devices, such as the manipulation of grammar, direct address, and so forth. But the fact that Southern African praise poetry makes use of similar devices does not mean that different traditions’ ways of remembering the subject are the same. An

---

<sup>2</sup> See the Ndebele examples below.

intense debate has, for instance, been waged over the memory versus improvisation issue. We have come to accept that while most of the Southern African praising traditions may be predominantly memorial, Xhosa has in addition excelled in improvisation. Should a Xhosa *imbongi* (praise poet), for example, be asked to perform at a certain event he may well have a lot of things to say about the event itself, not to mention the person he may be praising. Much of what the *imbongi* says may never be heard again. The Zulu *imbongi*, on the other hand, will prefer to perform the praise poetry of a person he has come to know over the years and about whom he has composed a relatively stable set of praises. A phrase such as “relatively stable” in the discourse on praise poetry needs some qualification. Although poets are often adamant that a person’s praises cannot be changed, we understand that they mean among other things that since a person’s praises are in a sense the person himself or herself, they should always be performed in the usual revered fashion, that one cannot detract from what a person has achieved, and so on. Praise poets, on the other hand, are sometimes oblivious to the fact that they make use of varying grammatical constructions to say “the same thing,” that they are switching the order of motifs, and that they are “forgetting” certain motifs. What they are profoundly aware of is that their subject is always growing in stature through interactions with people and events and that the poets accordingly have to keep track of his or her actions.

There are also contextual and situational aspects to consider. Praise poets have to think about the particular occasion and, importantly (perhaps especially for “memorial praise poets”), whom they will be praising. Being clad in skins and brandishing a stick or spear is not absolutely necessary for some poets to function well. The photograph below of the well-known Zulu praise poet, J. Dlamini, shows him clad in trousers and a golf shirt as he was praising Mangosuthu Buthelezi (Minister of Home Affairs, but officiating as the chief of the Buthelezi clan) at a Shaka Day ceremony on September 25, 1999. Audience participation also differs from occasion to occasion. At the Shaka Day ceremony just cited, the audience stood reverently as they listened to the praises of Buthelezi. The poet did not provide an occasion for the audience to utter the well-known participation formula “Musho!” (“Speak him forth!”). By contrast, the Ndebele praise poet mentioned later in this paper always performed in front of lively, even rowdy participants. He often paused to accommodate participation and not seldom had to recommence a line when the crowd was too noisy.



J. Dlamini praising chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi, Shaka Day ceremonies, 25 September 1999, at Stanger, KwaZulu-Natal.

### *Functions*

Praise poetry's function is largely determined by the context and situation in which it is performed. Clan poetry performed at weddings and praises in the context of divining are clearly more mediatory in that they serve to make a connection with the ancestors. Poetry extolling chiefs or kings and political figures may range from serving as a "traditional" means of propaganda<sup>3</sup> to offering highly critical remarks. Essentially though, praise poetry seeks to individualize, that is, to set the individual apart from all others, to build and maintain his or her austere character and position. Whatever the case, audiences enjoy it immensely, so that the functions of entertainment and education (in the sense of inculcating the conventions of the genre) must not be underestimated. Vail and White strongly argue that oral poetry is driven by what they call poetic license: "the convention that poetic expression is privileged expression, the performer being free to express opinions that would otherwise be in breach of other social

---

<sup>3</sup> See Vail and White's analysis of Swazi royal praises in this regard (1991:155 *et seq.*).

conventions” (1991:319). Accordingly, they contend, this aesthetic should form the bedrock of a poetics for oral poetry.

### *A Tradition in Transition*

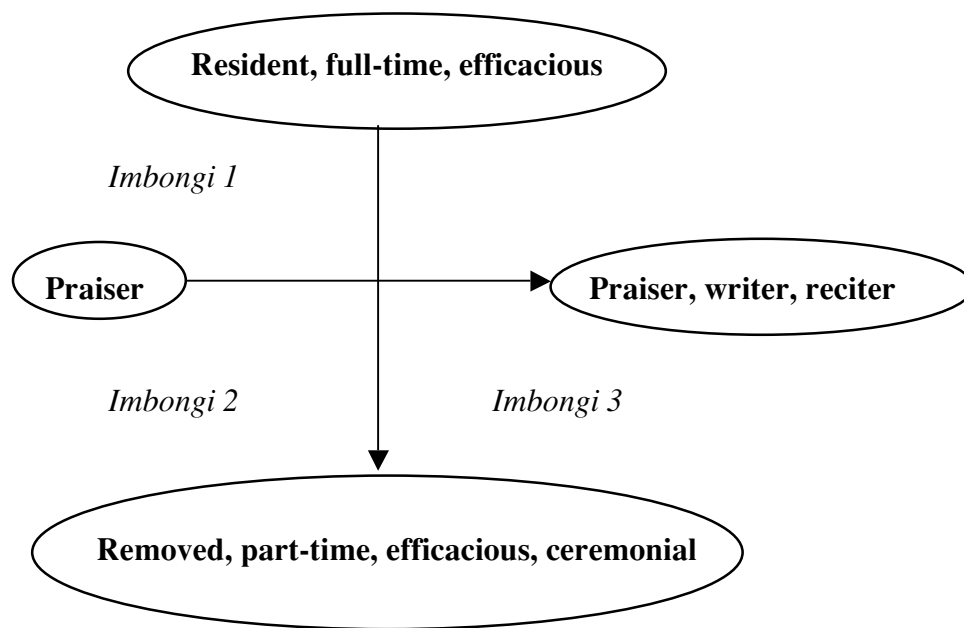
In the long history that the praise poem evidently enjoys, colonial and subsequent political interventions have probably brought about the greatest changes. But while these interventions have not been kind to some traditions of praising, other varieties are as vibrant as ever. While Barber maintains that “the heyday of praise production in both Sotho and Yoruba cultures is essentially over” (1999:33) and although this observation also applies to other cultures in Southern Africa, it does not mean that no praises are ever recited in these cultures. The residue of knowledge in the art of praising surfaces when the need arises, albeit sometimes as a somewhat canonized piece of culture—something produced, for instance, at culture-specific national days instituted under apartheid, at the opening of a new provincial parliamentary session, and so on. The changes to the tradition could be summarized as an irrevocable distancing of praise poets from traditional contexts, as Russell Kaschula affirms (1991:47): “Any romantic view of the present day *imbongi* as a traditionalist attached only to chiefs would be redundant and naïve.” The weakening of the system of clan and tribal chiefs is probably one of the major factors in the decline of praising in certain cultures. But as old systems are replaced by new, some traditions have simply inserted the praise poem into the new system and in the process have adapted the genre, whether marginally or more profoundly.<sup>4</sup>

The findings of Jeff Opland (1975), published more than twenty-five years ago about the changing role of the praise poet, are still valid today. I have adapted his and other researchers’ findings graphically as illustrated in the diagram on the next page. The vertical line illustrates the context continuum and the horizontal line the mode of delivery continuum; the former will be discussed first. The resident, full-time *imbongi* was not primarily an entertainer at the chief’s or king’s homestead.<sup>5</sup> His services had

---

<sup>4</sup> Relatively profound adaptation occurs in the case of the so-called worker poetry, for example; see Kromberg 1993.

<sup>5</sup> The highest political leader in traditional African communities is the “chief” (*inkosi* in Zulu, *ikosi* in Ndebele, and so on) who rules within a clan. In Zulu history, however, since the imperialistic rule of Shaka (1818-28), the head of the Zulu clan is recognized as ruler (king) of the Zulu nation. The same generic term, *inkosi*, is used to refer to the “king” (but, in order to recognize his supreme status, the Zulu king is



### Positions occupied by past and contemporary praise poets

to do with the serious business of enhancing the political image of the chief. If the chief's medicine man and diviner guaranteed his good standing with the ancestors, the praise poet guaranteed his good standing with the ordinary people. Although the praise poet of today does not reside at the chief's place any longer and does not praise him moment by moment (for instance, when he appears in the morning after his night's rest or when he meets with his headmen), his role is still to a large degree an efficacious one. The chief without a praise poet is as unthinkable, especially among the Nguni people (Ndebele, Swati, Xhosa, Zulu), as one without a diviner. But over and above the efficacious functions of the contemporary praise poet—including mediation and especially individualization or image-building—the commemorative or ceremonial function has developed. The contemporary praise poet is perfectly at ease in rendering his services simply to grace the occasion, as was evident when a number of praise poets performed at President Thabo Mbeki's inauguration ceremony in July, 1999.

The left-to-right continuum shows that the oral poet has become one who not only praises traditionally and orally,<sup>6</sup> but one who also documents

---

generally called *isilo*, a term of respect meaning "lion"). Henceforth the title "chief" will be used, but "king" must be understood where the context requires it.

<sup>6</sup> Taken in the sense Foley (1988, 1996) explains these terms.

his own poetry and writes other poems. Once oral poetry has been documented, the way is open for the reciter who wishes to learn the praises and recite them when occasion arises. To summarize: *Imbongi 1* is the traditional poet who was attached to the chief's household and who ate from his table. Then we find the poet of colonial times and thereafter, *Imbongi 2*. Although he praised the chief as often as was necessary, he was no longer a remunerated, resident poet. Today we also find the poet who praises orally and who documents his or her poetry, *Imbongi 3*. Here we also encounter the new poets, the worker poets, who perform at trade union rallies, funerals, and so on.

### **Creativity in Ndebele Praise Poetry**

The main focus of this paper is on some aspects of my research on amaNdebele verbal art, praise poetry in particular, which was undertaken between 1986 and 1996. Apart from giving a little-known culture some exposure, I am interested in ascertaining how Ndebele praise poetry has been affected in the light of the changes in the tradition as explored above. Although the amaNdebele live throughout the central areas of the Mpumalanga province in South Africa, large numbers of isiNdebele speakers are concentrated in the former KwaNdebele homeland about 150 kilometers northeast of Pretoria. A great deal of the Ndebele praise poetry was performed in the traumatic year of 1988 when the former homeland of KwaNdebele was forced into an election for the acceptance or rejection of an independent KwaNdebele state. Chief Minister Majozi Mahlangu and his legislative assembly took former President P.W. Botha's bait and advocated independence, while Ndebele Ingwenyama (chief) Mabhoko and his sons, who together with other opponents were kicked out of the legislative assembly and jailed on various occasions, rejected independence. As the chief's sons visited various venues—mainly black townships outside the homeland—to rally people against independence, they were accompanied by the chief's praise poet, Sovetjeza Mahlangu (born in 1940), who contributed his praising abilities to the service of a political cause. The political meetings usually progressed as follows. While people were arriving, usually in groups singing topical songs, Sovetjeza would praise well-known Ndebele chiefs of old, with his usual emphasis on Mabhoko, in whose time Boer settlers encroached on Ndebele land (1845). At the arrival of Ingwenyama Mabhoko and his sons (or only the latter), Sovetjeza again praised Mabhoko. Thereafter he would praise Prince Cornelius (the elder son of Ingwenyama

Mabhoko) and Prince James, respectively, as well as other important speakers, prior to their delivering their speeches.

Naturally, some praise poets find themselves on more than one point on the continuum from oral poet to reciter/writer, as described above. Sovetjheza Mahlangu, the *imbongi* yakwaMabhoko (Mabhoko's praise poet), is just such a versatile poet. He grew up learning to praise the Ndebele *amakhosi* (chiefs) in traditional contexts but is also able to praise other subjects. He was, for instance, one of the performers at President Mbeki's inauguration ceremony. When on occasion my fellow fieldworker Philemon Ntuli and I spoke to him about his poetry, he demonstrated that he was able to praise Mandela, whom he had not met at that stage (1990). He gave us the following lines in typical Sovetjeza style, with a long, dramatic opening line:

*UMandela ungumlilo owawuvutha wabonw' abelungu bawuthela  
ngamanzi kanti kulapho uzabhebhetheka  
UMandela yindlovu eyathi iphuma esirhogweni  
Itja yezizwe yavuka uhlanya ithi ayifuni ma-homeland  
Kasafuni makhosi.*

Mandela is the fire that flared up that was seen by the whites as they  
doused it with water and yet he was to be prosperous.  
Mandela is the elephant who when he came out of jail  
the youth of the nations awoke (and became) a madman saying they don't  
want any homeland.  
They want no kings.

Looking at the art of praising by Sovetjeza, there is no doubt that he is a productive and creative *imbongi*. In other words, he is able to produce praise poetry of both traditional and contemporary political figures at will. But how he learned his craft is interesting. Although we had spoken to him on a few occasions, he was very reluctant to reveal details about himself.<sup>7</sup>

Mbulawa Abram Mahlangu, known among the people as Sovetjeza, had to go and live with his uncle at the age of six when his father died. After 13 years he went to stay with another uncle, SoJafutha. It was during this later period that he took an interest in Ndebele history; he was taught about the succession of Mabhoko's descendants and where they had built their homesteads. He was initiated in 1962, and when he was with his district age group at the house of one of the *amasokana* (initiates), he heard a woman praising the chiefs of old. Enthused by this performance, he went home to

---

<sup>7</sup> The facts I present here come from M. Mahlangu et al. 1987:i *et seq.*

fetch a book and pencil and, one afternoon when the *amasokana* were at the next initiate's house, he asked the woman to recite those *iimbongo* (Ndebele for praises) while he wrote them down. On another traditional occasion when his uncle held a feast to thank the ancestors (*ukubonga abezimu*), he again listened with great interest as an aunt praised. He also asked her to help him write down the poems she performed. On this second occasion it was the *iimbongo* of the Ndebele chiefs Mkhephule and Rhobongo. From an old man of the Msiza clan he learned more *iimbongo* as a result of having bought him some sorghum beer. Afterward he went around collecting and recording the praises of the chiefs. In 1969 at the Nyabela Day celebration he spontaneously ascended the rock (used as an address platform) after another *imbongi* had praised. He notes that there was much applause and the people were amazed at the verbal dexterity of a man who was then only 30 years old. After this performance he was asked to praise at many meetings of a cultural nature and became known as an *imbongi*. Sovetjeza is a descendant of Matsitsi (in turn a descendant of Mabhoko) and says that of the 23 male descendants of Matsitsi he is the only one with a deep interest in the history and *iimbongo* of Mabhoko's progeny.

My first recordings of Sovetjeza's *iimbongo* in 1986 at the Nyabela Day festival included, strangely enough, only one line for Mabhoko, a line that does not occur in his later versions, namely

*UMabhoko uyabusa bayavungama*

Mabhoko rules while they are uneasy

The later versions performed at political meetings contain, on average, about 40 lines. Sovetjeza's compositions for Prince James numbered 11 lines in 1986 compared to 32 lines in a version recorded two years later. Likewise, the earlier recordings for Prince James contain portions that do not occur later, such as

*Umkhonto l' onzima ushokoloze ilif elimnyama  
Lisiza nesiwezulu lasabalala.*

This black assegai aggravated (? -*shokoloza* is archaic) a black cloud  
It comes with the first rains and then vanishes.

Sovetjeza's repertoire is a fraction of what praise poets of other traditions, notably Zulu and Xhosa, are capable of, but then it must be remembered that Sovetjeza praises at least 15 traditional chiefs of the past



and at least four contemporary leaders. Although creativity is maintained principally by presenting well-known motifs or themes in different grammatical configurations and syntactical combinations, completely novel themes do emerge, such as the reference to the Swazis in the last line of the following selection of Mabhoko's praises:

*Mabhoko yakha ngamad' amahlahla*  
*Nang' uMswaz' ugangile.*  
*Maphos' umkhontro azondwa eSwazini*  
*Uzondwe konoMswazi*  
*Abansibazibomvu zifana nezegwalagwala.*  
 (Musho! )<sup>8</sup>

Mabhoko build with long poles [= defend yourself well]  
 [because] here is the insolent Mswazi.  
 Hurler of the *assegai* hated in Swaziland  
 He is hated by the mother of Mswazi  
 Those of [= the people of] the red feather resemble those of [= the feathers  
 of] the Knysna lourie.  
 (Musho!)

The last line of the praise selections, richly coded grammatically, bears an ominous resemblance to the expression "Jozi libomvu izinkwalankwala" ("*assegai* red with blotches"). Such lines, probably composed during performance, bear testimony to Sovetjeza's creative ability. But he is not only an oral performer; he also records praise poetry and writes poetry that departs from *iimbongo*.<sup>9</sup>

Before looking at an example of a reciter in the praiser-writer-reciter continuum, a brief view of creativity among other Ndebele speakers may be of interest. Sovetjeza was not the only person we came across during our fieldwork who made use of *iimbongo*. First, there were those among the audience who were not only able to repeat a few lines, but who could work creatively with familiar lines. In fact, some older men praised with verses never used by Sovetjeza in his performances (but that do appear in Mahlangu et al. 1987). For example, at Mamelodi, a township just north east of Pretoria, a man praised Mabhoko after Sovetjeza concluded a seven-

---

<sup>8</sup> The usual response of agreement and encouragement. This is actually the Zulu form; the Ndebele response is *Mutjho!*, as is heard in some of the praises.

<sup>9</sup> See M. Mahlangu et al. 1987 and M. Mahlangu and C. Mahlangu 1995.

line second poem for him. Note how Mabhoko is addressed as Nyabela.<sup>10</sup> The praiser commences with a line that is so well-known that it can probably be quoted by virtually all Ndebele people, but the lines that follow are never utilized by Sovetjeza:

*Mabhoko Sindeni umhlab' unethuli.*  
*UMabhoko ubhodele amatje ngengubo*  
*Bathi bacenga<sup>11</sup> naye wazicengel'*  
 . . . (inaudible)  
*Siphalaphala siphos' simnyama.* 5  
*Bamkhulu!*  
*SoMtjongweni!*  
*Nyabela!*

Mabhoko Escapee when the world is dusty [= in turmoil].  
 Mabhoko collects stones in a garment  
 When they begged him he begged for himself [= he just calmed down]  
 . . . [inaudible]  
 The beautiful one who hurls when he is dark [= furious]. 5  
 Grandfather!  
 SoMtjongweni!  
 Nyabela!

Second, dignitaries who delivered speeches at the meetings often praised Mabhoko before they spoke. Solly Mahlangu (nicknamed “Speaker” because he was Speaker of the KwaNdebele Legislative Assembly before he was removed), although not a very dynamic speaker or praiser, was also able to employ lines that Sovetjeza never used. At Vosloorus, Solly praised Mabhoko with the following words before he spoke:

*Ngwenyama*  
*Mabhoko*  
*Sindeni umhlab' onethuli*  
*Langa eliphezulu*  
*Elishis' amabele* 5

---

<sup>10</sup> The Ndebele hero who was besieged by Boer commandoes and who was captured only when he came out of his fortress facing starvation, and who is commemorated annually on 19 December.

<sup>11</sup> Both in this version and in the one in Mahlangu et al. 1987, note the word *cenga*—line 3, of unknown meaning to speakers we asked. According to Bhuti Skhosana, lecturer in Ndebele in the Department of African Languages, University of Pretoria, it would be more appropriate if the word were *ncenga*, or “beg.”

*We khuthani namavilakazi*  
*Madoda gijimani ngazo zoke izindlela nibatjele KwaMhlanga*  
*Nithi Ingwenyama ayivinjelwa iinyanyopha* [?last word not  
 clearly audible].  
 [Much cheering]

Ngwenyama<sup>12</sup>  
 Mabhoko  
 Escapee in a dusty world  
 Sun on high  
 that scorched the sorghum. 5  
 You, the diligent and the lazy [= all people]  
 Men, run along all the paths and tell them at KwaMhlanga.  
 Say the Ingwenyama is not stopped by thugs [?last word not clearly  
 audible].  
 [Much cheering]

Apart from lines 1-3, all verses were apparently composed by Mahlangu himself. Recognized praise poets, it would seem, are conservative and seek to keep *iimbongo* unchanged. They are probably the first to emphasize that praises “cannot be changed.” Other poets who do not share this burden often work more creatively.

As he praised before delivering his speech, Prince Cornelius (elder son of Ingwenyama Mabhoko, and the present ruling monarch of the Ndzundza section of the Ndebele) made quite a few changes to the praises of Mabhoko. It is clear that he was using the medium to convey messages to former President P.W. Botha:

*Niyok' bikela uBotha*  
*Ukuthi uMajozi uluzile.*  
 [Great response by all in the clapping of hands]  
*Bathi MaNdebele, gijimani ngazo zoke izindlela*  
*Niyok' thokoz' uRamodike* 5  
*Undunankulu waseLebowa* [Cheering starts before close of the  
 line and almost drowns the next line]  
*Nithi usebenzile.*

You [pl.] go and report to Botha  
 That Majozi has lost.  
 [Great response by all in the clapping of hands]  
 They say Ndebele people, run ye along all the paths,  
 Go and thank Ramodike 5  
 Chief Minister of Lebowa [Cheering starts before close of the

---

<sup>12</sup> The standard address for the then-reigning Ndebele chief.

line and almost drowns the next line]  
 You should say: he has worked [= done well].

### A Creative Reciter

The sequel to the electioneering meetings was a thanksgiving meeting held at Ingwenyama Mabhoko's homestead on August 5, 1989. He called the meeting to thank his subjects for the peace that had returned to the strife-torn area. It was also clearly an occasion to recognize their support that resulted in the successful contesting of the election. At this ceremony the emcee called on a lad about thirteen years old to praise. He apologized for not calling Sovetjeza, but said that he wanted to surprise the people and show them that talented youths are available in KwaNdebele. He also mentioned that the boy had learned the praises from the book *Igugu LamaNdebele* (M. Mahlangu et al. 1987). The emcee then told the boy to relax, and the lad introduced himself and praised as follows:

*Ngilotjhisa Ingwenyama, ngiyalotjhisa namaduna namakhosana  
 wok' aKwaNdebele.*

*NgiwuMagadangana kaMphikeleli koQasha l' eMathysloop  
 ofundafunda eKwagga eSokhapha is' kole.* 5

*Ngifunda ibanga lesine.*

*Iibongo kaMabhoko.*

*Mabhoko Sinden i umhlab' unethuli.*

*Silembe sakoSiphiwa ikom' erag' abelusi.*

*Ndlel' ezimazombe zinjengobunyonyo nabuyokudla inyanga  
 yezulu koSontimba* 10

*Mvumazoke kaMagodongo*

*Ongasayikwala ndaba*

*Indaba kaPiet wayivumela nekaFrans wayivumela.*  
 (Enthusiastic Musho!)

*Ithini? Idung' amanzi kwakuya kwamuka umfundisi Mvalo  
 Mhlambi wamahhatjhi wabelungu odle kaFrans wehloli.*  
 (Mutjho!)

*Imbiza ephekwe phezu kwelitje iphuphume yatjhisa umdoko* 15

*Simakhomba lapho.*

*UMkhananda wakithi uyakhona ongasayikutjhiwa majarha  
 Owadla njengamabutho waNongabulana  
 Wawadindela njengamabibi wezindlela*

*Akwandaba zalutho* 20

*Igeqe elimnyama*

*Asiso igeqe lakudla izinkomo zamadoda*

*Rhotjha limnyama amanye ayakhanya.*

- (Mutjho!)  
*'bob' buyisa bebethe inarha*  
*Bebethe uMlitjhe noNgwanaphaphu* 25  
*Silwa nezinkunzi eentrath'*  
*Sizibulale sisale silwa nazimbili.*
- (Mutjho!)  
*Indaba inosongo bayisongela*  
*Kanti wena usongele ukwaphula umgobo wamajarha eDidini*  
*Bath' bayakwakha ngamad' amahlahla uMswazi ugangile* 30  
*kwaMabhoko*  
*KwaMabhoko akuvalwa ngamnyango kuvalwa ngamakhanda amajarha*  
*eDidini.*
- (Mutjho!)  
*Maphosa umkhonto eSwazini*  
*Uzondwe ngonomsuzi*  
*Yiziqatha ezibomvu usiso ijozi lokugwaza izinkomo zamadoda*  
*Ijozi lokugwaza abeSuthu* 35  
*Ijozi lokugwaza amaSwazi.*
- (Kwa-kwa-kwa-kwa-kwa [the usual deferential response of a woman])  
*Idlovu bayibona idlovu yakhamba kwaNdiyase esangweni bayibona*  
*ngomgoga bathi kusile uSothakazi*  
*Amakhuwa angesiza likhona ivimbela lekhethu lakosoMalungwana.*  
 [Cheering, but specific responses inaudible]  
*Ngumabusabesala kaMagodongo ngumabusa bengafuni* 40  
*Ngowavimbela evimbela ubuyani bembeth' inarha*  
*Bembethe uKhunwana noSakazana*  
*Kwakumhla kaMzilikazi kaMatjhabana.*  
 [Specific responses inaudible]  
*UMabhoko wathatha izindlela ezimazombe eziya eRholweni*  
*Yindlandla yakoS'phiwa eyakhwela kwelitje kwadabuka uMzilikazi* 45  
*kaMatjhabana.*  
 [Cheering, but specific responses inaudible]  
*UMabhoko yitjirhi njengehlabathi isindindiwana ngangembho*  
*kom' ibov' 'akoNomalanga*  
*Ngilihlwana libov' kwezamadoda ungadla zakhe uyajabajaba.*  
 [Specific responses inaudible]  
*Mabhoko isihlangu esimnyama imilambo emibili* 50  
*Eseyama iNgemana neNontindo*  
*Isihlangu esivikela amaNdebele mhla kunguMzilikazi kaMatjhabana.*  
 [Specific responses inaudible]  
*UMabhoko isinakanaka esanakazela emmangweni weMangwana*  
*uMabamba abokomo ngesilevu nguSothakazi.*
- (I greet the Ingwenyama, I also greet the headmen and all the sub-chiefs of KwaNdebele.

I am Magadangana of Mphikeleli of Qasha's place at Mathysloop  
 who is learning at Sokhapha School at Kwaggafontein.)<sup>13</sup>

I am in standard 4. 5  
 The *iibongo*<sup>14</sup> of Mabhoko.  
 Mabhoko Escapee when the world is dusty.  
 Hoe of Sipiwa's place, the cow that kicks the herd boys.  
 Winding ways like ants as they go and devour the medicine man  
 at the place of Sontimba.

Agreer to everything of Magodongo 10  
 Who will not refuse any matter.  
 He agreed to the matter of Piet and that of Frans he agreed to.  
 [Enthusiastic Musho!]  
 What does it say? It makes the water murky until the minister  
 Mvalo left  
 Herd of horses of the whites who devoured those of Frans, of the spy.  
 (Mutjho!)

The pot that was cooked on a stone, it boiled over and burnt the 15  
 porridge  
 The one who points there.  
 Mkhananda of ours, he is able to do that which the young men can't,  
 Who ate the warriors of Nongabulana  
 He heaped them up like dirt on the road  
 It became a matter of no consequence. 20  
 Black frontal covering [? archaic]  
 It isn't a frontal covering that devoured the cattle of the men.  
 Dark fearsome man while others are light.  
 (Mutjho!)

Bring them [ants?] back to cover the land  
 To cover Mlitjhe and Ngwanaphaphu. 25  
 The one who fights three bulls  
 It killed them remaining to fight with one.  
 (Mutjho!)

The matter is an oath, they swore to it  
 In fact you swore to break the shield [?umgobo is archaic] of the young  
 men of Didini  
 While they are building with long poles (= defending themselves),  
 Mswazi is insolent (= attacking) at Mabhoko's place 30  
 At Mabhoko's place they are not closing with a door, they are closing  
 with the heads of the young men of Didini.  
 (Mutjho!)

Hurler of the *assegai* in Swaziland.

---

<sup>13</sup> The parenthetical section of the translation was performed by the emcee as the boy presented himself.

<sup>14</sup> The standard orthography is *iimbongo*.

You are hated by the mother of Mswazi  
 It is red hooves, you are the *assegai* stabbing the cattle of the men  
 The *assegai* to stab the Sothos 35  
 The *assegai* to stab the Swazis.  
 (Kwa-kwa-kwa-kwa<sup>15</sup>)  
 The elephant they saw walking at Ndiyase, they saw it at the gate by  
 means of its trunk [*umgoga* is archaic] when it dawned,  
 it is Sothakazi.  
 The whites may come, our defender of the place of Malungwana's  
 father is present.  
 [Cheering, but specific responses inaudible]  
 It is Mabusabesala of Magodongo,  
 it is the Ruler they don't want. 40  
 It is the one who fended off the ants as they covered the earth  
 As they covered Khunwana and Sakazana.  
 [Specific responses inaudible]  
 On the day of Mzilikazi of Mashobana.  
 [Cheering, but specific responses inaudible]  
 Mabhoko took winding ways that led to Rholweni.  
 He is the tall elephant of the place of Siphwa that climbed  
 on a rock and Mzilikazi of Mashobana was split. 45  
 [Specific responses inaudible]  
 Mabhoko is an irritation between the teeth like sand, the short one,  
 red cow of the place of Nomalanga  
 Reddish eye<sup>16</sup> with regard to the affairs of the men, he finishes his  
 and is up and down.<sup>17</sup>  
 [Specific responses inaudible]  
 Mabhoko is the black shield, the two rivers 50  
 he crossed, the Ngemana and the Nontindo  
 Shield defending the Ndebele on the day of Mzilikazi of Mashobana.  
 [Specific responses inaudible]  
 Mabhoko is the vigilant one<sup>18</sup> being vigilant on the open  
 grasslands of Mangwana,  
 Mabamba [catcher] by the beard of the people of cattle, he is  
 Sothakazi.

When compared to the *iimbongo* of Mabhoko (M. Mahlangu et al. 1987:31), it is quite clear that Magadangana's performance is to a large

---

<sup>15</sup> This is the usual deferential response of a woman.

<sup>16</sup> = "diligent."

<sup>17</sup> That is, "busy with affairs of others."

<sup>18</sup> *isinakanaka* may also mean "the long stupid one."

extent a recitation of something he had memorized. His text matches the original fairly well with minor omissions and changes. Although his omissions may be due to memory lapses, there were no uneasy pauses in his confident performance. The young praiser did not pay much attention to line divisions and spaces (probably meant to be participation pauses) in the original. This feature of his performance is a realization on his part that every performance is unique, that the praise poet creates participation pauses according to how he experiences the audience. In addition, the line divisions and pauses are probably artificial in the written text since they are not based on an actual performance. Thus Magadangana's lineation and placement of pauses—in other words, where he ends the paragraph—are the humble beginnings of his own creative endeavors.<sup>19</sup>

In fact, some of the young poet's mistakes are clearly due to a conflict between memorization and creativity. In line 22 we see a concordial discrepancy between "*asiso*" and "*igeqe lakudla . . .*"; the poet has memorized "*asiso*" (referring to the *isi-* noun class) while the noun *igeqe* is actually in the *ili-* class. This is a perfectly excusable mistake because *igeqe* (or *isigeqe* as Sovetjeza uses it) is an archaic word that lacks a secure meaning for the young poet. Sovetjeza himself did exactly the same thing with an archaism; in different performances he used the word *tjhokolova* in no fewer than three noun classes:

At Vosloorus:

<i>Tjhokolova likaMkhephule . . .</i>	<i>ili-</i> noun class
(The <i>tjhokolova</i> [aggravator?] of Mkhephule . . .)	

At Mamelodi:

<i>Utjhokolova lukaMkhephule</i>	<i>ulu-</i> class, a class that
(The <i>tjhokolova</i> of Mkhephule . . .)	does not even exist in
	standard Ndebele
<i>Tjhokolova kaMkhephule</i>	class 1a (in the
( <i>Tjhokolova</i> of Mkhephule)	vocative)

Magadangana's adaptations of the written version commence in line 8 ("*ikom' erag'*" instead of "*ikom' irag'*" in the written version) and continue at regular intervals throughout his performance. His variations consist

---

<sup>19</sup> For example, where the written text has one line, Magadangana divides the line in two (see lines 10 and 11).



mainly of the use of a different type of concord (for instance, relative instead of subject concord), changes in tense form, and minor additions.<sup>20</sup> These changes are in no way insignificant and cannot be ascribed to error or memory lapse since the manipulation of grammar, or the use of unfamiliar grammar, has long been regarded as one of the major poetic devices available to the praise poet (see Van Wyk 1975:20). Magadangana's version of this line also represents a different meaning: "He who defeated them like the warriors of Nongabulana"; compare Sovetjeza's line: "He defeated the warriors of Nongabulana."

Such adaptations of the "same" text are quite normal. Sovetjeza himself adapted standard lines. This was evident, to mention one example, in a metaperformance recorded on December 22, 1988 during an interview on aspects of his art. When explaining the historical incidents referred to in the praise poetry of the chief Mkhophule, he rendered the "same" *iimbongo* as follows (presented line for line below the "original" performance of December 19, 1986 in order to highlight the differences):

<i>Wena mfana gijim' uyotjel' amadoda</i>	You boy, run and tell the men
<i>Mntwana gijim' uyotjel' amadoda</i>	Child, run and tell the men
<i>Uth' uMkhophule ubuyebele wenza</i>	Say Mkhophule has come
<i>Njengayizolo</i>	back and has done like
	yesterday
<i>Uth' uSoqaleni wenze njengayizolo</i>	Say Soqaleni did like
	yesterday
<i>Wahlik' ipera esehla kanye namadoda</i>	He dismounted the horse
	alighting with with the men
<i>Wehl' ipera ekanye namadoda</i>	He alighted from the horse
	with the men

Although Magadangana's performance flows from memorization rather than from improvisation, the variations in the performance unmistakably bear witness to an emerging ability with the conventions of Ndebele *iimbongo*. In terms developed by Walter Ong (1995:11), we could say that although the poet relied mainly on secondary orality, conventions reminiscent of primary orality made inroads into his performance. Magadangana has learned the

---

<sup>20</sup> For example: *Owadla njengamabutho waNongabulana* ("who ate [narrative or 'dramatic' past tense] like the warriors of Nongabulana," line 18), as opposed to *udle amabutho kaNongabulana* ("he ate [short form of the recent past] the warriors of Nongabulana") in the written text.

modern, individualistic way. He has taken a shortcut, instead of the time-consuming traditional path of learning at the feet of the specialist, in order to produce what for all intents and purposes looks like traditional, popular art.

Another instance of role reproduction with some creative changes is provided by the praise poems recorded at an *ingoma* (male initiation). Among the Ndebele, an *ingoma* occurs every three or four years. The many small details are too numerous to describe here; instead, I will summarize the ceremony's three main events. At the pre-initiation rendezvous the boys gather at the houses of chiefs and headmen to dance and sing, while their fathers, the trainers, and other men engage in serious switch-fighting.<sup>21</sup> After these preliminaries comes the initiation proper, during which time the boys go into the hills for a period of seclusion. Here they are circumcized and taught secret jargon, songs, praise poetry, and so on. After about a month they return to the same venues for post-initiation celebrations.

It was on August 15, 1988 at one of these celebrations, which took place at the homestead of the Chief of the Manala section of the Ndebele, that we recorded songs and praise poetry. We were immediately struck by the fact that the praise poetry of each of the young men was in Northern Sotho and not in Ndebele. The system of praising in the context of *ingoma* is clearly an adopted one. This probably also applies to many aspects of the ritual itself; in fact, the very name *ingoma* is derived from the word *koma*, which refers to female or male initiation in Northern Sotho. It is therefore not surprising that all the young men's praises have almost the same number of lines and make use of the same or similar motifs. We recorded the words of nine young men as they were praising themselves. Here is one example:

*E gangwa ke nna Mašila*  
*Mrhirhadiatla, Mafega.*  
*E tšhabela kae?*  
*E tšhabela tlase Botebeleng*  
*Mašila Botebeleng basa ile go senya* 5  
*Ba ile go lwana ntwā ya Maburu le Makgalaka*  
*Ke rile mohlang ke ya go khopa*  
*Lenaka la ka la bothankga bosogana*  
*Gwa lla kgwadi, gwa lla phalafala.*  
*Ba re: ga se phalafala ke tingting* 10  
*Nakana tša rena banna*  
*Ke Mankalakatana*  
*Ka 'naka la tšhukudu ga ke hlabe ka lona*  
*Ke laola diema.*  
*Ke se šikere sa ntatemogolo* 15

<sup>21</sup> They use long slender switches as opposed to the sticks of Zulus.

<i>Sa mapanta a makhwibidu</i>	
<i>Ga ke thuntšhe ka sona, ke laola diema</i>	
<i>Ke three-four sethunya sa masole</i>	
<i>Ba thuntšha ba nanabela.</i>	
<i>Ke two-three verila-verila</i>	20
<i>Ga ke thuntšhe ka sona mpana</i>	
<i>Ke thuntšha ka sona ... [inaudible]</i>	
It is being milked by me Mašila <sup>22</sup>	
Mrhirhadiatla, Mafega.	
Where does it flee to?	
It flees downwards to Ndebeleland	
Mašila in Ndebeleland they have gone to destroy	5
They have gone to engage in the war of the Boers and the Rhodesians.	
On the way I went to wrench	
My horn of being a young man. <sup>23</sup>	
A bull bellowed, a ram's horn was heard	
They said: it is not a ram's horn, it is a ting ting <sup>24</sup>	10
The flutes blown by us men.	
I am Mankalakatana	
With the horn of a rhinoceros I do not stab. <sup>25</sup>	
I control the idioms	
I am carrying that which belongs to my grandfather	15
That which has red belts	
I don't shoot with it, I control the idioms.	
It is a three-four the rifle of the soldiers	
They shoot while they advance slowly.	
It is a two-three verila-verila <sup>26</sup>	20
I do not shoot a barbarian with it	
With it I shoot ... [inaudible] <sup>27</sup>	

---

<sup>22</sup> Or "I take up the challenge to 'milk this cow'," that is, to praise.

<sup>23</sup> To be circumcized.

<sup>24</sup> A reference to a musical instrument?

<sup>25</sup> Meaning "do not have sex uncircumcized?"

<sup>26</sup> Meaning unclear.

<sup>27</sup> Probably inaudible because they were being recorded. Transcription, translation, and certain interpretations by S. A. Makopo are gratefully acknowledged.

These praise poems are an interesting blend of repeated and unique motifs. In all of the poems the young men are keen to identify themselves by means of a name or names; these could be called personal eulogies (lines 1-3). In more than one poem there is reference to the cow-milking motif that occurs here at the beginning. Another common element is circumcision or the obtaining of manhood via the metaphorical phrase “horn of manhood.” Connected to this motif is the assertion that it is not a ram’s horn as well as the identification of what appears to be a musical instrument—the “ting-ting.” The motif of the rhino horn is important in these poems, since it refers to manhood and sexual knowledge. In a few of the poems the phrase “I am Mankalakatana” occurs, perhaps referring to the evening star with which the young men become so familiar as they spend many clear winter nights out in the veld. The motifs of the red belts (war attire?, line 16) and the controlling of the idioms (line 17) also recur. The latter is another important constituent because it indexes the initiates’ newly acquired verbal authority, for instance their ability to partake in adult discussions.

The young men clearly learn these praises by heart while they are in the hills. Uniqueness consists of the individual’s name in his poem together with a few idiosyncratic lines or phrases. The problem with these copied versions is not so much their similarity, since all praise poetry shares a certain linguistic likeness, but the fact that even action motifs are copied, thus giving the impression that the speakers’ forebears actually participated in certain actions, such as a “Boer-Rhodesian” War (line 6). Nonetheless, the performances have a role in illustrating the spectrum of Ndebele praise poetry.

## Conclusion

The extent of the performance of praise poems in the political meetings to which I have referred testifies to the ability of Sovetjeza as Ndebele praise poet. In these meetings more than 80 praise poems were performed, far exceeding the number of political speeches delivered.<sup>28</sup> While the *iimbongo* had to entertain, mediate, and sensitize the people, political orators had to educate and persuade. Whereas creativity in the initiates’ praise poems depended almost “entirely on the reuse and recombination of traditional themes, formulas, and ‘ways of speaking’,”<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>28</sup> These performances of course include multiple performances of the “same” praise poem.

<sup>29</sup> R. P. Martin as quoted in Bauman 1996:18.

creativity in Sovetjeza's art is characterized by a high degree of novelty, primarily in the use of metaphor, rather than by repetitions (see Groenewald 1998). The reason for this high degree of creativity in his poetry is obvious: praise poetry thrives on heroic themes, and there are many subjects in South Africa with unique battle histories, so to speak. On the whole, creativity in Nguni praise poetry is brought about mostly by devices such as imagery (chiefly metaphor), forms of repetition, and various sorts of linguistic resources. The latter was evident in the humble creativity of Magadangana. These devices in all their various forms are immensely varied in Southern African praise poetry; not only is the poet in a position to select from an array of possibilities, but he can also combine them in interesting configurations.

The varied nature of Ndebele praise poetry includes memorization and recitation as well as importing praise poetry from another culture. The importing of praises does not necessarily mark stagnation; in fact, emergence is vital for a tradition to survive. The most vibrant traditions in South Africa, namely Xhosa and Zulu, are characterized not only by linguistic creativity but also by emergence or performance in new contexts. Ndebele praise poets have also placed the art of praising in diverse contexts, such as a highly volatile political situation, and in the printed media. Where no tradition of praising existed, as in the *ingoma* (initiation for men), Ndebele simply borrowed and adapted praises from Northern Sotho. Linguistic creativity in Ndebele praise poetry is another marker of the vitality of the tradition. However, as shown in the introductory section above, contexts are always subject to change.

At present Ndebele praise poetry is performed only at memorial occasions, for instance when the current monarch officiates at the annual Nyabela Day celebrations. Yet this situation need not be seen as the beginning of decline, since the tradition has proved that it possesses a latent vitality to rise to a new contextual opportunity. We can see such vitality in the appearance of younger poets. In general, contextual changes in South Africa have led to more opportunities for the performance of praise poems, illustrating the resilience of one of the most ancient forms of verbal art in this region, in "South Africa's truly original contribution to world literature" (Brown 1998:76-77).

## References

- Barber 1999                      Karin Barber. "Obscurity and Exegesis in African Oral Praise Poetry." In *Oral Literature and Performance in Southern Africa*. Ed. by Duncan Brown. Cape Town: David Philip. pp. 27-49.
- Bauman 1978                      Richard Bauman. *Verbal Art as Performance*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
- Bauman 1996                      \_\_\_\_\_. "Folklore as Transdisciplinary Dialogue." *Journal of Folklore Research*, 33:15-20.
- Brown 1998                      Duncan Brown. *Voicing the Text: South African Oral Poetry and Performance*. Cape Town: Oxford University Press.
- Chapman 1996                    Michael Chapman. *Southern African Literatures*. London and New York: Longman.
- Foley 1988                      John Miles Foley. *The Theory of Oral Composition: History and Methodology*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. Rpt. 1992.
- Foley 1996                      \_\_\_\_\_. "Signs, Texts, and Oral Tradition." *Journal of Folklore Research*, 33:21-29.
- Groenewald 1998                H. C. Groenewald. "Entextualisation—Accounting for Language Use in Oral Poetry." *South African Journal of African Languages*, 18, i:1-10.
- Gunner 1999                      Liz Gunner. "Remaking the Warrior? The Role of Orality in the Liberation Struggle and in Post-Apartheid South Africa." In *Oral Literature and Performance in Southern Africa*. Ed. by Duncan Brown. Cape Town: David Philip. pp. 50-60.
- Gunner and Gwala 1991        Liz Gunner and Mafika Gwala. *Musho! Zulu Popular Praises*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press.
- Joubert and Van  
Schalkwyk 1999                Annekie Joubert and J. A. Van Schalkwyk. "War and Remembrance: The Power of Oral Poetry and the Politics of Hananwa Identity." *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 25:29-47.

- Kaschula 1991 Russell H. Kaschula. "The Role of the Xhosa Poet in Contemporary South African Society." *South African Journal of African Languages*, 11:47-54.
- Kromberg 1993 Steve Kromberg. "The Problem of Audience: A Study of Durban Worker Poetry." Unpub. M.A. thesis, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.
- Mahlangu and  
Mahlangu 1995 M. A. Mahlangu and C. J. Mahlangu. *Iimbongo Zabarholi Banamhlanje. (The Praises of Today's Leaders)*. Pietermaritzburg: Shuter and Shooter.
- Mahlangu, Mahlangu and  
Mahlangu 1987 M. A. Mahlangu, J. J. Mahlangu, and M. S. Mahlangu. *Igugu Lama/Ndebele. (Ndebele Treasure)*. Braamfontein: Skotaville.
- Mkhize 1989 V. V. Mkhize. "Oral-formulaic Language in King Zwelithini's Izibongo." Unpub. M.A. thesis, University of Natal, Durban.
- Molefe 1992 Lawrence Molefe. "An Analysis of the Praises of Domestic Animals." Unpub. M.A. thesis, University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg.
- Ong 1995 Walter J. Ong. *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. London and New York: Routledge. Orig. publ. 1982.
- Opland 1975 Jeff Opland. "Iimbongi nezibongo: The Xhosa Tribal Poet and the Contemporary Poetic Tradition." *Publications of the Modern Language Association*, 90:185-208.
- Pongweni 1996 Alec J. C. Pongweni. *Shona Praise Poetry as Role Negotiation: The Battle of the Clans and the Sexes*. Gweru: Mambo Press.
- Turner 1990 Noleen Sheila Turner. "Elements of Satire in Zulu Oral Traditions." Unpub. M.A. thesis, University of Natal, Durban.
- Vail and White 1991 Leroy Vail and Landeg White. *Power and the Praise Poem*. London: James Currey.

Van Wyk 1975

E. B. Van Wyk. "Die taalkundige grondslae van versvorm in die Bantoetale." ("The Linguistic Fundamentals of Verse in the Bantu Languages."). In *Kunswerk as taal*. Ed. by F. I. J. Van Rensburg. Cape Town: Tafelberg. pp. 15-33.



## **Milman Parry and A. L. Kroeber: Americanist Anthropology and the Oral Homer**

**John F. García**

The view of Homer which . . . was to render earlier scholarship obsolete . . . was apparently arrived at by the reaction of an unusual mind to the text of Homer: nothing in Parry's background (middle-class, not particularly intellectual, Welsh Quaker origins), nor in the place where he was born and lived until he went to France in 1923 . . . makes that reaction likely. Parry's teachers in Greek at the University of California included two of the finest Hellenists of their generation, George Calhoun (1888-1942) and Ivan Linforth (b. 1879). Both men knew Homer well and had a sensitive understanding of his poetry. But they were not the source of any of Parry's specific ideas. His work was as much a surprise to them as to the rest of the world. The mind that presented Homer to the world as the singer of traditional poetry was itself the product of no traditions.

A. Parry 1971:xxii-xxiii

### **Introduction**

Milman Parry's mythic reputation derives from the brilliance of his scholarship, the suaveness of his rhetoric, a mysterious and untimely death, and above all his standing as a revered ancestor of American Homeric scholarship in the predominant form it now takes. Adam Parry's words enhance the sense of something unaccountable, even miraculous, in his father's genius; yet we can read them today, if we want to take the study of intellectual history seriously, only with a skeptical eye. Even in his life of Parry, which he affixed to his edition of the elder's papers, Adam seemed ill at ease with mythmaking; he was elsewhere at pains to emphasize that "each of the specific tenets which make up Parry's view of Homer had been held by some former scholar."<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, he asserted that it was his father

---

<sup>1</sup> A. Parry 1971:xxii. Henceforth, I refer to Adam Parry for the most part simply as 'Adam'; 'Parry' stands for Milman throughout.

who transformed the disparate findings of other scholars on diction and metrics (Heinrich Düntzer and others), formulary texture (Antoine Meillet and Arnold van Genep), the contrasts between the techniques of oral and literate poets (Matija Murko, Marcel Jousse), and the Yugoslav analogy (Murko) into an original theory. It was his father who rendered the contentions of the Analysts and Unitarians moot, for both sides were right in ways that neither had imagined.

The history of some of the “specific tenets” has been filled in even further since Adam’s fine essay of 1971. For example, David Bynum has placed the elder Parry at the end of a succession of Harvard folklorists; Joachim Latacz has laid firmer emphasis on the achievement of Parry’s German predecessors, while Charles de Lamberterie has assigned Meillet due credit for his influence on the young Parry’s appreciation of Homer’s orality; John Foley has shown the value of V. V. Radlov’s work among the Turkic peoples of the central Asian steppes.<sup>2</sup> Yet it remains the case that Parry’s specific innovation, his explication of the mechanisms of traditional oral composition, has not been fully accounted for in the disciplinary history of oral tradition studies, owing in part to Adam’s poignant but misleading claim that his father was, in this regard, *sui generis*.<sup>3</sup> Parry could cite German scholarship to the effect that the poet’s choice of epithet for a given noun was governed above all by metrical fit; the concept of the formula was known. But his interpretation of these facts was another matter. His central innovation was the development of philological techniques for detecting traces of traditional behavior in textual artifacts. It is precisely here, in the detection and explication of tradition, that Adam claims his father stood alone. In this essay, I will suggest that Parry’s original emphasis on the traditional formation and transmission of Homeric diction was more an outgrowth of his intellectual training than his son would allow. Parry was indeed the product of traditions, and here I want to explore the legacy in his work of the Americanist tradition in ethnography.

---

<sup>2</sup> Bynum 1974; Latacz 1979; de Lamberterie 1997, which corrects Adam’s view that Antoine Meillet “cannot be said to have vitally affected the direction of [Parry’s] thought” (1971:xxiii); Foley 1988:10-13, but the whole work provides a more comprehensive and balanced survey than A. Parry 1971.

<sup>3</sup> More work needs to be done on Parry’s years at the Sorbonne. Peradotto (1997) rightly calls attention to the influence still exerted there in Parry’s day by the pupils of Emile Durkheim, but we still lack details that go beyond the thin account offered by Adam. For example, did Parry know Maurice Halbwachs, who was publishing *Les Cadres Sociaux de la Mémoire* (1925) just as Parry was getting started?

The Master of Arts thesis that Parry presented to the Classics faculty at the University of California, Berkeley already contained the germ of his thinking on traditional poetry, as Adam observed, and clearly Parry had already developed a concentrated interest in the workings of tradition before he arrived in Paris. Since he also attended Berkeley as an undergraduate, since his home life was “not particularly intellectual,” and since Adam seems right that Berkeley’s faculty in classical studies did not show any special interest in the problems that exercised Parry’s mind,<sup>4</sup> it is reasonable to look for influences where Adam apparently did not: thinking on culture, folklore, and tradition to which Parry was exposed in his Berkeley days. His academic transcripts look normal, on the whole, for an American majoring in classics at the time.<sup>5</sup> Apart from advanced work in Latin—Parry had studied it when he attended high school at Oakland Tech—and less advanced Greek, which he came to favor over Latin by his second year, there are the ordinary courses in physical education, hygiene, public speaking, political science, and so on. What does stand out, however, is that during the academic years 1921-22 and 1922-23, he took three semesters of anthropology. This young field cannot be said to have been a normal choice for a promising classicist at the time; in fact, the field was in some ways still in its infancy. As he rose through the ranks, from college freshman to senior, working through his requirements for graduation, Parry winnowed his competing interests, leaving in the end only English, Graphic Art (did he think of pursuing archaeology?), German, Anthropology, Greek, and Latin. It is even more striking that he continued with anthropology in his last term

---

<sup>4</sup> Adam mentions George Calhoun, but the signatories to Parry’s Master’s thesis were Ivan M. Linforth, James T. Allen, and R. W. Gordon. Nevertheless, it is true that of Parry’s Berkeley teachers, graduate or undergraduate, Calhoun took the liveliest interest in the former pupil’s later work as soon as it became known. In works of 1933 and 1935, Calhoun would cite Parry and engage him in genial debate. Berkeley’s library copy of Parry’s MA thesis was apparently lost for some time before the summer of 2000. When I tried to have it paged at Berkeley’s Doe Memorial Library, I found no catalogue record of it. After I reported this, the head archivist at the Bancroft Rare Book Library eventually tracked down a typewritten list of MA theses in the collection that did show Parry’s on deposit. The shelves were read and the thesis found (call number at Doe, 308t P265). It is included entire (save the title page) in Parry 1971:421-36.

<sup>5</sup> University of California, Berkeley, Office of the Registrar. Transcript of Record: Parry, Milman, 1919-23. According to notations on the documents themselves, they had been requested only twice before my own enquiry: in 1925, presumably by Parry himself for his application to the Sorbonne, and in 1967, presumably by Adam Parry for the biographical essay on his father (1971).

as an undergraduate (he took his A.B. in December 1922)—this and German were the only non-classics courses he was taking when he graduated.

## **Kroeber**

It has not been reported, to my knowledge, that Parry studied his anthropology under A. L. Kroeber (1876-1960), one of the leading figures in twentieth-century American Indian studies and a major linguistic anthropologist and cultural theorist.<sup>6</sup> The courses were simply titled: Anthropology 1a (first term 1921-22), 1b (second term 1921-22), and Anthropology 103 (first term 1922-23). In the first of these, Kroeber was assisted by Robert H. Lowie and E. W. Gifford, both already prominent Americanists; in the second by Lowie only; Kroeber taught the third alone. There is a possibility that Kroeber's colleagues did much of the work in the first two semesters, since he was then spending a good deal of his time practicing psychoanalysis in Berkeley. Parry entered U. C., Berkeley in 1919 when Kroeber, who lived and wrote until 1960, was already a major figure in his field, a freshly promoted full professor, and something of a public intellectual. Apart from his many technical treatises and articles, he published often in popular magazines.<sup>7</sup> In the years before Parry's arrival, Kroeber had won a considerable share of public attention as friend, guardian, and observer of a Yana (Yahi) Indian, Ishi, who alone had survived the massacre of his fellow tribesmen by a white gang of vigilantes. Kroeber's advocacy for Ishi established his reputation among non-specialists as an erudite mediator between the two worlds of Indian and white man. He was one of the most prominent and visible figures in Berkeley at that time.

Kroeber was the first doctoral pupil of Franz Boas at Columbia University and thus belonged to the first generation of trained Americanists.<sup>8</sup> It was a time of foundations. Even before Kroeber had completed his doctorate, he was hired as ethnologist for the California Academy of Sciences in San Francisco, a position that provided the experience and

---

<sup>6</sup> See T. Kroeber 1970:104-7; further, n. 8 below. Apart from Theodora Kroeber's biography, see also Steward 1973; the former, by his widow, is admiring and anecdotal, while the latter is more analytical and interpretative. Many good obituaries followed Kroeber's death in 1960, but best for present purposes is Hymes 1983, which originally appeared in 1961.

<sup>7</sup> Kroeber's bibliography is surveyed in Gibson and Rowe 1961.

<sup>8</sup> See, in general, Darnell 2001.

contacts to make him the obvious man for a job directing the new Anthropological Museum and Department of Anthropology at the University of California (1901). (He would remain at the university until his retirement in 1946 and maintain a house in Berkeley until his death.) The first decades of this century were also a formative period for the steady elaboration of theory and method in anthropology, and Kroeber quickly distinguished himself as a fieldworker of exacting empirical standards, possessing a love for quantification and statistics coupled with an extraordinary talent for abstracting theoretical insights from his field experience. By 1923, the year in which Parry earned his Berkeley Master of Arts degree in classical studies, Kroeber had produced numerous ethnographic monographs and articles, a textbook (*Anthropology*), and *A Source Book in Anthropology* (with T. T. Waterman).<sup>9</sup>

The source book, published by U. C., Berkeley, may have been required for one of the courses Parry took; the textbook came out too late to have been used in its published form but does give a good idea of the substance of Kroeber's lectures.<sup>10</sup> Parry was thus exposed for three consecutive semesters to Kroeber's theory of culture, already highly developed. A sketch of that theory follows.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> The best review of Kroeber's professional activity in this period is Hymes 1983, which emphasizes Kroeber's contribution to the nascent field of linguistic anthropology. 1923 was important in his career for another reason. It was then that he decided to abandon the professional pursuit of Freudian psychoanalysis, which he had undergone and studied in Vienna some years earlier, then practiced at his home in Berkeley; see Steward 1973:11-12; T. Kroeber 1970:101-18. I doubt that this is relevant to the present study, because with few exceptions (e.g. A. Kroeber 1920), he segregated his interest in psychoanalysis from his professional writings in anthropology (T. Kroeber 1970:119); it is unlikely that he lectured his classes on it.

<sup>10</sup> Brief descriptions of the courses are given in University of California 1921 and 1922. These do in fact correspond broadly with the material presented in A. Kroeber and Waterman 1920 and A. Kroeber 1923: *Anthropology 1a, General Anthropology: Origin and Antiquity of Man*: "Man as an animal; heredity; races and race problems; earliest culture;" *Anthropology 1b, General Anthropology: Origin and Development of Civilization*: "The source and growth of institutions, arts, customs, industries, language, and religion;" *Anthropology 103, Outlines of Culture Growth*: "Human origins and classification; beginnings of culture; growth of civilization in the great centers of Egypt, Europe, and Asia; diffusions in Africa and Oceania; belated and marginal peoples; world religions and international contacts."

<sup>11</sup> Kroeber himself (1952) assembled his principal statements on culture, dating from his 1901 study on symbolism in Arapaho art; see also A. Kroeber and Kluckhohn 1952. Here I consider only those aspects of his theory that were elaborated by the time

Kroeber summarized the doctrines he had developed in the years before Parry encountered him in a set of eighteen tenets, which he published in the *American Anthropologist* for 1915. With these “professions,” as he called them, he aimed to align the parameters of sociocultural anthropology with those of history, rather than those of science, as Boas would have it. He also began here to enunciate an important part of what would become his mature theory of culture.<sup>12</sup> What most interests us at present is Kroeber’s insistence that the business of anthropology, as a historical endeavor, is not with individuals, but with arrays of human activity issuing in culture: “The material studied by history is not man, but his works” (profession 2, 1915:283); “The personal or individual has no historical value save as illustration” (profession 6, 1915:284). For Kroeber, anthropology was the study of man’s cultural gestures as they appeared in acts, customs, institutions, and artifacts, and as these were gradually stored up in the great accumulation that defined a people’s progress.

A second trend is visible in the professions. The liberalism on questions of race that Kroeber had been exposed to as a young man received the disciplinary endorsement of Franz Boas, and both men integrated this ideology into their scholarship:<sup>13</sup> “The absolute equality and identity of all human races and strains as carriers of civilization must be assumed by the historian” (profession 8, 1915:285); “Heredity cannot be allowed to have acted any part in history” (profession 9, *ibid.*). For Boas, sentiments such as these had validated each society’s integrity and worth, making each a legitimate object of concentrated study; but as I mentioned earlier, he generally did not welcome cultural comparison *per se*, preferring instead to interpret cultural artifacts in terms of the several societies that produced

---

he taught Parry, though Kroeber himself admits that the substance of his theory was in place by the time of his famous essay of 1917 and remained stable. Apart from the studies mentioned so far, I am particularly indebted for background to Thoresen 1971, Buckley 1996, Bennett 1998, and Kuper 1999.

<sup>12</sup> A. Kroeber 1915 raises many important issues in this history of anthropological thought that I cannot discuss here. See further Buckley 1996.

<sup>13</sup> On Kroeber’s background, see T. Kroeber 1970:espec. 24-27; for Boas on race, see Boas 1974:221-42 (= Selection 31, “Human faculty as determined by race”) and espec. 310-30 (= Selections 42-44, “The outlook of the American Negro,” “Changing the racial attitude of white Americans,” “Race problems in America”), as well as the comments of the editor, George Stocking (Boas 1974:307-9).

them and to trace their diffusion from one people to another.<sup>14</sup> But in Kroeber's hands, relativist principles issued in methods different from his master's: it was precisely the "absolute equality and identity of all human races" that rendered them suitable for comparison, one to the other. This of course was not to be performed for its own sake, but in order to bring 'configurations' into relief and reveal the shape of the growth of civilization.<sup>15</sup> The result was a forceful defense of comparison in the study of civilization's artifacts.

### The Superorganic

In 1917, Kroeber published an essay on "The Superorganic" in the *American Anthropologist*, which had long since become a major organ, alongside the *International Journal of American Linguistics*, of Boas and his pupils.<sup>16</sup> The essay in some ways simply carried on Boas's assault on social evolutionism and racial determinism, though Kroeber was by temperament impelled to move well beyond Boasian particularism, the insistence that cultural comparison and historical reconstruction were to be minimized in favor of the thorough synchronic description of a given people.<sup>17</sup> He took

---

<sup>14</sup> On Boas's intellectual inheritance, see G. W. Stocking in Boas 1974:1-20; Boas himself discussed the work of an important influence on him, the German anthropologist Virchow (*ibid.*:36-41); cf. his more popular account of his early years, 41-43; on the influence of Bastian, see Koepping 1995.

<sup>15</sup> See espec. A. Kroeber 1944, discussed by Bennett 1998:272-81.

<sup>16</sup> Murray (1994:47-76) provides a brief intellectual history of the Boas school, particularly its linguistic activity. His sociological model emphasizes the dissemination of the doctrines of "theory groups" through various channels including journals; for the importance of the *American Anthropologist*, see espec. 51-52, 75. An indispensable review of the immediate intellectual milieu in which Kroeber developed his thoughts on the superorganic is supplied by Thoresen 1971:240-64. See also Bennett 1998; Darnell 2001:69-102.

<sup>17</sup> See further Buckley 1996. Bennett (1998:282-83 n. 2) quotes a late statement by Kroeber on the original motive behind his 1917 paper: "Looking back thirty years on my essay called 'The Superorganic' I am struck by the sense that pervades it of a great need for freeing cultural phenomena from the oppression of biological thinking."

another stride beyond Boas, as we have seen, in wanting to detach anthropology from what he thought was an illusory grounding in science.<sup>18</sup>

In his 1917 paper, Kroeber drew a sharp dividing line between organic (evolutionary) developments, on the one hand, and civilization on the other (167): “We do not, in gradual alternation from father to son, change our arms into flippers and grow a tail. We do not enter the water at all to navigate it. We build a boat.” The evolutionism that Kroeber was combating was not so much Darwinism as Lamarckianism, which enjoyed a stealthy revival in social thought around the turn of the century. This is not the place to sketch out the ramifications of these trends,<sup>19</sup> but it is important to our thesis that Kroeber set out to demolish the social application of the theory of acquired characteristics, which had been taken over by some social scientists from Lamarck. This theory held that factors in the environment of organisms produced adaptations in them that they then passed along to their young. Darwin first, and Mendel’s successors later, would radically qualify the influence of environment on the development of organisms in ways that were not consistently sifted into the social sciences. But what was discredited in science should not, for Kroeber, be allowed to make a stand in the study of culture, society, and civilization: “Heredity by acquirement is equally a biological and historical monstrosity” (profession 10, 1915:285).<sup>20</sup> The principle was vital to Kroeber’s theory of culture, with its emphasis on the accumulation of knowledge and artifacts. At the same time, it posed a further argument against racial determinism. As he argued in the 1917 paper:

---

<sup>18</sup> See also the later essay, A. Kroeber 1936. Buckley (1996:espec. 268) questions Kroeber’s immunity from scientific methods; on Kroeber’s use of quantification, see Hymes 1983:247.

<sup>19</sup> See for general background Barnard 2000:27-46 and espec. Stocking 1968:234-69.

<sup>20</sup> Kroeber argued this “profession” as follows (1915:285-86): “This naive explanation may be eliminated on the findings of biology; but should biology ever determine that such heredity operates through a mechanism as yet undiscovered, this heredity must nevertheless be disregarded by history together with congenital heredity. In the present stage of understanding, heredity by acquirement is only too often the cherished inclination of those who confuse their biological thinking by the introduction of social aspects, and of those who confound history by deceiving themselves that they are turning it into biology.”



. . . [I]t must be maintained that little really satisfactory evidence has been produced to support the assumption that the differences which one nation shows from another—let alone the superiority of one people to another—are racially inherent, that is organically founded. It does not matter how distinguished the minds that have held such differences to be hereditary—they have in the main only taken their conviction for granted. The sociologist or anthropologist can, and occasionally does, turn the case inside out (181).<sup>21</sup>

But what made perhaps a bigger impression on Kroeber's contemporaries was the metaphysical character of the notion.<sup>22</sup> The great linguist and Americanist Edward Sapir recognized this aspect of Kroeber's thought already in his response to the essay on the superorganic, which appeared, also in the *American Anthropologist*, later in 1917. He objected that Kroeber had recklessly minimized the role of individuals in the shaping of history (443): "One has only to think seriously of what such personalities as Aristotle, Jesus, Mahomet, Shakespeare, Goethe, Beethoven mean in the history of culture to hesitate to commit oneself to a completely non-individualistic interpretation of history. I do not believe for a moment that such personalities are merely the cat's-paws of general cultural drifts." Although he agreed that man stored up knowledge in his cultural gestures, Sapir further argued that Kroeber had blundered into a heavy-handed reification of civilization (*idem*):

If I understand him rightly, he predicates a certain social 'force' whose gradual unfolding is manifested in the sequence of socially significant phenomena we call history. The social is builded out of the organic, but is not entirely resolvable into it, hence it implies the presence of an unknown principle which transcends the organic, just as the organic, while similarly builded out of the inorganic, is not resolvable into it but harbors a new and distinctive force that works itself out in organic phenomena. I consider the analogy a false one.

Sapir and Kroeber carried on their discussion in their letters. They clearly enjoyed their disagreements, even conspired to make them

---

<sup>21</sup> = A. Kroeber 1952:33-34; cf. Bennett's discussion of this passage, 1998:260-61.

<sup>22</sup> Aside from a public controversy with Edward Sapir, on which see below, Kroeber named four contemporaries who accused him of entertaining a nebulous metaphysics: Paul Radin, Elsie Clews Parsons, Hermann K. Haeberlin, and Alexander Goldenweiser. See Sapir and A. Kroeber 1984:245.

interesting when they surfaced in public.<sup>23</sup> But on matters of doctrine, the letters stress their agreements. “. . . [I]t does strike me,” wrote Sapir, “that our common tendency is away from conceptual science and towards history” (Sapir and A. Kroeber 1984:258). Still, on the accusation that he was imposing needless abstraction on the notion of culture, Kroeber would ultimately cede to his younger colleague. In the introduction to his paper on the superorganic, as collected in his 1952 anthology of writings on culture, he wrote, “. . . I retract, as unwarranted reification, the references. . . to organic and superorganic ‘substances’, entities, or fabrics. While it certainly is often needful to view different kinds of phenomena as of different orders and to deal with them on separate levels of apprehension, there is no need for metaphysically construing levels of conception or orders of attribute into substantial entities or different kinds of substance” (A. Kroeber 1952:23).<sup>24</sup> By then, however, Parry was long dead; the theory of culture that he imbibed from Kroeber’s lectures was much the same as the one published in 1917.

### **Parry and Kroeber’s Anthropology**

Parry entered Berkeley in 1919, in the thick of the superorganic controversy. The fields of classical studies and anthropology as they are cultivated today do not cross-pollinate equally. To the extent that ideas migrate between them, it is mainly from anthropology to classics. This was not always the case. George Stocking has persuasively argued that in the early days of American anthropology, Franz Boas set out to establish methods that would place his young science on an equal footing with the tradition of European classical studies. Boasian particularism, to which I have referred above, aimed not only at endowing each indigenous society with its own autonomous culture, but more specifically with recovering a classical past for it. This was done by setting out into the field to recover a people’s texts and artifacts, which bounty would then be brought back, to Washington or New York, and distributed to the appropriate specialists,

---

<sup>23</sup> Kroeber wrote to Sapir, “The decadence of linguistics [of which ES had complained] is largely your own fault. You’re an individualist and haven’t built up a school. Do something general in character and you may get opposed. At least I promise you an opponent if you can make me disagree” (Sapir and A. Kroeber 1984:260).

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Bennett 1998:265 with further self-criticisms by Kroeber of early formulations of his cultural theory.

archaeologists, linguists, and so on.<sup>25</sup> This ideology of the artifact was then passed on to Boas's pupils. A perusal of Kroeber's early titles reflects the quest for "texts": "Animal Tales of the Eskimo" (1898), "Tales of the Smith Sound Eskimo" (1899), "Cheyenne Tales" (1900), "Ute Tales" (1901), "Wishok Myths" (1905), and so on. Kroeber too had received a classical education and was clearly receptive to this methodological bequest from Boas. This artifact-centered approach to anthropology would certainly have resonated with the young Parry, and as he absorbed one example after another, cultural comparison would surely have prepared him to look at the project of the Homerist as closely analogous. The doctrine of the "absolute equality and identity of all human races," as put forward by Kroeber, who in turn inherited it from Boas, may well have given Parry some of the considerable courage that it took to compare Yugoslav peasant singers to Homer—a comparison that remains unsettling to many Hellenists.<sup>26</sup>

But there are several areas of influence that relate to more precise teaching that Parry may well have inherited directly from Kroeber himself. I suggest the following:

1. *The "Superorganic."* Parry did not use the word itself.<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, already in his Master of Arts thesis (1923), Parry can be seen wielding a fully formed notion of tradition that, like Kroeber's theory of culture, minimizes the role of the individual. He compares composition in traditional diction to Greek sculpture, using the work of Phidias as an example (1971:425, italics added):

By following this tradition of design and expression [in the representation of divinity,] Phidias has filled his work with *the spirit of a whole race*: he has not only followed its conception of the nature of the goddess, he has also represented her in the position and with the attributes *which the race had chosen and approved* as the most fitting to represent the beauty, the strength, the calmness of her nature. In a sense it might also be said that the statue was *produced by the Greeks in collaboration with Phidias*. Nor, by accepting these broader lines has he hampered the strength or subtlety

---

<sup>25</sup> Stocking 1977; Jacknis 1996b; Darnell 1990.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. the comment by Hugh Lloyd Jones (1992:52): "For the understanding of Homer's poetry, German is a more important language than Serbo-Croatian."

<sup>27</sup> Kroeber himself did not use it much either. Though it stands as the title of his famous essay (1917), he did not use it even in the body of that work. The word is absent from the index to his *Anthropology*, though it is used in passing in the text (1923:57).

of his own personality. He has used them for the further perfection and purification of the popular ideal. *He has blended his own genius with that of his race*, so inextricably that the two are hard to distinguish: they can only be realized in the perfection of the result.

Such is the role of convention in Greek sculpture, and we can now see that its role in epic poetry is much the same. We realize that the traditional, the formulaic quality of the diction was not a device for mere convenience, but the highest possible development of the hexameter medium to tell *a race's heroic tales*. The poetry was not one in which a poet must use his own words and try as best he might to utilize the possibilities of the metre. It was a poetry which for centuries had *accumulated* all such possibilities—all the turns of language, all the words, phrases, and effects of position, *which had pleased the race*.

We were obviously wrong in applying to the diction of this verse the standards of modern art which made it seem a patchwork technique. We cannot speak here of making a figure *subtle and individual as the artist's imagination*; for the artist's subtlety was a sort which expressed itself *not in individuality* but in refinement of the popular conception. We cannot speak disparagingly of the fact that all the work of the school was much the same; it was similar only in kind, not in the degree of perfection. And while it was a technique which might be learned parrot-like by men of little genius who added nothing to their inheritance, it was also a technique which furnished inexhaustible material for genius: the work of bringing to perfection is never finished.

We must keep these things in mind if we would understand the values of epic diction, if we would understand the epics at all. *We must not look upon this poetry as we would upon our own contemporary, individualistic art*. Rather it is Phidian; for it may be said that like the Lemnian Athene *it was produced by the Greek race in collaboration with the artist*, whose proper task was the perfection and refinement of the popular ideal.

In this brief passage, striking in its repetitiveness, I count ten instances of the individual artist contrasted with the social group; Parry also uses the word “race” no fewer than six times. The blend of “spirit” or “genius” with “race” arises in direct descent from Boas through Kroeber. Boas himself appeared to prefer “people” to the ideologically charged “race,” speaking of the “genius of a people,” but race remained a central topic of reading and discussion in the anthropology courses that Parry attended in Berkeley.<sup>28</sup> In

---

<sup>28</sup> For Boas on the “genius of a people,” see G. W. Stocking’s “Introduction” in Boas 1974:espec. 5-7. On the anthropology courses, see, apart from the course descriptions cited earlier, the readings in A. Kroeber and Waterman 1920, a third of which deal with this topic (including one by the racial determinist Francis Galton). The editors of the latter work offered this disclaimer (1): “The passages in this volume have

addition, Parry cites the notion of accumulation, key to Kroeber's theory of civilization, here applied to the development of traditional diction. It too stems ultimately from Boas. In words that would echo in Kroeber's work, Boas wrote, "the mythologies of the various tribes [of the Northwest and Canada] as we find them now are not organic growths, but have gradually developed and obtained their present form by accretion of foreign material. Much of this material must have been adopted ready made, and has been adapted and changed in form according to the genius of the people who borrowed it" (1974:96).<sup>29</sup> The idea that Homeric diction is a treasury of accumulation is at least as old as the ancient biographical rationalization that had Homer traveling the Greek world collecting dialectal forms, the stuff of which he would make his verses ([Plut.] *Vit. Hom.* 8, etc.). Parry's work on traditional diction gave a theoretical basis to the diachronic accretion of forms, and by corollary, the same traditional device is capable of preserving the memory of material and social forms that had long since passed out of currency.<sup>30</sup>

What, then, did Parry learn from Kroeber's theory of the superorganic? Throughout his career, from his Master of Arts thesis to the unfinished field notes entitled "Ćor Huso," Parry promulgated the view that the development of Homeric diction could not have been the work of a single man.<sup>31</sup> This creation was thus vested in the "genius of the people." Within the discipline of Parryist studies in Homer, it is only a small step

---

been selected for their utility in stimulating discussion. They are included not because they present ultimate scientific truth, but because they embody facts and interpretations which are useful for the exercise of thought on some of the larger problems of anthropology." Despite his position on the question, Kroeber professed his admiration for Galton's diligence (1952:22): "Indeed, Galton has always evoked my complete respect and has been one of the largest influences on me." Galton nevertheless misinterpreted his findings, in Kroeber's view.

<sup>29</sup> See further Stocking's discussion, n. 28 above.

<sup>30</sup> On material forms anachronistically preserved in traditional diction, see Lorimer 1950 and Sheratt 1990. For social forms, see additionally Morris 1986, 2000.

<sup>31</sup> Thus in his 1923 MA thesis: "To think that [traditional diction] would soon disappear from epic poetry [after Homer] would be as foolish as to think that a technique so elaborate, so complex, and so much the very essence of the epic, could have been evolved by one man or even by a single generation" (1971:423). And again in *Ćor Huso*: ". . . [M]y study of the Homeric language led me to see that such a language could be created only by a long tradition of oral poetry. . ." (1971:39-40).

from such a “superorganic” view of tradition to one that predicates verbal action of a reified Tradition. To think of culture or civilization—or tradition—as “a social ‘force’” (in Sapir’s words) makes it possible for Parry’s successors to say things such as “the *Iliad* demarcates its subject and orients the audience toward its treatment of its themes” or the like, especially as the authorial control of the Poet dissipates into the generations of his forebears or fellow guildsmen.<sup>32</sup>

2. *The “historical method.”* A second influence was on Parry’s identification of his method as a fundamentally historical one. He expounded this position in an address delivered near the end of his short life, “The Historical Method in Literary Criticism,”<sup>33</sup> which I suggest is influenced by Kroeber’s 1915 essay, “Eighteen Professions,” as well as by the “superorganic” essay, or at least by their tenets themselves as they were presented in Kroeber’s lectures. In the most substantial discussion of this piece available, Seth Schein took Parry to task for an overly simple model of the relationship between poet and audience. It is true that this talk, which was delivered before an audience of non-specialists (namely, the Overseers of Harvard College), disposes of a rather unsubtle theoretical grounding. But there is more to Parry’s project than Schein allows; and this can best be understood when we take into account Parry’s California experience.<sup>34</sup>

Reading Parry against an Americanist background, he can be seen affirming Boasian particularism as filtered through Kroeber’s theory of culture. In Parry’s eyes, the historical method itself is subject to the

---

<sup>32</sup> The quotation, taken from Slatkin 1991:15, is meant as an example only; this kind of verbal predication is quite common now.

<sup>33</sup> Presented in 1935 and first published in the *Harvard Alumni Bulletin* in 1936; reprinted as Parry 1971:408-13.

<sup>34</sup> Schein suggests that Parry’s views are the “product of [his] graduate study in France rather than Germany, to which most American classicists from Gildersleeve on seem to have gravitated” (1997:277). It is certainly true, however, that his choice of France over Germany is remarkable, especially because Benjamin Ide Wheeler, a prominent Indo-Europeanist (and eponym of Wheeler’s Law of Greek accentuation, not to mention Wheeler Hall at Berkeley) who was trained in Germany, had been President of the University of California until 1919, the year of Parry’s entry, and a major influence on the development of classical studies there. According to his son, Parry had sought out Victor Bérard, but was disappointed; he fell in at last, in part through the good offices of Maurice Croiset, with Aimé Puech, who supervised his *thèses* (A. Parry 1971:xxiii; see also de Lamberterie 1997:9-11).

cumulative progress that Kroeber had argued for in reference to civilization (Parry 1971:409): “The students of each generation, approaching the literature of some past period with the clearer sight which has been won for them by the earlier generation, will find in the best opinions on that past elements which jar with one another, or things which have been left out, or things which have been given too much place; and if they have head enough not to become befuddled by details—which is the great hazard—they will in their turn give a truer picture.” But he goes even further: particularism is to be seen as part of this trend. For this, Parry uses the key term “relativity,” which Schein seems to pass over. Parry describes what he means thus (*idem*):

The notion of relativity surely lies in this direction: if I say that Grote’s account of democracy at Athens is more revealing of the mind of an English Liberal of the nineteenth century after Christ, than it recalls what actually took place in Athens in the fifth century before Christ, and then go on to admit that the opinion which I have just expressed about Grote may in turn reveal even more my own state of mind than it does that of Grote. . . even in that case I am still doing no more than to try to attain a more perfect method for the historical approach to the thought of the past.

For Parry, then, “relativity” is the principle of letting each culture speak for itself. The technique that he proposes for achieving this is suggested to him by the passage from the writings of Ernest Renan that he had placed towards the opening of his first *thèse*. In Adam’s English, it reads: “How can we seize the physiognomy and the originality of early literatures if we do not enter into the moral and intimate life of a people, if we do not place ourselves at the very point in humanity which it occupied, in order to see and feel with it, if we do not watch it live, or rather if we do not live for a while with it?” (1971:409)<sup>35</sup> Now, Schein may be right that this viewpoint is naive: “In this respect, Parry resembles the anthropological fieldworkers of earlier generations who optimistically thought that their ‘participant observation’ of traditional cultures not their own enabled them to understand—objectively and without distortion—the institutions, social structures, and values of these cultures” (1997:276). He is surely correct in likening Parry’s attraction to Renan’s sentiment to that of early anthropologists (though it was not so much a matter of Parry’s imitation of them, since participant observation as we know it today was more a legacy of Malinowski than the earlier Americanists whom Parry had known).

---

<sup>35</sup> Cf. the different rendering at 1971:2.

But Schein seems to go astray when he attempts to account for Parry's clear effort to move beyond Renan's simple formulation. Parry acknowledges that this "point of view . . . is one which can never reach completely, but only come nearer to its attainment," and that "the students of each generation, approaching the literature of some past period with the clearer sight which has been won for them by the earlier generation, will . . . in their turn give a truer picture" (1971:409).<sup>36</sup> Schein rightly detects a breach between Parry's approach to his subject and that of the German philologists, but comments that "this sense of Classics as one of the 'human sciences' rather than the 'Humanities' (and of the comparative study of 'forms of society other than our own' as a legitimate 'field of learning') is perhaps a product of Parry's graduate study in France rather than Germany . . ." (277). Now, it is certain, not least thanks to Parry's own autobiographical remarks in this regard,<sup>37</sup> that much of his later thought was given definitive shape in Paris, but his view of classical philology as he would practice it is strongly influenced by Kroeber's defense of a historical (rather than biological) basis for anthropology. Adam Parry's insistence that his father was, as a theorist of tradition, *sui generis* is carried too far. This insistence leads Schein to underestimate the importance of the view that Parry expounds in his essay on historical method. It is true, as he says, that Parry could have gained from modern theoretical sophistications (1997:281), but it took considerable courage to address to the Overseers of Harvard College, men who must have imagined themselves guardians of a sacred cultural trust, his challenge to a triumphalist strain in western classical scholarship that still commands adherence today. Parry's "historical method," like the grand comparative projects of Kroeber, would brandish a principle of "relativity" learned from Americanist ethnographers in California. Armed with that theory, they would open the gates for successors who would set Homer's songs beside those of South Slavic Moslem *guslari* or peers from farther abroad.

3. *The Phonograph and "Salvage Ethnography."* Another bequest that Parry received was the use of the phonograph in the field and the general mood of "salvage ethnography." When he took to the field in 1929, the year following the defense and publication of this French *thèse*, he had only the inspiration of Matija Murko and his own genius, according to the

---

<sup>36</sup> Cited by Schein 1997:276.

<sup>37</sup> On which see de Lamberterie 1997.



usual account. But his California background prepared him for this adventure in many ways not as yet acknowledged. Franz Boas had instilled in his pupils a sense of urgency regarding the preservation—“salvage” was the word often used—of Native American cultures, languages especially. Kroeber himself privately lamented the rapid destruction of native culture in California.<sup>38</sup> It is very possible, then, that Parry inherited this attitude from Kroeber, but it was to some extent in the air among anthropologists, and there is even an early work on South Slavic heroic song by Beatrice Stevenson that pleads for its salvage.<sup>39</sup>

From the start, Americanists used the phonograph and portable cameras in their acts of preservation and collection.<sup>40</sup> Kroeber himself had enthusiastically adopted the latest technologies: already in 1914 he contracted a commercial company to make films of Ishi engaged in traditional activities such as fishing and archery; he used photography and phonography extensively in the field as well.<sup>41</sup> Heider tells of the blunder

---

<sup>38</sup> Buckley 1996. According to Theodora Kroeber (1970:51), Boas had taught her husband that “the time was late; the dark forces of invasion had almost done their ignorant work of annihilation. To the field then! With notebook and pencil, record, record, record. Rescue from historylessness all languages still living, all cultures. Each is precious, unique, irreplaceable. . . .” Brady quotes these verses by the most zealous of all salvage ethnographers, John Peabody Harrington: “Give not, give not the yawning grave its plunder, / Save, save the lore for future ages’ joy; / The stories full of beauty and of wonder / The songs more pristine than the songs of Troy, / The ancient speech forever to be banished – / Lore that tomorrow to the grave goes down! / All other thought from our horizon banish, / Let any sacrifice our labor crown” (Brady 1999:52; see further Walsh 1976).

<sup>39</sup> Stevenson 1915. She writes in tones that recall those of Boas’s pupils (1915:58-59): “That [the guslar] is a relic of the past cherished only by a few individuals who recognize the importance of this messenger of an older time, is regrettable. The many pass on unattentive to the sensitive melody of his compositions, or to the significance which these compositions may bear to the folklorist, the ethnologist, and the musician.” Because her article appears in the same issue of the *American Anthropologist* as A. Kroeber 1915, it is at least conceivable that Parry encountered it in his student days.

<sup>40</sup> On the use of the phonograph in ethnography, see Shelemay 1991, Jacknis 1996b, and Brady 1999; on film, Heider 1976:espec. 16-45.

<sup>41</sup> On Kroeber’s use of photography, see Jacknis 1996a; on his use of phonography, Brady 1999:66, where the early Americanists’ study of what they called folklore is well emphasized; on his use of film, see note 42 below, but add the observation by Ira Jacknis (personal communication, 1 November 2000) that Kroeber himself did not make the films, but paid to have them produced.

that cost posterity the films of Ishi: they were stored too near a source of heat in the University of California museum and were destroyed (1976:128-29). But according to Ira Jacknis, the curator of the Ishi exhibit for the Hearst Museum of Anthropology at Berkeley, museum records place the destruction of the film only before 1928. Though it is purely a matter of speculation, it is at least possible that the film was screened in public during Parry's years there.<sup>42</sup> On his own Yugoslav salvage expeditions, Parry, too, sought out the most up-to-date technology. For example, his film—he called it a *kino*—of Yugoslav singer Avdo Medjedović (1935) was among the earliest ethnographic films, and its importance in this regard has been seriously underestimated.<sup>43</sup> The use of film in the field was pioneered by American ethnographers.

But his phonographic work was even more innovative. Here I quote from the description of Mitchell and Nagy:

As late as the mid-1930s, no one had collected songs of this sort in what might be regarded as a natural way, that is, without artificial breaks necessitated by the demands of the limited recording technology available. To this end, Parry commissioned Sound Specialties Company of Waterbury, Connecticut, to prepare a recording device for him consisting of two turntables connected by a toggle switch. The careful back-and-forth alternation of the turntables allowed the normal time limit of several minutes of recording on a twelve-inch disk to be expanded virtually infinitely (2000:x).<sup>44</sup>

---

<sup>42</sup> Jacknis (personal communication, 1 November 2000) doubts that Kroeber screened the films publicly or for his students; he suggests that a likelier influence for Parry may have been Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922). On the scanty efforts in ethnographic film before 1922, see Heider 1976:19-20.

<sup>43</sup> On Parry's term *kino*, see Mitchell and Nagy 2000:vii. Even among American anthropologists, ethnographic film got off to a slow start. Boas, not at first appreciating the potential of Flaherty's innovations, did not come to film until 1929. The collaborative film work of Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson in Bali, which represented a major advance in ethnographic method, was not to be published until the early 1950s (Jacknis, personal communication, 1 November 2000; Heider 1976:19, 27-30). Thus, Kroeber's film of Ishi stands out as a striking early landmark, and Parry's film of Avdo Medjedović is not far behind.

<sup>44</sup> See further x-xii on the technological obstacles that Parry overcame in the field.

This innovation permitted Parry and his fellows to capture on record what Daniel Melia has recognized as a key property of the oral-formulaic method of composition, namely that it “allowed the singer to compose narratives of arbitrary length” through the recombination of traditional “words” guided by traditional knowledge (2000:731).<sup>45</sup> And having recognized Parry’s early association with Kroeber, we are now in a position to relate his technological triumph to an earlier one achieved by Franz Boas, which he would have come to know in lectures or discussions on field methods in ethnology. Ira Jacknis has described Boas’s innovation (1996b:204, italics added):

Boas was always concerned about the technical problems of these new recording devices, such as the inability of cameras of his time to take pictures of potlatches in a darkened house. Similarly, early phonographs could not accurately record rhythm, faint notes, or the sounds of the choral singing common on the Northwest Coast, and the wax cylinders could only record for short periods. During his 1893 World’s Fair session, *Boas overcame this limitation by recording a single song across two cylinders.*

Parry explicitly attributed part of the success of his theory of oral composition to his use of recent technology: “It is even more than likely that someone else would have done this before had it not been for the lack of the mechanical means: it has only been in the last few years that the science of electrical sound recording has given us an apparatus of such a sort that it can record songs of any length and in the large numbers needed before one can draw conclusions, and finally which can make records which are so good that the words on them can be accurately written down for the purpose of close study” (1971:470). With a certain inevitability, it also encouraged Parry’s comparison of Avdo with Homer himself, here described by his assistant, Albert Lord: “Avdo’s songs were longer and finer than any we had heard before. He could prolong one for days, and some of them reached fifteen or sixteen thousand lines. Other singers came, but none could equal Avdo, our Yugoslav Homer.”<sup>46</sup>

---

<sup>45</sup> On formulae as “words,” see Foley 1995:2-3, 7, and *passim*, 1999:65-88; on recombination, see Edwards 1983.

<sup>46</sup> Lord 1937; cited in Mitchell and Nagy 2000:xii.

## Epilogue

Given Kroeber's own professional interest in cultural transmission and diffusion, linguistics, and metrics and prosody, did he come to recognize Parry's work?

"L'Épithète Traditionnelle dans Homère," Parry's doctoral thesis (Paris, 1928), did not make an immediate impact on classical or broader humanistic studies, despite a flattering review by the eminent Homerist Pierre Chantraine (1929). With the exception of Martin Nilsson's favorable reception of the thesis in the opening chapter of *Homer and Mycenae* (1933), which Parry did live to see (he died in 1935), the Hellenic world did not notice the broad ramifications of his achievement, on the whole, until after the Second World War.<sup>47</sup> Although Kroeber was famous for a capacious memory and would have been proud of Parry's success in attaining a posting at Harvard University in only his second year of teaching, I found no evidence among Kroeber's papers on deposit at the University of California that clearly indicated any recognition of Parry—no correspondence to or from Parry, no apparent references to him in the files on metrics and prosody.<sup>48</sup>

Yet there is evidence that Kroeber did keep up with Parry's work at some level. Kroeber's son Karl, who teaches English and Native American studies at Columbia University, where his father got his start, remembers that the elder Kroeber spoke about Parry's discoveries in "the forties or fifties"<sup>49</sup>—precisely when Parry's writings were gaining recognition and instigating bitter quarrels among specialists and the broader community of comparatists; at a time too, I should add, when Kroeber himself was

---

<sup>47</sup> A. Parry 1971:xlili-xxlvii. One of the few earlier champions was George Calhoun, with whom Parry had studied at Berkeley. He cited his former pupil's thesis in his own study of repetitions in Homer (Calhoun 1933; A. Parry 1971:lxix-lxxii). Kroeber knew Calhoun—at a minimum—in the latter's capacity as secretary of the Faculty Senate Editorial Committee (University of California, Bancroft Library, Kroeber Papers, Incoming Correspondence), and although it is a good guess that they had occasion to discuss Parry, there is no documentary evidence to this effect.

<sup>48</sup> The solitary hint in the Kroeber papers of the scholar's recognition of Parry was a bibliographical notation of volume one of *Serbocroatian Heroic Songs*. Writing down the editors, Kroeber only underlines Milman Parry, though not "ed. & tr. by Albert Lord, transcr. by Béla Bartók." University of California, Bancroft Library, Kroeber Papers, files on "Meter, Rhythm," microfilm reel 164, frame 5.

<sup>49</sup> Karl Kroeber, personal communication, 10 September 2000.

surveying metrics and prosody for his own teaching.<sup>50</sup> There is further evidence that Kroeber knew and admired his former pupil—though mysteries still envelop it. When his grandson Paul Kroeber, now a specialist in Salish language and society, was departing for college in the 1970s, he selected from his grandfather’s library a number of books that he thought he could use at school. One item in particular caught his eye. He took down from the shelves a set of Homer’s works, the Allen and Monro edition from the Oxford Classical Texts series. As he progressed in his studies, Paul came to recognize the special significance of these books from Alfred Kroeber’s collection: the inside flyleaf of the first volume was inscribed, in red ink, “Milman Parry.” The text itself was annotated by its first owner, with phrases in certain passages underscored, struck through, or circled with solid or dotted lines, and an arcane system of numerals and brackets recording his observations on phraseology and meter, also in various colors. How Kroeber came upon these books remains a mystery to his grandson, and it will probably remain so to us—there is no presentation message or other clue to provenance, save a bookseller’s notation at the upper righthand corner of the inside flyleaf, just above the name: “4 vols 4<sup>00</sup>.” Kroeber had apparently added annotations of his own on slips of white paper left between certain pages, tables of statistics on prosody, in fact, that closely resemble similar notes to be found among his papers on deposit in the Bancroft Library in Berkeley. The books themselves remain in the personal collection of Paul Kroeber at Bloomington, Indiana.<sup>51</sup>

We can locate, then, or begin to do so at least, one tradition from which Parry emerged. This was the Americanist tradition of anthropology represented at the University of California by the most influential pupil of Franz Boas, A. L. Kroeber. It is a tradition on which Parry drew in his account of Homer’s art of epic composition and that is in fact thriving to this day, in broad projects of cultural comparison, in the study of performance in

---

<sup>50</sup> Though he retired from the University of California in 1946, he did return from various visiting professorships around the country to teach there occasionally. On one such occasion, he taught a course in metrics and prosody; his notes are in the file on “Meter, Rhythm” (see n. 48).

<sup>51</sup> The above description of the books is based on photocopies of selected pages that Paul Kroeber kindly supplied to me; I repeat my thanks to him. However, the description here is incomplete; Parry’s Homer awaits fuller description.

verbal art, and in the continuing debate among anthropologists on the status of culture as an analytical category.<sup>52</sup>

*University of Iowa*

### References

- Barnard 2000                    Alan Barnard. *History and Theory in Anthropology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bennett 1998                    John W. Bennett. "A. L. Kroeber and the Concept of Culture as Superorganic." In his *Classic Anthropology: Critical Essays, 1944-1996*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction. pp. 259-85.
- Boas 1974                        Franz A. Boas. *Franz Boas Reader: The Shaping of American Anthropology, 1883-1911*. Ed by George W. Stocking, Jr. New York: Basic Books. Rpt. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982.
- Brady 1999                      Erika Brady. *A Spiral Way: How the Phonograph Changed Ethnography*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi.
- Buckley 1996                    Thomas Buckley. "The Little History of Pitiful Events: The Epistemological and Moral Contexts of Kroeber's California Ethnology." In Stocking 1996:257-97.
- Bynum 1974                      David E. Bynum. *Four Generations of Oral Literary Studies at Harvard University*. Cambridge, MA: Center for the Study of Oral Literature.
- Calhoun 1933                    George M. Calhoun. "Homeric Repetitions." *University of California Publications in Classical Philology*, 12:1-25.
- Calhoun 1935                    \_\_\_\_\_. "The Art of Formula in Homer—EPEA PTEROENTA." *Classical Philology*, 30:215-27.

---

<sup>52</sup> In preparing this essay, I received generous help from Ira Jacknis, Kathryn Klar, Daniel Melia, and the staff of the Doe and Bancroft libraries at the University of California, Berkeley; from Erika Brady, David Depew, and June Helm; and from Karl Kroeber and Paul Kroeber. I am also grateful for research funding from the Arts and Humanities Initiative and Old Gold Summer Fellowship program at Iowa.

- Chantraine 1929 Pierre Chantraine. "Sur un trait du style homérique." *Revue de Philologie*, 55:294-300.
- Darnell 1990 Regna Darnell. "Franz Boas, Edward Sapir and the Americanist Text Tradition." *Historiographia Linguistica*, 17:129-44.
- Darnell 2001 \_\_\_\_\_. *Invisible Genealogies: A History of Americanist Anthropology*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- de Lamberterie 1997 Charles de Lamberterie. "Milman Parry et Antoine Meillet." In *Létoublon* 1997:9-22.
- Edwards 1983 Carol L. Edwards. "The Parry-Lord Theory Meets Operational Structuralism." *Journal of American Folklore*, 96:151-69.
- Foley 1988 John M. Foley. *The Theory of Oral Composition: History and Methodology*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. Rpt. 1992.
- Foley 1995 \_\_\_\_\_. *The Singer of Tales in Performance*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Foley 1999 \_\_\_\_\_. *Homer's Traditional Art*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Gibson and Rowe 1961 Ann J. Gibson and John H. Rowe, compilers. "A Bibliography of the Publications of Alfred Louis Kroeber." *American Anthropologist*, 63:1060-87.
- Heider 1976 Karl G. Heider. *Ethnographic Film*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Hymes 1983 Dell Hymes. "Alfred Louis Kroeber: Linguistic Anthropologist." In his *Essays in the History of Linguistic Anthropology*. Amsterdam: Benjamins. pp. 245-72. [Reproduced, with corrections, from *Language*, 37 (1961): 1-28.]
- Jacknis 1996a Ira Jacknis. "Alfred Kroeber and the Photographic Representation of California Indians." *American Indian Culture and Research Journal*, 20:15-32.
- Jacknis 1996b \_\_\_\_\_. "The Ethnographic Object and the Object of Ethnology in the Early Career of Franz Boas." In *Stocking* 1996:185-214.

- Koepping 1995 Klaus-Peter Koepping. "Enlightenment and Romanticism in the Work of Adolf Bastian: The Historical Roots of Anthropology in the Nineteenth Century." In *Fieldwork and Footnotes: Studies in the History of European Anthropology*. Ed. by Han F. Vermeulen and Arturo Alvarez Roldán. London: Routledge. pp. 75-91.
- A. Kroeber 1915 Alfred L. Kroeber. "Eighteen Professions." *American Anthropologist*, 17:283-88.
- A. Kroeber 1917 \_\_\_\_\_. "The Superorganic." *American Anthropologist*, 19:163-213.
- A. Kroeber 1920 \_\_\_\_\_. "Totem and Taboo: An Ethnologic Psychoanalysis." *American Anthropologist*, 22:48-55.
- A. Kroeber 1923 \_\_\_\_\_. *Anthropology*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company.
- A. Kroeber 1936 \_\_\_\_\_. "So-called Social Science." *Journal of Social Philosophy*, 1:317-40.
- A. Kroeber 1944 \_\_\_\_\_. *Configurations of Culture Growth*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- A. Kroeber 1952 \_\_\_\_\_. *The Nature of Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- A. Kroeber and Kluckhohn 1952 \_\_\_\_\_ and Clyde Kluckhohn. *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions*. Papers of the Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, 47, no. 1. Cambridge, MA: Peabody Museum.
- A. Kroeber and Waterman 1920 \_\_\_\_\_ and Thomas T. Waterman. *Source Book in Anthropology*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- T. Kroeber 1970 Theodora Kroeber. *Alfred Kroeber: A Personal Configuration*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Kuper 1999 Adam Kuper. *Culture: The Anthropologists' Account*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Latacz 1979 Joachim Latacz. "Tradition und Neuerung in der Homerforschung: Zur Geschichte der Oral poetry-Theorie." In *Homer: Tradition und Neuerung*. Ed. by Joachim



- Latacz. *Wege der Forschung*, 463. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft. pp. 25-44.
- Létoublon 1997      Françoise Létoublon, ed. *Hommage à Milman Parry: Le style formulaire de l'épopée Homérique et la théorie de l'oralité poétique*. Amsterdam: Gieben.
- Lloyd Jones 1992      Hugh Lloyd Jones. Reply to letters. *New York Review of Books*, 39.9 [May 14]:52.
- Lord 1937      Albert B. Lord. "Across Montenegro Searching for Gusle Songs." Unpub. typescript. Harvard University. Milman Parry Collection of Oral Literature.
- Lorimer 1950      Hilda L. Lorimer. *Homer and the Monuments*. London: Macmillan.
- Lowie 1936      Robert H. Lowie, ed. *Essays in Anthropology Presented to A. L. Kroeber in Celebration of his Sixtieth Birthday: June 11, 1936*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Melia 2000      Daniel F. Melia. "Oral Theory." In *Medieval Folklore: An Encyclopedia of Myths, Legends, Tales, Beliefs, and Customs*. Vol. 2. Edited by Carl Lindahl, John McNamara, and John Lindow. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO. pp. 730-34.
- Mitchell and  
Nagy 2000      Stephen Mitchell and Gregory Nagy. "Introduction to the Second Edition." In Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales*. 2nd edition. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. pp. vii-xxix.
- Morris 1986      Ian Morris. "The Use and Abuse of Homer." *Classical Antiquity*, 5:81-138.
- Morris 2000      \_\_\_\_\_. *Archaeology as Cultural History: Words and Things in Iron Age Greece*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Murray 1994      Stephen O. Murray. *Theory Groups and the Study of Language in North America: A Social History*. Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- A. Parry 1971      Adam Parry. "Introduction." In M. Parry 1971:ix-lxii.
- M. Parry 1971      Milman Parry. *The Making of Homeric Verse: The Collected Papers of Milman Parry*. Ed. by Adam Parry. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Peradotto 1997 John Peradotto. "Homer, Parry and the Meaning of Tradition." In *Létoublon* 1997:23-31.
- Sapir 1917 Edward Sapir. "Do We Need a 'Superorganic'?" *American Anthropologist*, 19:441-47.
- Sapir and A. Kroeber 1984 Edward Sapir and Alfred L. Kroeber. *The Sapir-Kroeber Correspondence: Letters between Edward Sapir and A. L. Kroeber 1905-1925*. Ed. by Victor Golla. Berkeley: Survey of California and Other Indian Languages, University of California.
- Schein 1997 Seth Schein. "Milman Parry and the Literary Interpretation of Homeric Poetry." In *Létoublon* 1997:275-81.
- Shelemay 1991 Kay K. Shelemay. "Recording Technology, the Record Industry, and Ethnomusicological Scholarship." In *Comparative Musicology and Anthropology of Music: Essays on the History of Ethnomusicology*. Ed. by Bruno Nettl and Philip V. Bohlman. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. pp. 277-92
- Sherratt 1990 Elizabeth S. Sherratt. "'Reading the Texts': Archaeology and the Homeric Question." *Antiquity*, 64:807-24.
- Slatkin 1991 Laura M. Slatkin. *The Power of Thetis: Allusion and Interpretation in the Iliad*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Stevenson 1915 Beatrice Stevenson. "The Gusle Singer and His Songs." *American Anthropologist*, 17:58-68.
- Steward 1973 Julian H. Steward. *Alfred Kroeber*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Stocking 1968 George W. Stocking. *Race, Culture, and Evolution: Essays in the History of Anthropology*. New York: Free Press.
- Stocking 1977 \_\_\_\_\_. "The Aims of Boasian Ethnography: Creating the Materials for Traditional Humanistic Scholarship." *History of Anthropology Newsletter*, 4, ii:4-5.
- Stocking 1996 \_\_\_\_\_, ed. *Volksgeist as Method and Ethic: Essays on Boasian Ethnography and the German Anthropological Tradition*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press.

- Thoresen 1971 Timothy H. H. Thoresen. "A. L. Kroeber's Theory of Culture: The Early Years." Unpub. Ph.D. diss., University of Iowa.
- University of California 1921 University of California. *Schedule and Directory, August-December 1921* and *Schedule and Directory*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- University of California 1922 \_\_\_\_\_. *Schedule and Directory, August-December 1922* and *Schedule and Directory*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Walsh 1976 Jane M. Walsh. *John Peabody Harrington: The Man and His California Indian Fieldnotes*. Ballena Press Anthropological Papers, 6. Ramona, CA: Ballena Press.

## **Personal Favor and Public Influence: Arete, Arsinoë II, and the *Argonautica***

Anatole Mori

This interdisciplinary study explores the connection between the Ptolemaic monarchy and the Phaeacian episodes in Homer's *Odyssey* and the *Argonautica* of Apollonius Rhodius. In particular, I am interested in what the epic representation of the Phaeacian queen Arete can tell us about the political influence of Arsinoë II Philadelphus, ruler of Egypt with Ptolemy II in the third century B.C.E. The close relation between Alexandrian poetry and court politics makes it likely that the portrait of Arete alludes to Arsinoë's reputation as a powerful voice in Ptolemy's administration.

### **Homer, Apollonius, and the Ptolemies**

In the first half of the third century B.C.E. Apollonius studied and worked in the Royal Library of Alexandria. He wrote numerous poems as well as scholarly monographs, held the position of head librarian, and served as the royal tutor of Ptolemy III Euergetes, the son of Ptolemy II and his first wife, Arsinoë I. His only extant work is the *Argonautica*, an epic that recounts the travels of Jason and the heroes who recover the golden fleece after sailing on the Argo from Thessaly to the kingdom of Aeëtes on the edge of the Black Sea. Books 1 and 2 describe the voyage east, Book 3 focuses on Jason's meetings with Aeëtes and his daughter Medea, and Book 4, with which we are primarily concerned, narrates the return to Greece.

In his 1912 commentary, Mooney observed that the Homeric epics "constitute in the truest sense the *πηγή καὶ ἀρχή* ["fount and origin"] of the *Argonautica*" (13). It is certainly true that appreciation of the *Argonautica* entails familiarity with Homeric narrative, vocabulary, and modes of expression. Echoes of Homer resound throughout the poem, as Apollonius reworks and adapts the archaic material. Yet the *Argonautica* is

hardly a traditional oral epic, or even an oral-derived text like the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey* (Foley 1990:6). Passages from one or more versions of the written poem may have been performed by Apollonius in public,<sup>1</sup> but it is evident that our poet did not compose in performance, and that he wrote the *Argonautica* largely for a literate audience—that is, to be read (aloud) in private.<sup>2</sup> Apollonius viewed epic poetry from the perspective of a textual critic, with this kind of criticism having begun only recently, under Aristotle (Thomas 1992:92, Nagy 1996:121-27). At the Library of Alexandria Apollonius had access to numerous Homeric papyri of various degrees of “reliability.” Holdings in the Library, acquired from booksellers in Athens and Rhodes, would have included commercial papyri (*koinai*, *demodeis*, *eikaioterai*) and city-texts (*politikai*), together with the recensions of individual critics.<sup>3</sup> From these various and multiform manuscripts the Alexandrian critics sought to establish an original, authentic edition of Homer.<sup>4</sup> Zenodotus, born c. 325 B.C.E., was the first Alexandrian *diorthôtes* (“corrector”) of Homeric texts, and we know that Apollonius published at least one monograph that was critical of his readings.<sup>5</sup> One may

---

<sup>1</sup> Green 1997:1-8. One of the two biographical “Lives” of Apollonius that were preserved with the manuscripts of the poem refers to a failed performance (*epideixis*) that allegedly caused Apollonius to emigrate to Rhodes, where he subsequently improved the poem.

<sup>2</sup> Knight 1995:3, n. 10; Beye 1982:25-26; Hunter 1989:42. See also Thomas 1992:9, 13, 93; cf. Gavrilov 1997, who argues that silent reading was widely practiced in the ancient Mediterranean world.

<sup>3</sup> Allen 1924:271-326; West 1967:11-18; Foley 1990:22-26; Nagy 1996:96-103. Although these “eccentric” or “wild” Homeric papyri were presumably modeled on standardized, post-Peisistratean Panathenaic text(s), they show added lines and considerable orthographic variation in comparison with extant medieval manuscripts and are dated, for the most part, prior to 150 B.C.E. Consistent orthography and *numerus versus* in papyri after 150 B.C.E. are attributed to an improved and expanded book trade and, possibly, the influence of the scholar Aristarchus (216-144 B.C.E.).

<sup>4</sup> Nagy 1996:149-53. Nagy has vigorously debated the existence of an authentic Homeric control text used by the Alexandrians to establish canonical readings. Rather than rejecting textual variants as deviations from a single original edition, Nagy argues for a “multitextual editorial framework” that is able to accommodate authenticated manuscript variants by dating them to a particular historical context.

<sup>5</sup> The monograph, now lost, was entitled *πρὸς Ζηνόδοτον* (“Against Zenodotus”). It should be noted that Apollonius succeeded Zenodotus as the head of the

view the *Argonautica* as a participant in this critical debate (Mooney 1912:50-51), an organic variant or rather a mannered extension of Homeric diction that was likely to reach a broader readership than the monographs or marginalia of contemporary commentaries. In John Miles Foley's terms, it is clear that Apollonius sought to confer denotative meaning on passages that, in a multiform, oral-traditional context, would have conveyed inherent meaning.<sup>6</sup>

Although Apollonius' compositional method differed from that of traditional epic poets, he wrote in an idiom that consciously emulated Homeric models even as it announced its own literary innovation. We might describe this process as the "reoralization" of written epic: the occasional repetition of a scene or a speech that recalls an oral paradigm or alludes to a specific Homeric parallel (Cairns 1998:65). The poet transposed oral features into written epic in order to retain the authenticity and immediacy of a traditional performance (Oesterreicher 1997:213-14). Like Callimachus, Apollonius followed the principle of *imitatio cum variatio*: the *Argonautica* employs Homeric constructions, but alters them with the expectation that readers would still recognize the original scenes and linguistic patterns (Giangrande 1976:271-76). So, for example, in Homer we consistently find the phrase *pukinon epos* ("wise word") between the medial caesura and bucolic diaeresis (Foley 1991:155). Apollonius, on the other hand, situates the phrase earlier in the line, divides it, and even inverts the word order (*epos in thumoi pukinon*, 4.111; *pukinon phasthai epos*, 4.1200). The long-debated phrase *epea pteroenta* ("winged words") provides another case in point (Martin 1989:30-32, Foley 1990:129-37). Oral poets would not necessarily have seen *epea pteroenta* as a detachable unit (Foley 1990:136), yet Apollonius certainly did, for he omits not only *epea pteroenta* in the *Argonautica*, but also any instance of *epos* in the nominative or accusative plural. Apollonius also maintains the semantic contrast between *epos* and *muthos* that is discussed in Richard Martin's 1984 study of Homeric speech acts. I will argue below that this differentiation between *epos* and *muthos* helps to clarify Arsinoë's role in the Ptolemaic administration.

---

Library (270-245 B.C.E.?). See further Pfeiffer 1968:146-48 and Fraser 1972:I, 320-35, 449-58.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Dowden 1996. Noting the difficulty of deriving extratextual meanings for a poem whose external (oral) tradition is largely lost, Dowden argues for the relative fixity of traditional epic and the perceptible influence of other examples of the Epic Cycle, such as the *Aithiopsis*, on the *Iliad*.

In order to understand more fully how these two terms function in the *Argonautica*, we must closely compare the narrative circumstances in which Arete speaks in both poems.<sup>7</sup> Both Homer and Apollonius idealize Arete, although their descriptions of an ideal queen differ in an important respect. The Homeric Arete publicly defends Odysseus, whereas in the *Argonautica* Arete helps Medea by speaking privately to Alcinous. In addition, Apollonius expands Alcinous' administrative role. The Homeric Alcinous governs with thirteen other rulers (*basileis*), but in the *Argonautica* Alcinous governs Phaeacia independently. It might therefore appear that Alcinous becomes more dominant in the later epic as Arete simultaneously becomes less authoritative, speaking privately to the king rather than before the assembled Phaeacians. However, Apollonius emphasizes Arete's status and authority by describing her speech as a semantically weighted *muthos*, in contrast to the lighter, generic *epos* of Alcinous.

By eliminating the Homeric council and streamlining the Phaeacian government, Apollonius simulates the Ptolemaic monarchy. Apollonius' reconfiguration of Arete's role is especially intriguing in light of the controversy over the influence of Arsinoë II Philadelphus. Arsinoë, called "une femme énergique et ambitieuse" by Bouché-Leclercq (1903:161-62), had returned to Egypt after the deaths of her previous husbands, Lysimachus and Ptolemy Ceraunus.<sup>8</sup> There she married her younger brother, Ptolemy II, and ruled with him for about eight years until her death in 270 B.C.E., roughly the time of the composition of the *Argonautica* (Hunter 1989:1-9). Whether the *Argonautica* was composed during Arsinoë's reign or at some point after her death and deification is of less importance to my argument than the recognition that, for Apollonius, the influence of an ideal queen was to be exercised from behind the throne, rather than publicly, in the manner of the Homeric Arete. Homer describes Arete as a conspicuous figure among the Phaeacians, who gaze after her as though she were a goddess (*Od.* 7.71-

---

<sup>7</sup> For a thorough analysis of both Phaeacian episodes, see Knight 1995:244-57 and Kyriakou 1995:156-68.

<sup>8</sup> Arsinoë's influence over the elderly Lysimachus was strongly implied by the execution of Agathocles, his eldest son by a previous marriage: his death would presumably have secured the political future of her own children (Pausanias 1.10.3-4; Justin, *Epitome* 17.1.4-6; Memnon, *FGrH* 3B 434.5-6). After the death of Lysimachus, Arsinoë married Ptolemy Ceraunus over the objections of her eldest son; Ceraunus soon murdered her younger sons (Justin, *Epitome* 24.3.1-8). On her arrival in Egypt Arsinoë was probably instrumental in the intrigue that led to the exile of Ptolemy II's first wife to Koptos (scholiast to Theocritus, *Idyll* 17.129). See Ogden 1999:59-62; 74, n. 44.

72). Although Arsinoë's prominent status as a cult figure in Egypt after her death is well documented,<sup>9</sup> the nature and extent of her power during her rule in Egypt continues to be debated.<sup>10</sup> For example, the Egyptian title *nsw-b'itj* ("King of Upper and Lower Egypt") was unusual for a queen and implies that Arsinoë's political sway exceeded customary expectations for royal consorts.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, the Athenian Chremonides noted that Ptolemy II continued to favor the common freedom of the Greeks "in accordance with the policy of his predecessors *and his sister*."<sup>12</sup> Some scholars have accordingly questioned evidence that discredits Arsinoë's official role in foreign policy.<sup>13</sup> As I shall show, the circumstances of Arete's *muthos* (what she says, where she speaks, whom she addresses, and the effect her speech has) suggest how Arsinoë may have exercised her political power.

It may seem curious to connect epic directly with Ptolemaic politics, but recent work has shown that the *Argonautica* sheds more light on its contemporary context than scholars had previously believed. For example, Hunter has demonstrated that the Argonauts' worship of Homonoia ("social harmony") reflects Hellenistic cult practice (1995:19, n. 28), and that the conclusion of the poem alludes to Ptolemy's rightful control over Cyrene.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Rowlandson 1998:28-33. On Ptolemy's posthumous deification of Arsinoë as an Egyptian (as well as Greek) goddess, see Hölbl 2001:101-4; on her iconography, see Koenen 1993.

<sup>10</sup> Hazzard 2000:82-100, esp. 96-99. Pomeroy (1984:17-20) argues for Arsinoë's dominance, while the strongest proponent of the "weak" Arsinoë thesis is Burstein 1982.

<sup>11</sup> On Egyptian evidence, see Quaegebeur 1971:205-9, 1988:45. See Hauben 1982:espec. 114-19 and 126 on her ties with Greek freedom; also Fraser 1972:I, 239-40. Hauben (1970:35-41, 63-67) addresses Arsinoë's well-known ties with Callicrates, commander of the Ptolemaic navy. The poets Posidippus, Hedyllus, and Callimachus celebrated Callicrates' dedication of the temple at Cape Zephyrion to Arsinoë -Aphrodite (Fraser 1972:I, 239-40).

<sup>12</sup> *Syllecta Inscriptionum Graecarum* 434/35= *Inscriptiones Graecae* II, 687; emphasis mine. Burstein (1982:208) argues that the reference to Arsinoë is purely honorific and signals her cult status rather than an actual role in the formation of public policy.

<sup>13</sup> Hazzard 2000:95-96; Pomeroy 1984:17-20; Rowlandson 1998:26.

<sup>14</sup> Hunter 1993:153 notes that the frame of the poem is "explicitly political" and that the end of the *Argonautica* supports Ptolemy rather than Magas as the rightful ruler of Cyrene. Callimachus the Cyrenian, on the other hand, praised Magas in his hymns; see Laronde 1987:362-70.



As court poetry, the *Argonautica* could be expected to touch on contemporary issues, and encomia for the Ptolemies were obviously encouraged. The *Argonautica* is thus as politically relevant and evocative as Callimachus' *Hymn to Zeus* or Theocritus' *Idyll* 17. In contrast to these poems, however, which refer openly to the Ptolemies, the *Argonautica* veils political references in allusion. The epic framework allowed the poet to place sensitive references at a politically safe remove.

Such caution might well be expected for poetry supported by royal patronage, and the Ptolemies' incestuous marriage made them vulnerable to poetic criticism.<sup>15</sup> The Ptolemies sought to make a virtue of their blood kinship by rationalizing their marriage as a *hieros gamos* akin to that of Zeus and Hera, an association that is made explicit by Theocritus (*Id.* 17.131-32).<sup>16</sup> The idealized marriage of the epic rulers Alcinous and Arete was similarly reinforced by close kinship. Homer describes Arete as Alcinous' niece (*Od.* 7.53-68), and Hesiod regarded Arete as the sister of Alcinous, according to an Alexandrian scholiast.<sup>17</sup> As Hunter has shown, Alcinous and Arete themselves were understood by the Alexandrians to be analogues of Zeus and Hera.<sup>18</sup> The marriage of the Ptolemies was therefore modeled on a divine marriage that linked them in turn with the rulers of Phaeacia.

The political force of this extended connection between the Ptolemies and the Phaeacians is not entirely clear. Would the allusion to the Phaeacians have been recognized as flattery or criticism of the Ptolemies? Apollonius depicted the ideal queen as an advisor interceding privately on behalf of her favorites, not as a figure who expressed her own opinions publicly. One might therefore object that Apollonius intended the fictional

<sup>15</sup> Sotades of Maroneia unwisely alluded to the union of Zeus and Hera in order to criticize the Ptolemies; this lampoon led to his imprisonment and execution ([Plutarch] *Moralia* 11A, Hegesander *apud* Athenaeus 14.620f-21a). See Cameron 1995:18, n. 100.

<sup>16</sup> On poetic references to the royal marriage, see Bouché-Leclercq 1903:163 with n. 2. On the dates of the deification and marriage, see Hazzard 2000:89-90.

<sup>17</sup> Ἡσίοδος δὲ ἀδελφὴν Ἀλκινόου τὴν Ἀρήτην ὑπέλαβεν (fr. 222 Merkelbach-West). I thank the anonymous reader for bringing this reference to my attention.

<sup>18</sup> Hunter 1993:161-62. See Hazzard 2000:91-92 on the practice of flattering kings by praising Zeus.

monarchy as a corrective model,<sup>19</sup> and that the idealized portrait of a discreet Arete implicitly criticizes an excessive display of queenly power. If, on the other hand, Arsinoë was indeed celebrated for her tactful influence, we could confirm that the portrait of Arete was a poetic mirror intended not to catch the real queen, but to compliment her discretion. In the absence of additional evidence it is difficult to rule out the possibility of cleverly disguised political censure, but it should be pointed out that similar objections might well be raised with respect to all Ptolemaic encomia.

While we cannot determine the precise extent of Arsinoë's power through an examination of epic poetry, we may say that Arete's behavior implies that Arsinoë's policies and recommendations were biased towards her personal favorites. Apollonius' representation of Arete's influence would therefore be in accord with R. A. Hazzard's assessment that Arsinoë was widely perceived as powerful, regardless of her documented responsibilities in the administration.<sup>20</sup> Thus, while this study concentrates on the evidence offered by the poems themselves, the political ramifications of the Phaeacian episode remain an important consideration. After examining the division of labor between Alcinous and Arete in both poems, I address the revision of Arete's public role in the later epic. How exactly was Arete's hidden influence idealized as the bureaucratic counterweight of Alcinous' publicly demonstrated authority? As we shall see, both Alcinous and Arete are praised for their respective contributions to the resolution of the conflict between the Argonauts and the Colchians. Of critical importance, however, is the chorus of Phaeacian women who publicly commend Arete for her disclosure of Alcinous' *pukinon epos*. The Phaeacian episode thus presents a sympathetic view of the queen's efforts on behalf of her favorites. Apollonius enlists a traditional Homeric episode in order to comment on the hidden channels of power in the Ptolemaic court.

---

<sup>19</sup> Claiming friendship with both Carthage and Rome in 252 B.C.E., Ptolemy offered to mediate between them, no doubt to avoid involvement in a costly war (Appian, *Sikelikê* 1). Ptolemy's generous neutrality in the West may have been necessitated by his diplomatic isolation in the East (Hauben 1982:107).

<sup>20</sup> Hazzard 2000:99: "the perception of Arsinoë's power was common to those persons outside the court during Ptolemy II's reign . . . Arsinoë II had extraordinary status, and men identified that status with power, especially after the king promoted the cult of Arsinoë Philadelphus throughout his realm in 268."

### **Arete in the *Odyssey***

The circumstances of Odysseus' arrival on Scheria are well known, but I would like to begin by reviewing those aspects that will prove significant for comparison with the Phaeacian episode in the *Argonautica*. We learn from Athena that Alcinous and all the Phaeacians hold Arete in high esteem. She resolves the quarrels of those she favors, even quarrels between men, which would not normally fall within the purview of women (*Od.* 7.73-74). Athena adds that in general the Phaeacians are hostile to strangers and avoid human contact, although they are skilled sailors (7.30-33). Because the appearance of Odysseus is likely to create conflict, Arete's favor and her talents as peacemaker will be critical for persuading the Phaeacians to help him return to Ithaca.

Odysseus enters the palace invisibly and appears as he kneels in supplication before Arete. The elderly counselor Echeneus is the first to recover, and he quickly reminds Alcinous of the sanctity of suppliants. This observation seems to be made not simply for Alcinous, but for the benefit of all the Phaeacians, who are presumably shocked by the sudden appearance of a stranger. Arete recognizes his clothes as her own handiwork (7.233-39), yet refrains from questioning him until after the other Phaeacian chiefs have departed. She does not demand a public explanation, but waits to consult with her guest in private. Arete also quietly advises Odysseus to guard the gift chest as he sleeps on the return voyage to Ithaca (8.442-45). Odysseus is a stranger, a *xeinos*, but he is also Arete's suppliant, and she therefore shields him from public scrutiny and encourages him to be wary of the arrogant members of her own community.<sup>21</sup> Thus, the Homeric Arete is a discreet and tactful strategist, sensitive to issues of privacy. She will display similar qualities in the *Argonautica* when she arranges for the secret wedding of Jason and Medea.

Arete further supports Odysseus by speaking publicly on his behalf. In Book 11, when he pauses in his description of his encounter with the queens of the past in the underworld, Arete turns to the stunned Phaeacians and asks: "How does this man seem to you now, in looks and stature and even temperament?" (11.336-37). Odysseus is her personal guest, she says, but each of them shares in the responsibility for his proper treatment (11.338). Having claimed Odysseus as her *xeinos*, Arete calls on all the Phaeacians to emulate her actions by offering gifts. In Book 8 Alcinous

---

<sup>21</sup> On the hostile Phaeacians, see Ross 1969, Redfield 1983:240-42, and Carnes 1993.

directed the Phaeacian chiefs to be generous to Odysseus, and Arete here publicly voices support of her husband.

Arete's speech is seconded by Echeneus (11.344-46):

Friends, our wise queen speaks not wide of the mark,  
nor does she fall short of our expectations. Do be persuaded.  
The deed and the word (*ergon te epos te*) depend on Alcinous.<sup>22</sup>

Echeneus praises Arete, but his speech directs the attention of the audience to Alcinous, whose authority is now underscored with the statement that “the deed and the word depend on Alcinous.” Alcinous takes his cue and announces that all the Phaeacians are responsible for providing Odysseus with gifts and an escort home, adding that his own position necessarily entails greater responsibility (11.352-53): “His safe conduct will concern all our men, yet me most of all, for mine is the authority in the community.” Alcinous here declares that all will participate in the escort, and then claims that his authority demands greater concern for the stranger's safety. This statement reverses the emphasis of Arete's statement at 11.338, where she named Odysseus as her personal *xeinós*, and then called for contributions from all the Phaeacians. Arete's role as hostess is lifted into the public sphere by Alcinous' explicit reference to his authority. Alcinous thus transforms Arete's private responsibility for her *xeinós* into support for his own political standing.

### **Arete in the *Argonautica***

In *Argonautica* 4, Apollonius expands on the Homeric distinction between Arete's private concern for suppliants and Alcinous' sense of his public responsibility and status (Kyriakou 1995:157-58). He portrays them as ideal, benevolent rulers whose administrative roles seem to be determined by their respective genders. Alcinous is a diplomatic ruler concerned with the resolution of strife (*Arg.* 4.1010). He is more attentive than Arete to the complexity of the threat posed by the conflict between the Argonauts and the Colchians. By contrast, Arete is swayed by compassion for Medea, and adopts clandestine means to protect her. She uses her influence in private counsel with Alcinous, who sympathizes with Medea but is not willing to provoke international conflict on her behalf (4.1073-1109). Out of consideration for Arete, Alcinous divulges his plan to allow Medea's marital

---

<sup>22</sup> All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

status to decide the issue. Arete is therefore able to arrange for a secret wedding the night before the Colchians are informed of the judgment in the public assembly.

Let us consider these events in greater detail. The Phaeacians welcome the Argonauts to their island as if they were their own children (4.997). The newcomers are not threatened by arrogant Phaeacians, but rather by the Colchian army that is still in pursuit of Medea. Medea implores Arete to protect her (4.1011-13), and the description of her supplication clearly recalls Odysseus' appeal to Arete (*Od.* 7.142).<sup>23</sup> In both stories, Arete is asked to intercede with the Phaeacians on behalf of her guests.<sup>24</sup> Medea tries to justify her actions, noting that she left home only under the influence of *Atê*, the divine folly that leads mortals to ruin (*Arg.* 4.1016-17). She claims that she did not willingly run away with strange men, but was compelled to flee out of fear (4.1021). She points out that she is still a virgin, and concludes by begging the queen to pity her and to use her influence over her husband (4.1025-26).

Arete's audience with Medea prepares us for her subsequent conversation with Alcinous in the privacy of their bedroom (4.1068-71):

Thus within the house in the city, as in time past  
Lord Alcinous and the most revered wife of Alcinous  
Arete deliberated about the maiden  
in their bed in the dark. . . .

The phrase "as in time past" implies not only their customary deliberations, but their customary preparations for bed as it was described "in time past" in Homer. We recall that Arete had initially waited to speak with Odysseus after the departure of the chiefs. The description of the evening then draws to a close with the following passage (*Od.* 7.344-47):

So then long-suffering noble Odysseus lay down to sleep  
in a fitted bed in the echoing colonnade.  
But Alcinous went to bed inside his lofty home  
and his lady wife made the marriage bed beside him.

---

<sup>23</sup> Medea's reluctance to trust a third party recalls Odysseus' mistrust of his Phaeacian hosts (Most 1989).

<sup>24</sup> Odysseus addresses Arete primarily (1.146), though he also addresses her husband and the other guests at the banquet (7.147-48). Odysseus asks all the Phaeacians to help him (7.151), but Medea appeals only to Arete, although she also demands help from all the Argonauts.

In contrast to Homeric epic, which does not describe private conversations between Alcinous and Arete, Apollonius brings his audience into the royal bedroom to reveal Arete as she exercises her influence over her husband just as Medea had requested.<sup>25</sup> The passage might appear voyeuristic, inasmuch as the audience visualizes the couple in the darkened bedroom. Yet, the poet avoids any hint of physical intimacy, and there is no hint of a Hera-like seduction in Arete's speech (*Arg.* 4.1073-95). Apollonius essentially substitutes this conversation for the Homeric Arete's public defense of Odysseus.<sup>26</sup> In fact, there is no reference in the *Argonautica* to an assembly or council of Phaeacian nobles, nor is there an equivalent for the counselor Echeneus. The king will simply announce his decision to the assembled Argonauts, Colchians, and Phaeacians, flanked by an elite corps of the army (4.1180-81). These Phaeacian *aristoi* apparently played no role in the deliberations, and their presence serves largely to remind the Colchians of the military strength behind Alcinous' decision.<sup>27</sup> Theocritus describes Ptolemy in similar terms at *Idyll* 17.93-94: "about him gather horsemen and shielded warriors in hosts, harnessed in flashing bronze" (tr. Gow 1952).

Arete begins her defense of Medea by reminding Alcinous that they have close ties with the neighboring Haemonians, whereas Aeëtes is far away and they know little about him (4.1073-77). She appeals to her husband's sense of fairness and political expedience, arguing that since they must choose sides in the matter, they ought to take the side of the Argonauts, who represent the interests of their neighbors.<sup>28</sup> The suggestion of a possible alliance with the Greeks contrasts with Homer's isolationist Phaeacians, and was probably due to the positive identification of Scheria (Drepane in the *Argonautica*) with Corcyra, which is not far off the coast of the mainland (Thucydides 1.25.4). Secondly, Arete recapitulates Medea's earlier speech in order to forestall the possible objection that the girl might be unworthy of their help. She notes Medea's pitiable suffering and shifts the blame for her misdeeds and misfortunes to *Atê* and human frailty (4.1077-83). The third portion of Arete's argument rests on pious obligation (4.1083-87). Jason has

---

<sup>25</sup> Hunter 1993:71: "Apollonius 'writes' this missing scene for us."

<sup>26</sup> The council of kings ( *basileis*) meets and feasts daily in the palace (7.95-99). Alcinous is preparing to meet with it when Nausicaa asks for permission to do the washing (6.53-55).

<sup>27</sup> Alcinous' confidence is due also to the "unbreakable oaths" the Colchians have sworn prior to his judgment (4.1205); see Byre 1997:73 and Fränkel 1968:577.

<sup>28</sup> See the scholiast's note on *Arg.* 4.982-92a.

sworn to marry Medea, so if they allow her to be taken he will necessarily compromise his oath. Finally, she closes with a reminder of the irrational passion to which fathers are particularly subject (4.1087-95). They must interfere, she argues, because Aeëtes would mistreat his daughter in the manner of other excessively jealous fathers. In sum, Arete claims that they must intervene on the grounds of sympathy, respect for the gods, and Phaeacian political ties.

Although Arete frames her argument according to what she sees as Phaeacian self-interest, she is willing to accept war as the price for the protection of Medea. Alcinous is sympathetic, but he is clearly more concerned for the international consequences of the decision (4.1098-1109):

“Arete, I could even use force to banish  
the Colchians, obliging the heroes for the sake of the girl,  
but I am apprehensive of dishonoring the straight judgment of Zeus;  
nor would it be a very good idea to treat Aeëtes lightly, as you suggest,  
since no one is more imperious than Aeëtes,  
and despite the distance he would willingly engage in war with Greece.  
Therefore it seems right to make a decision that will  
be best in the opinion of all men. I will not hide it from you:  
If she is still a virgin, I order that they take her back to her father.  
But if she shares the bed with her husband  
I will not separate her from her spouse, nor will I give their enemies  
her child, should she be carrying one in her womb.”

Rather than choosing to side with the Greeks in the event of a conflict, as Arete has advised, Alcinous wishes to make a decision that will avoid war. Arete’s allegiance to her Greek allies is commendable, but she lacks Alcinous’ dedication to peace. This difference seems to me to be of critical importance insofar as the poet seems to be describing (or prescribing) a division of labor in the royal administration: the queen is a strong lobbyist, but she is less concerned than the king to devise diplomatic solutions (Vian 1981:48). If, as I suggested earlier, the poet is commenting on the Ptolemaic monarchy, this distinction would imply that Arsinoë’s sympathy for her favorites similarly affected her foreign policy (Hauben 1982).

After the discussion, Alcinous immediately falls asleep (4.1110), and Arete secretly instructs her herald to tell Jason that he must marry Medea that night (4.1111-20). We should not judge Arete’s “deception” too harshly. While Vian describes this scene as a quotidian revision of Hera’s deception of Zeus (*Διὸς ἀπάτη*) in an anti-epic register (1981:ad 1072), we must remember that in contrast to Hera’s plot, Arete does not use sex as a distraction, and her plans do not contravene those of Alcinous. We have

seen that Alcinous intentionally revealed his judgment to Arete before it became public, although he could hardly fail to be aware of her partisanship. The fact that Alcinous falls asleep almost instantaneously after the discussion further suggests that he expects her to act, and leaves her ample opportunity to do so. The extent to which Alcinous knowingly colludes in the wedding is not made explicit, but there is no indication later in the poem that he is disturbed by Arete's intervention.<sup>29</sup> Nor is the wedding kept secret for long, since Hera immediately starts a rumor in order to spread the good news of the marriage to all the Phaeacians (4.1184-85). Thus, on the following morning, the crowd assembles not only to hear the judgment of Alcinous, but also to take part in the wedding celebration. The poet notes that one brings a ram and another a heifer, and that many others bring wine, robes, gold ornaments, and bridal gifts (4.1185-91). Their spontaneous generosity contrasts with the reluctance of the Homeric Phaeacians to provide gifts for Odysseus, and the abundant wealth of the kingdom evokes the *homonoia* that is characteristic of the idyllic rule of Alcinous and Arete in Apollonius (Vian 1974:16-17).<sup>30</sup> Despite, or perhaps more accurately, as a result of their conflicting spheres of interest (Medea's safety vs. diplomatic neutrality) the two rulers orchestrate a peaceful resolution.

### The *muthos* of Arete

I have argued up to this point that, in comparison with her portrait in the *Odyssey*, Arete's authority has been eclipsed in the *Argonautica*. Arete explains her concerns privately to Alcinous, but it is he who will speak authoritatively in the assembly. Alcinous is the ruling judge of the Phaeacians (4.1177-79): "In his hand he held the golden scepter of justice, with which many people decided the just settlements (*themistas*) in the city."<sup>31</sup> As in the *Odyssey*, "the deed and the word" seem to belong to Alcinous.

---

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Zeus' angry response to Hera's trickery at *Il.* 15.14-33.

<sup>30</sup> Note the Argonauts' dedication of a Temple to Homonoia (*Arg.* 2.718).

<sup>31</sup> Fränkel's 1961 OCT edition follows the mss. ᾧ ὑπο πολλοί for ᾧ ὑπο λαοί at line end. Cf. Hesiod, *Theogony* 84-87 on the just king: "The people (οἱ δέ τε λαοί) / all acknowledge him as he settles disputes / with straight justice. Speaking without hesitation / he would quickly and skillfully put an end to even a great conflict."



I do not believe, however, that the question of the respective responsibilities of Arete and Alcinous ends here. Arete does not speak publicly, but her contribution to the resolution is publicly acknowledged. During the wedding celebration, a chorus of nymphs joins Orpheus in singing and dancing. They spontaneously honor Hera for inspiring Arete to disclose the “wise word” of Alcinous. By assigning a role in the court intrigue to Hera, the nymphs reveal the divine motivation and sanction for Arete’s actions (4.1197-1200).<sup>32</sup>

Then sometimes  
they sang without him [Orpheus] swirling about in a circle,  
in your honor, Hera, for you gave Arete the idea  
of declaring the wise word [*pukinon epos*] of Alcinous.

The narrator is referring, of course, to the *pukinon epos* that is expressed by Alcinous in response to Arete’s *muthos* during the bedroom council (4.1096-97). The narrator uses the same phrase (*pukinon epos*) to describe Alcinous’ speech as Arete takes it to heart at the conclusion of their conversation (4.1111).<sup>33</sup> As we have seen, Arete then instructs her herald to tell Jason to marry Medea. This herald takes the *epos* of Alcinous, which has now become the *muthos* of Arete, to the Argonauts (4.1121-23): “His feet bore him swiftly from the hall, so that he might report the *muthos* of Arete to Jason.” Finally, when the Argonauts hear the *muthos*, they are delighted that the crisis is likely to be resolved without bloodshed (4.1126-27), since they have vowed to defend Medea by force if necessary (4.1053-57). *Muthos*, like *epos*, designates speech, yet Apollonius consistently uses the term *epos* to refer to the speech of Alcinous, and *muthos* to refer to Arete’s plans.

Apollonius employs *epos* and *muthos* approximately the same number of times (61 and 63 occurrences respectively), and it is not surprising that both terms also tend to occur more frequently in the last half of the poem, the two critical books after Medea joins the Argonauts. What is the force of the distinction between these two terms? Richard Martin’s study of the use of *epos* and *muthos* in the *Iliad* concludes that they refer to different types of

---

<sup>32</sup> Their praise is easily transferred to Arsinoë herself, given her ideological identification with Arete and the Olympian in her marriage as well as her cult titles. See Fraser 1972: I, 237-38.

<sup>33</sup> The phrase *pukinon epos* signifies a message whose import will profoundly alter the course of events if it is properly transmitted (Foley 1991:154-56).

speech acts.<sup>34</sup> Using terminology drawn from Prague school linguistics, Martin defines *epos* as the generic term, referring to brief speeches in which the emphasis falls on the message that is conveyed by the speaker. The private conversation between a husband and a wife, like that of Alcinous and Arete, would accordingly fall into the category of *epos*.<sup>35</sup> A *muthos*, by contrast, is heavily marked, bearing greater semantic weight across a narrower range of expression. It refers to an authoritative speech act that takes place in public, reflects the powerful position of the speaker, and leads to definitive action. Thus, the less weighted term *epos* may be used in place of *muthos*, while the reverse is never the case. *Muthos* inherently implies significant speech and, accordingly, we find that Apollonius qualifies the transparent, unmarked *epos* with adjectives roughly twice as often as he does *muthos* (see Table 1).

TABLE 1: Modifiers of *Epos* and *Muthos*

Rate of occurrence	Percentage
Adjectives	
<i>Epos</i> (25/61)	41%
<i>Muthos</i> (15/63)	24%
Pronominal adjectives	
<i>Epos</i> + <i>toion</i> (15/61)	25%
<i>Muthos</i> + <i>toion</i> (7/63)	11%
Possessive, interrogative pronouns	
<i>Epos</i> + <i>emoisi</i> (1/61)	1.6%
<i>Muthos</i> + <i>hemeterous</i> , <i>teon</i> , <i>poion</i> (3/63)	4.7%
Totals	
<i>Epos</i> (41/61)	67%
<i>Muthos</i> (25/63)	39%

<sup>34</sup> Martin 1989:12-14, 22-26, 37-42. Martin's analysis focuses on the direct discourse of Achilles, but I consider his findings worth consideration in this context as well.

<sup>35</sup> Martin 1989:37-38. Apollonius uses *pukinon* ("wise," "well-constructed") to describe Alcinous' speech. This adjective distinguishes "the best kind of *epos*" (35). Cf. Nagy 1997:119-25 on the marginalization of *muthos* as a speech act in post-Homeric literature (e.g., Pindar).

The contrast between the marked *muthos* and the unmarked *epos* is pronounced during three episodes in particular: the assembly of the Lemnian women; the meeting of Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite; and Arete's speech to Alcinous. In all three of these scenes, *epos* emphasizes a speech *qua* verbal speech, whereas *muthos* is an important, authoritative plan that is verbally expressed and causes action that is critical to the plot. During the Lemnian assembly, the nurse Polyxo's plan to welcome the Argonauts is referred to as *muthos* (1.698). The attendant speeches of Hypsipyle and the people, on the other hand, are each called *epos* (1.699, 1.705, 1.714). Similarly, during the meeting of Hera and Athene with Aphrodite (3.1-110), Hera's description of her plan is called a *muthos* (3.24, 34-35), which contrasts with Athena's more general term for the speech (*epos*) she will make to Aphrodite (3.35).

The contrast between these two terms is most strongly felt at 4.1096-97. Apollonius calls Alcinous' response to Arete an *epos*, and describes her speech to him with the plural of *muthos*: "His mind delighted in the *muthoi* of his wife, and he made the following *epos*."<sup>36</sup> Apollonius highlights the contrast between the words by juxtaposing them on opposite sides of the caesura. This opposition suggests the different perspectives of the two speakers. Alcinous is engaged in a private conversation, an *epos*, with his wife. But for Arete, who does not speak in the assembly, her appeal to her husband is marked as political, public discourse: it is the dramatic equivalent of Arete's address to the Phaeacians in *Odyssey* 11. The royal status of the speakers and the politically charged content of their discussion evidently complicate the distinction between private, marital *epos* and public *muthos*.

Although the *muthos* of Arete takes place in the bedroom, it commands the attention of the (literate) audience of the poem just as an oral traditional scene involving a public speech would have done. The written composition of the *Argonautica* may well have affected or rather created a narratological distinction between public and private speech. We find a much higher incidence of indirect discourse, for example, in Apollonius than in Homer.<sup>37</sup> Oral epic favored direct discourse and used it to dramatic effect in the public performance of the poem, as the poet publicly recited speeches framed by narrative contexts like an assembly. By contrast, indirect discourse hints at secrecy and hidden meaning, because the narrator only

---

<sup>36</sup> τοῦ δὲ φρένες ἰαίνοντο / ἧς ἀλόχου μύθοισιν, ἔπος δ' ἐπὶ τοῖον ἔειπεν. Apollonius repeats the *epos* phrase in a formulaic manner later in the poem (4.738), but in this instance the contrast with *muthos* is significant.

<sup>37</sup> On the extended use of indirect speech in written epic, see Hunter 1993:143-44. For other characteristics of written composition, see Hunter 1989:41-42.

paraphrases the speaker's actual words (Hunter 1993:143-45). Apollonius' audience witnesses the iterative regression of the private conversation first overheard in the royal bedroom. The narrator indirectly reports Arete's secret plan as she instructs the herald, who then relates both her plan and the counsel of Alcinous in still more abbreviated form to the Argonauts (4.1110-23). The secret, indirectly reported *muthos* of Arete is thus demonstrably as crucial for the resolution of the crisis as the publicly announced *epos* of Alcinous. It may even be said to steal its dramatic thunder, since the narrator does not bother to report Alcinous' *epos* at all, noting simply that he remained firm in his judgment and compelled the Colchians to accept his terms (4.1201-10). The public eloquence of kings and poets whose sweet *epea* can dissolve disputes and sorrows (Hesiod, *Theogony* 80-103) is thus measured against a written poetry, inspired and composed behind the scenes, in a bedroom or a library, and only later sung.

## Conclusion

Apollonius divides the Phaeacian monarchy into two branches: one that satisfies public expectations of justice and another that works indirectly and through hidden channels. On the one hand, the authority of Alcinous' *epos* inheres in its performance as a judgment; his public declaration enacts and confirms his juridical power over the Phaeacians, Argonauts, and Colchians alike. There is no need of an Echeneus to declare that "the deed and the word" belong to Alcinous. On the other hand, the iterability of the bedroom *epos* of Alcinous invests Arete with a significant measure of power as well. Apollonius' representation of Arete therefore has tempting implications for our interpretation of Arsinoë's influence.<sup>38</sup> The Homeric Arete speaks publicly, but Apollonius praises Arete for quietly plotting with and through the diplomatically conservative Alcinous, just as Arsinoë may have done with Ptolemy. Arete's portrait can be taken as a gloss on Arsinoë's tactics: she is possibly being criticized for openly wielding power or, more probably, given Apollonius' high status, praised for her generous patronage.

Using Martin's distinction between the unmarked *epos* and the marked, authoritative *muthos*, we see that the terms of Alcinous' private *epos* are transferable and exchangeable; Arete appropriates it when she advises Jason to marry Medea. Her directive preempts the declaration of

---

<sup>38</sup> See Nagy 1997:132-33 on the anthropological connection between epic speech acts (i.e., myths) and social realities.

Alcinous' *epos*, which will not be revealed as the ruling of the king until the following morning. Arete's *muthos*, which includes the details of Alcinous' decision as well as plans for the wedding, is at once secret, proper, and authoritative. The rescue of Medea and the resolution of the conflict are due as much to Arete's intervention as to Alcinous' public announcement. Despite the initial secrecy surrounding the *muthos* of Arete, she is eventually credited for her role in the resolution of the conflict, since, as we noted above, the chorus praises Hera for inspiring Arete to disclose Alcinous' decision (4.1199-1200). Hera's rumor has done its work, and Arete's *muthos* is eventually expressed in civic discourse. In the *Argonautica* we see the possibility of a legitimate role for court intrigue within an ideal monarchy, one in which the queen's appropriation of an *epos* intended for public expression does not compromise her political reputation. It may even be said to improve it, since Arete is celebrated for transmitting Alcinous' *pukinon epos*. For Apollonius, the *epos* may belong to Alcinous, but the *muthos* belongs to Arete, and the deed, ultimately, belongs to Hera.<sup>39</sup>

*University of Missouri-Columbia*

### References

- |                      |   |
|----------------------|---|
| Allen 1924           | Thomas W. Allen. <i>Homer: The Origins and Transmission</i> . Oxford: Clarendon Press.  |
| Beye 1982            | Charles R. Beye. <i>Epic and Romance in the Argonautica of Apollonius</i> . Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press.  |
| Bouché-Leclercq 1903 | Auguste Bouché-Leclercq. <i>Histoire des Lagides. Les Cinq premiers Ptolémées</i> . Vol. 1. Paris: E. Leroux. Rpt. 1963.  |
| Burstein 1982        | Stanley Burstein. "Arsinoë II Philadelphos: A Revisionist View." In <i>Philip II, Alexander the Great, and the Macedonian Heritage</i> . Ed. by W. Lindsay Adams and Eugene N. Borza. Washington, D.C.: University Press of America. pp. 197-212. |

---

<sup>39</sup> For their keen observations and suggestions I would like to thank the editor and Ian Worthington of the University of Missouri-Columbia. I also owe a debt of gratitude to the specialist reader, whose insightful comments have substantially improved this paper.

- Byre 1997 Calvin S. Byre. "Suspense in the Phaeacian Episode of Apollonius' *Argonautica*." *Illinois Classical Studies*, 22: 65-73.
- Cairns 1998 Francis Cairns. "Orality, Writing, and Reoralisation: Some Departures and Arrivals in Homer and Apollonius Rhodius." In *New Methods in the Research of Epic / Neue Methoden der Epenforschung*. Ed. by Hildegard L. C. Tristram. *Scripta Oralia*, 107. Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag. pp. 63-84.
- Cameron 1995 Alan Cameron. *Callimachus and His Critics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Carnes 1993 Jeffrey S. Carnes. "With Friends like These: Understanding the Mythic Background of Homer's Phaiakians." *Ramus*, 22:103-15.
- Dowden 1996 Ken Dowden. "Homer's Sense of Text." *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, 116:47-61.
- Foley 1990 John Miles Foley. *Traditional Oral Epic: The Odyssey, Beowulf, and the Serbo-Croatian Return Song*. Berkeley: University of California Press. Rpt. 1993.
- Foley 1991 \_\_\_\_\_. *Immanent Art: From Structure to Meaning in Traditional Oral Epic*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Fränkel 1961 Hermann Fränkel. *Apollonii Rhodii Argonautica*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fränkel 1968 \_\_\_\_\_. *Noten zu den Argonautika des Apollonios*. Munich: Beck.
- Fraser 1972 Peter Marshall Fraser. *Ptolemaic Alexandria*. 3 vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Gavrilov 1997 A. K. Gavrilov. "Techniques of Reading in Classical Antiquity." *Classical Quarterly*, 47:56-73.
- Giangrande 1976 Giuseppe Giangrande. "Aspects of Apollonius Rhodius' Language." *Arca*, 2:271-91.

- Gow 1952 A. S. F. Gow, trans. and comm. *Theocritus*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Green 1997 Peter Green, trans. and comm. *The Argonautika by Apollonios Rhodios*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Hauben 1970 Hans Hauben. *Callicrates of Samos: A Contribution to the Study of the Ptolemaic Admiralty*. Leuven: Uitgaven.
- Hauben 1982 \_\_\_\_\_. "Arsinoé II et la politique extérieure de l'Égypte." In *Egypt and the Hellenistic World: Proceedings of the International Colloquium Leuven: 24-26 May 1982*. Ed. by E. van't Dack, P. van Dessel, and E. van Gucht. *Studia Hellenistica*, 27. Lovanii: [Orientaliste]. pp. 99-127.
- Hazzard 2000 R. A. Hazzard. *Imagination of a Monarchy: Studies in Ptolemaic Propaganda*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Hölbl 2001 Günther Hölbl. *A History of the Ptolemaic Empire*. Trans. by Tina Saavedra. London and New York: Routledge.
- Hunter 1989 Richard L. Hunter, ed. *Apollonius of Rhodes: Argonautica Book III*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hunter 1993 \_\_\_\_\_. *The Argonautica of Apollonius: Literary Studies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hunter 1995 \_\_\_\_\_. "The Divine and Human Map of the *Argonautica*." *Syllecta Classica*, 6:13-27.
- Knight 1995 Virginia Knight. *The Renewal of Epic: Responses to Homer in the Argonautica of Apollonius*. Leiden: E. J. Brill.
- Koenen 1993 Ludwig Koenen. "The Ptolemaic King as a Religious Figure." In *Images and Ideologies: Self-definition in the Hellenistic World*. Ed. by Anthony Bulloch, Erich S. Gruen, Anthony A. Long, and Andrew Stewart. Berkeley: University of California Press. pp. 25-115.
- Kyriakou 1995 Poulheria Kyriakou. *Homeric Hapax Legomena in the Argonautica of Apollonius Rhodius: A Literary Study*. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner.

- Laronde 1987                    André Laronde. *Cyrène et la Libye hellénistique. Libykai Historikai: De l'époque républicaine au principat d'Auguste*. Paris: Editions du Centre de la Recherche Scientifique.
- Martin 1989                    Richard P. Martin. *The Language of Heroes: Speech and Performance in the Iliad*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Merkelbach-West 1970        Friedrich Solmsen, ed. *Hesiodi Theogonia, Opera et dies, Scutum*; Reinhold Merkelbach and M. L. West, eds. *Fragmenta Selecta*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mooney 1912                    George W. Mooney, ed. *The Argonautica of Apollonius Rhodius*. London: Longmans, Green. Rpt. 1964.
- Most 1989                    Glenn Most. "The Structure and Function of Odysseus' Apologoi." *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, 119:15-30.
- Nagy 1996                    Gregory Nagy. *Poetry as Performance: Homer and Beyond*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nagy 1997                    \_\_\_\_\_. *Homeric Questions*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Ogden 1999                    Daniel Ogden. *Polygamy, Prostitutes, and Death: The Hellenistic Dynasts*. London: Duckworth.
- Oesterreicher 1997            Wulf Oesterreicher. "Types of Orality in Text." In *Written Voices, Spoken Signs: Tradition, Performance, and the Epic Text*. Ed. by Egbert Bakker and Ahuvia Kahane. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. pp. 190-214.
- Pfeiffer 1968                    Rudolph Pfeiffer. *History of Classical Scholarship: From the Beginnings to the End of the Hellenistic Age*. Vol. 1. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Pomeroy 1984                    Sarah B. Pomeroy. *Women in Hellenistic Egypt: From Alexander to Cleopatra*. New York: Schocken Books. 2nd ed. Wayne State University Press, 1990.
- Quaegebeur 1971                Jan Quaegebeur. "Ptolémée II en adoration devant Arsinoë II divinisée." *Bulletin de l'Institut français d'archéologie orientale*, 69:191-217.
- Quaegebeur 1988                \_\_\_\_\_. "Cleopatra VII and the Cults of the Ptolemaic Queens." In *Cleopatra's Egypt: Age of the Ptolemies*. Ed.



- by Robert Steven Bianchi et al. Brooklyn, NY: Brooklyn Museum in association with Verlag Philipp von Zabern. pp. 41-54.
- Redfield 1983 James M. Redfield. "The Economic Man." In *Approaches to Homer*. Ed. by Carl A. Rubino and Cynthia W. Shelmerdine. Austin: University of Texas Press. pp. 218-47.
- Rowlandson 1998 Jane Rowlandson, ed. *Women and Society in Greek and Roman Egypt: A Sourcebook*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ross 1969 G. P. Ross. "The Unfriendly Phaeacians." *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, 160:387-406.
- Thomas 1992 Rosalind Thomas. *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Vian 1974 Francis Vian. *Apollonios de Rhodes. Argonautiques. Books 1-2. Vol 1*. Paris: Les Belles Lettres.
- Vian 1981 \_\_\_\_\_. *Apollonios de Rhodes. Argonautiques. Book 4. Vol 3*. Paris: Les Belles Lettres.
- West 1967 Stephanie West. *The Ptolemaic Papyri of Homer*. Papyrologica Coloniensia, 3. Cologne: Westdeutscher Verlag.

## **The Limits of Textuality: Mobility and Fire Production in Homer and *Beowulf***

**Guillemette Bolens**

Brian Stock has explained in *The Implications of Literacy* how “ways of thinking associated with orality often survive in a textual environment” (1983:12), and Paul Zumthor has underlined the importance of vocality in the performance of texts that were read at times such as the Middle Ages when illiteracy was the norm. However, Stock has also stressed the change in mentalities due to the advent of literacy: “The new use of texts is not merely ‘the graphic counterpart of speech.’ It has a structure and logical properties of its own. In societies functioning orally the advent of the written word can disrupt previous patterns of thought and action, often permanently” (18). For, in orality “the form and content of knowledge, whose logical properties are not differentiated as in textual tradition, are passed on in a series of face-to-face encounters. Such meetings are rich in gesture, ritual, and ceremony: men communicate not only by what they say but by how they behave” (14-15).

For Katherine O’Brien O’Keeffe, writing is language made spatial (1990:4):

Speaking is in essence a temporal act, and spoken communication depends on the presence of the audience before a speaker. . . . Literacy thus becomes a process of spatializing the once-exclusively temporal, and the thought-shaping technology of writing is an index of the development of this process. . . . In the hypothetical case of an originally oral poem, for example, committing the work to writing involves loss and gain—loss of interpretative performance but gain in the conservation of the poem. That loss is gradually, though never completely, compensated for by the addition of graphic cues that add information which guides interpretation.

Ursula Schaefer (1991:124) further explained that

even if we consider some of the preserved poetry to be “transcripts” of sorts from oral poetry, the simple act of writing down had already

transformed the singer's existence onto parchment which had to be brought to life again by somebody who usually was not this singer. This transformation of the living individual into a merely "potential voice" meant that until the "performance" it was waiting, as it were, to be revived by somebody else (or even by the same individual). This was the consequence of the moment of performance being separated from the moment of composition. While with the "singer of tales" the sung composition and the reception by listening were one, as soon as the writing medium interceded, composition and performance were separate events.

Thus the advent of literacy separated the moment of composition from that of performance. The poet had to rely on means of communication independent from gestures, muscular tone, vocal intonations, and the overall expressive dynamic of the body. The disappearance of corporeal mobility through the exteriorized and objectified existence of the written lines must have been a compelling difficulty in a period when an oral mentality—for which mobility was a component of communication—was gradually learning to convey meanings through motionless signs. Those changes were to modify patterns of thought both in the communication of ideas and in the reception of them, but first and foremost in the act of conceptualization.

To echo O'Brien O'Keeffe's words, "committing the work to writing involves loss and gain." The loss I wish to discuss is not associated with some prelapsarian state in which presence and communication were meaningful without the mediation of language (verbal and non-verbal) as a system of constructs. It is rather a shift from one way of creating meanings and shaping concepts to another. As Jack Goody puts it (1987:256): "Writing makes a difference not only to the expression of thought but to how that thinking is done in the first place." Correspondingly, Walter Ong has famously distinguished the psychodynamics of orality from that of literacy in this way (1982:55): "An oral culture simply does not deal in such items as geometrical figures, abstract categorization, formally logical reasoning processes, definitions, or even comprehensive descriptions, or articulated self-analysis, all of which derive not simply from thought itself but from text-formed thought."

The psychodynamics of orality and literacy must not be confused with orality and literacy as historical facts. John Miles Foley has rightly argued against an artificial separation of literacy and orality according to what has been called the Great Divide model: "The key concept in further development of this field must then be *complication*. We can no longer afford to settle for either side of the Great Divide model, for to do so is to turn away from the complex reality of our ancient and medieval texts"

(1991:36). On the basis of Stock's statement that "ways of thinking associated with orality often survive in a textual environment" (1983:12), the "complication" I propose in this essay involves reading signs of mobility, that is, signs of a way of thinking in which mobility is of prime significance. This way of thinking is akin to the psychodynamics of orality as defined by Ong.

This inquiry will lead me to question traditional interpretations of lines that have become difficult to read from within a literate mind-set. For example, scholars have often seen in Hephaestus a lame puffing god, whereas study of phraseology associated with him in the *Iliad* suggests a more complex case: while orality seems to have expressed extraordinary mobility, literacy involves handicap. As for the epic poem *Beowulf*, critics have strived vainly to give Grendel and his mother a shape—preferably monstrous—when all we know of their external appearance is that in fact they look human.<sup>1</sup> Once again mobility is more significant than form.

Consider John Carrington's experience. Quoting from Carrington, Ong comments: "Asked what he thought of a new village school principal, a Central African responded to Carrington, 'Let's watch a little how he dances.' Oral folk assess intelligence not as extrapolated from contrived textbook quizzes but as situated in operational contexts" (1982:55). The logic of this answer also underlies the *Iliad*, *Beowulf*, and the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*. Hephaestus, Hermes, and the dragon in *Beowulf* all make fire. In each case, the praxis of fire production is staged not as a technical operation but as a bodily event associated with an abnormal or extraordinary type of mobility. Moreover, the conceptual link between the body and the creation of fire is not to be found within a formal logic and a subject-object relationship. Instead of a form consisting of organs and capable of handling tools, the body is defined by its movements, and it is these movements that are the origin of fire. Mobility is at the core of this other logic.<sup>2</sup>

Words as objects and not as events—that is, as written rather than oral—give different accounts of the world.<sup>3</sup> When a literate thinker such as

---

<sup>1</sup> Hrothgar explains that, according to his hall-counselors who have seen them, Grendel's mother is in the likeness of a woman (*idese onlicnes*) and Grendel has the form of a man (*on weres wæstmum*) (1351-52). The word *wæstm* ("form," dative plural *wæstmum*) appears in this line only in the poem. Quotations from *Beowulf* are made from Jack 1994.

<sup>2</sup> See further Bolens 2000:espec. chs. 2, 4.

<sup>3</sup> "Formal logic is the invention of Greek culture after it had interiorized the technology of alphabetic writing" (Ong 1982:52).

Aristotle investigates the nature of movements, his question sounds like the opposite of the orally based problematic: “That which first causes movement in the animal is necessarily in some beginning,” that is, must be situated in some beginning (702). Aristotle’s endeavor is to locate the ἀρχή, “the beginning,” within the body. Instead of the idea that movement *is* the beginning, Aristotle states that movement is bound to be *in* a beginning. The philosopher then proceeds through a series of analogies leading him to assert that the origin of movements is desire (703) *within* the soul, which is analogous to the innate spirit *within* the heart. The order of priority has changed (organs come first, movements second) and along with it the modes of signification of the body.

### ***The Homeric Hymn to Hermes***

Hermes’ corporeality is linked to remarkable events. Hermes is born from Zeus’ love for the nymph Maia who gives birth to a παιῖδα πολύτροπον “a child of many turns, of many wiles” (13). Πολύτροπος is formed on πολύς “many” and τρόπος “turn,” derived from τρέπω “to turn.” The adjective can be understood literally (of many physical turns) as well as metaphorically (of many wiles, ruses, tricks, or skills). Both readings are pertinent, for the god is skilled—he invents the lyre out of a tortoise, also fire-sticks and the ritual sacrifice of oxen—and beguiles his brother Apollo while stealing his cattle; moreover, he does so by revolving in many directions and by inverting the usual directions of bodies and footprints. The newly born god invents the lyre and with it sings his own begetting, “naming the genesis made famous of himself” (59). This self-reflexivity and the use of language as a creative power will soon be paralleled by concrete “re-flections” that create fire as they reverse the directions of bodies.

The divine child Hermes steals the cattle of Apollo, the solar god, leading fifty oxen away from the herd, driving them through a sandy place and inverting their traces (ἵχνη’ ἀποστρέψας, 76). The aorist participle ἀποστρέψας of ἀπο-στρέφω “to turn in the opposite direction, to turn back” suggests grammatically that the hoofprints are reversed when pressed on the ground. The mobility of signs—here tracks—is further emphasized by the nature of the surface they are imprinted upon: footprints on sand are likely to alter. The god then inverts the hoofs themselves (literally, “making the hoofs opposite,” 77), placing the front of them in the back and the back in the front (77-78), and Hermes himself walks along backwards (ἔμπαλιν,

78). An old man witnesses the scene and is later questioned by Apollo. He answers that the child, as he walked, was turning in all directions (ἐπιστροφάδην, 210, an adverb likewise formed on στρέφω “to turn”).

The old man adds that Hermes was driving the cattle backwards, holding the head opposite to himself (κάρη δ' ἔχεν ἀντίον αὐτῷ, 211). Hugh Evelyn-White translates “he was driving them a backwards way, with their heads towards him.” He thus interprets κάρη “head/s” as a plural although it can also be a singular; he reads ἀντίον αὐτῷ as “towards him,” and translates ἀντία ποιήσας ὀπλάς (77) as “[Hermes] reversed the marks of their hoofs.” It is indeed possible for the adjective ἀντίος to mean “facing” as well as “opposite,” but if we choose to see a singular in κάρη and assign the same meaning to both instances of ἀντίος, we find the image of a bidirectional body, an image that fits in the series of inversions narrated in the text. After inverting the prints, the hooves, and the entire bodies of the oxen, Hermes walks backwards, turning in all directions and holding his head opposite to himself, that is, opposite to the front part of himself.

One more word manifests the importance of turning in Hermes' mobility. The aorist participle αὐτοτροπήσας (86) is used just as the child has woven sandals for his feet and is ready to steal the cattle away. Laurence Kahn explains that this participle is commonly translated by “with personal means,” but because the term is formed on αὐτο and τροπέω (=τρέπω) “to turn,” it can also be understood as “un mouvement, . . . un geste d'Hermès, ‘se retournant sur lui-même’” (1978:45, n. 12). This tends to confirm the idea that Hermes reverses not only the cattle's hoofs, but also himself and possibly his own head. In other words, inversions take place in the bodies he acts upon as well as within his own body.

The sandals Hermes weaves for himself with twigs of tamarisk and myrtle leave prints that are unreadable for Apollo, who is in search of his stolen cattle. He can recognize the tracks of the oxen despite their being turned backwards, he says, but he cannot identify the marks visible on the other side of the path: they cannot be footprints of man or woman or wolves or bears or lions, “nor do I think they are the tracks of a rough-maned Centaur—whoever it be that with swift feet makes such monstrous footprints” (224-25 Evelyn-White). The adjective πέλωρος “monstruous, enormous, exceptional” is derived from πέλωρ, which designates Hephaestus and Hades in the *Iliad*. Despite his extreme youth, Hermes' mobility creates signs bewildering even to the all-seeing solar god.

Before Zeus—whose judgment is called upon—Apollo explains his surprise and says that Hermes drove the cattle across a sandy place, using neither his feet nor his hands (346-47); “but, furnished with some other

means, he trudged his way—wonder of wonders!—as though one walked on slender oak-trees” (348-49 Evelyn-White). The verb (δια-)τριβω means “to rub, grind, consume,” and Evelyn-White translates it by “to trudge” to denote Hermes’ gait. It seems, however, paradoxical that a hypermobile god should have a heavy gait, and it is therefore probably more accurate to maintain the idea of rubbing since the child’s tracks suggest that he walked by means of slender oak-trees. For he is about to rub twigs together and invent fire-sticks.

To this point, neither feet nor hands have been used, but prodigious traces of rubbing are perceptible, and a few lines later an interesting verb is chosen by Apollo to describe Hermes’ capacity to create artifices and wiles: διαπυρπαλάμησεν (357). This verb derives from διά “throughout,” τὸ πῦρ “fire,” and ἡ παλάμη “palm of the hand, hand.” Evelyn-White translates it as “[he had gone home] by crafty turns and twists.” Although turns and twists are indeed relevant here, the signifiers literally refer to hands and fire. The implied meaning of the verb is “he was making tricks,” while its concrete, more immediate, meaning echoes the god’s second invention, the technique of fire: πυρὸς . . . τέχνην (108), that is, the production of fire by palms rubbing pieces of wood together.

Here is the passage in question: “[Hermes] gathered a pile of wood and began to seek the art of fire. He chose a stout laurel branch and trimmed it with the knife . . . held firmly in his hand: and the hot smoke rose up. For it was Hermes who first invented fire-sticks and fire” (108-11). Evelyn-White, following Kuhn, thinks that “there is a lacuna here. In l. 109 the borer is described, but the friction of this upon the fire-block (to which the phrase ‘held firmly’ clearly belongs) must also have been mentioned” (331, n. 1). Allen, Halliday and Sikes agree with this interpretation (1980:302): “Accordingly, if ὄζον and ἄρμενον denote different things, and if, as all anthropologists have seen, the process of friction is omitted, the lacuna demanded by Kuhn must be allowed.”

The text at lines 109-10 reads, literally, “taking a twig of the magnificent laurel, he trimmed it with iron / held [the twig] in his palm; the hot breath exhaled.”<sup>4</sup> Both singular and neuter, ὄζον “twig” and ἄρμενον “held” can perfectly fit together, meaning that Hermes holds the twig in his palm with the consequence that a hot breath rises. The omission of the movement of friction is a lacuna only if an instrumental logic is expected. But the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* narrates a corporeal event, not a practical

---

<sup>4</sup> δάφνης ἀγλαὸν ὄζον ἔλων ἐπέλεψε σιδήρῳ / ἄρμενον ἐν παλάμῃ· ἄμπνυτο δὲ θερμὸς αὐτμῆ.

instruction on innovative tools used by a subject acting upon an object. The friction of fire-sticks implies a fast, back-and-forth movement of the hands by which the twig revolves on the fire-block, and rapid, back-and-forth movements define Hermes' own mobility.

Thus the omission of the revolving motion of the fire-stick is not a lacuna after all: it indicates that the text is concerned not with pragmatics but with mobility. Instead of a technical instruction on fire-sticks, the hymn describes a polytropic god who moves in ever-changing and opposite directions, creating signs that elude Apollo himself by means of his gait and the twigs he rubs on the ground, producing heat with a twig he holds in his "fire-palm." In short, movement is understood as the origin of fire, and it was only the later literary audience of this text decided that something was missing.

Not illogically, Apollo feels threatened by his newborn brother Hermes, so young and already so powerful. He strives to overcome him precisely by limiting his mobility, surrounding his hands with firm bonds, with strong ligatures (409). "But the bands would not hold him, and the withes of osier fell far from him and began to grow at once from the ground," instead binding Apollo's cows. Kahn comments that "[Hermès] engendre le mouvement de ses liens" (1978:5). Hermes sets matter in motion or, more accurately, his creation is motion.

Hermes is then described as looking down on the ground, flashing fire. The verb ἀμαρύσσω means "to sparkle, shine, shoot forth, dart, cast lightnings," and the god is understood as emitting fire. The strangeness of this idea has led translators to situate fire in the eyes of the god, deflating the image down to a metaphor. Thus Evelyn-White renders "with eyes flashing fire"; similarly Humbert translates as "il jeta de côté des regards flamboyants." The text does not, however, mention the eyes. Admittedly, Hesiod used the same phrase in his *Theogony*, referring to fire flashing from Typhoeus' eyes (826-27). But in that instance the eyes are actually mentioned; moreover, Typhoeus is a dragon born from Earth and Tartarus; fire springs from his one hundred heads. His eyes are not merely shining, flashing fire metaphorically only; actual flames are produced by this extraordinary body. The dragon's power is such that "he would have come to reign over mortals and immortals" (837) if Zeus had not perceived it and fought against him, opposing lightning to fire: "through the two of them heat took hold on the dark-blue sea, through the thunder and lightning, and through the fire from the monster, and the scorching winds and blazing thunderbolt" (844-46). In Hermes' case, the phrase πῦρ ἀμαρύσσων allows equally for a literal reading: the god spins, revolves, inverts



directions, creates fire-sticks, cannot be tied down, and emits fire from his body.

### **Hephaestus in the *Iliad***

Hephaestus is characterized by his peculiar gait and has been seen throughout Western tradition as a limping and therefore diminished figure of the pantheon: “Hephaestus the god has crippled feet, making him an outsider among the perfect Olympians” (Burkert 1985:168). The reason for this interpretive consensus is to be found in Book 18 of the *Iliad*, where the smith is said to limp and is denoted by such terms as *κυλλοποδίων* (371) and *ἀμφιγυήεις* (393), two compound adjectives supposedly referring to a motor handicap. In fact, both adjectives may be understood as denoting a revolving motion. Indeed, *κυλλοποδίων* is a compound of the noun “foot” and a derivation from the verb “to roll, revolve.” It has been interpreted as the idea of a twisted and consequently maimed foot (see Chantraine 1968:s.v.). As for *ἀμφιγυήεις*, it has been translated into “limping with both legs.” But the stem *γυ-* refers to the notion of bending without negative connotation, appearing for example in *γυῖα* “joints”; any articular area of the body is defined as such because of its capacity to bend and modify the angles of the limbs.

The traditional interpretation of *ἀμφιγυήεις* has been rightfully called into question by Louis Deroy (1956), who analyzed the epithet into “*doué (-εις) d’une direction (-γυη-) double et divergente (ἀμφι-)*” [endowed with a double and diverging direction]. He concludes that, “according to linguistic evidence, Homer applied to Hephaestus a learned epithet, issued from some theological repertoire, which informs us that this god had the reputation of being able to move not only ahead, like everybody else, but also, quite surprisingly, in the opposite direction, backwards.”<sup>5</sup> The iconography confirms Deroy’s reading, as one of the most ancient representations of Hephaestus paints him riding a donkey with one foot entirely turned backward by an inversion of the ankle and two fingers of his left hand pointing towards the rear, emphasizing the simultaneous

---

<sup>5</sup> “Au témoignage de la linguistique, Homère aurait appliqué à Héphaïstos une épithète savante, tirée d’on ne sait quel répertoire théologique, et qui nous apprend que ce dieu avait la réputation de pouvoir se déplacer non seulement en avant comme tout le monde, mais aussi, fort étonnamment, en sens inverse, vers l’arrière” (1956:134).

bidirectionality of his body (François Vase, beg. sixth century B.C.E., Museum of Florence).

Détienne and Vernant, agreeing with Deroy's reading of Hephaestus' epithet, compare his mobility to that of Hermes (1974:257). Both gods have a gait defined by revolving movements and contradictory directions. The *Iliad* depicts Hephaestus revolving around his bellows, sweating and speeding up (18.372-73); his thin legs moved quickly beneath him (18.411), and, at this point, he is said to be limping (χωλεύων), while he is also called πέλωρ αἴητον (18.410-11). These lines have proven difficult to understand and translate.<sup>6</sup> Mugler (1989) interpreted them as “the monstrous and wheezy cripple left the foot of his anvil, shaking his scrawny legs”, and Daremberg (1865:35) read in the second part of the sentence: “his weak legs were shaking under him (trembling)”;<sup>7</sup> Murray and Wyatt (1999) translated: “He . . . rose from the anvil, a huge, panting bulk, limping along, but beneath him his slender legs moved nimbly,” while Lattimore (1951) renders: “He . . . took the huge blower off from the block of the anvil limping; and yet his shrunken legs moved lightly beneath him.” Finally, Fagles (1990) translates: “With that he heaved up from the anvil block—his immense hulk hobbling along but his shrunken legs moved nimbly.” The English translators thus tried to resolve the contradiction in Hephaestus' mobility by adding adversatives—absent in the text—such as “*but* his legs moved nimbly” or “*and yet* his legs moved lightly.”

Lattimore sees in πέλωρ αἴητον a reference to a bellows, while Mugler and Murray and Wyatt interpret the phrase as referring to the difficult breathing of the god. Bailly (1950) links the unsure meaning of αἴητος to its cognate ἄητος “terrible, impetuous (as is the blast of winds).” The verb ἄημι is used to describe the action of winds blowing, and the noun ἡ ἀήτης refers to the blowing of winds. As for the noun τὸ πέλωρ, it refers to Hades in the *Iliad*, to Hermes' footprints in his *Homeric Hymn*, and to Typhoeus in Hesiod's *Theogony*; although it can possibly be translated by “monster,” it is more correct and less misleading to read “prodigious being.” For the idea expressed concerning Hephaestus may perhaps be that of a creating god (a smith who can reproduce the world on a metallic shield), one who is phenomenal (πέλωρος) both in his breathing (possibly

---

<sup>6</sup> ἀπ' ἀκμοθέτοιο πέλωρ αἴητον ἀνέστη / χωλεύων· ὑπὸ δὲ κνήμαι ῥώνοντο ἀραιαί.

<sup>7</sup> Mugler (1989): “le Bancal monstrueux et poussif quitta le pied de son enclume en agitant ses jambes grêles”; Daremberg (1865): “ses jambes faibles s'agitaient sous lui (flageolaient).”

similar to the blowing of storming winds) and in his mobility (*ἀμφιγυήεις*, indicating that he can move in simultaneous contradictory directions).

Hephaestus' mobility is highly ambiguous and cannot be simply reduced to a handicap: the smith revolves like the wheels he forges for automatically rolling tripods (18.375), and his legs move swiftly like those of the robot maidens he once created out of gold, and who support him as he walks towards Thetis (18.417). The same verb (*ῥώομαι*) is used for swift warriors who race to the battlefield (11.50, 16.166). In the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*, the trees, supposedly used by Hermes to make enormous steps or footprints, are said to be “slender,” an adjective chosen to qualify Hephaestus' legs in Book 18 of the *Iliad*. The smith is thus a *πέλωρ* and his legs are thin in the way that trees can be said to be thin. This indicates that the adjective should not be translated by “shrunk,” as Lattimore and Fagles thought appropriate, or by any word imposing a negative connotation.<sup>8</sup> Thin legs in Hephaestus—even abnormally thin—need not be read as deficient legs, for slender branches produce fire in the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*.

At the end of Book 1 of the *Iliad*, Hephaestus, on Mount Olympus among the gods, dashes towards Hera. The verb used, (*ἀν*)-*αἴσσω* (participle *ἀναίξας* 1.584), later describes the soaring of Poseidon compared to a swift-winged hawk (13.62). Poseidon takes on the build and voice of Calchas as he intervenes to increase the strength and ardor of the two Ajaxes. One of them, however, perceives the divine nature of their interlocutor when Poseidon soars skywards, and he asserts that he recognized the traces of his feet and legs (13.71). Gods can be recognized with precision, he says, by means of their traces. In Book 1, Hephaestus is springing up to give his mother a cup. The same verb of movement is used in both cases to denote Poseidon's aerial mobility and that of Hephaestus. In other passages it is Athena and Hera or Iris and Apollo who dart down from the peaks of the Olympus (2.167; 4.73; 14.150, 225); it is also Ulysses who, darting out with his spear, wards off the Trojans threatening him on all sides (11.484); it is Achilles who rushes straight on against a flood (21.303), and Zeus who springs up and stands (15.6, also 17.460). Clearly the verb *αἴσσω* denotes intense mobility.

As we noted, Hephaestus jumps up to give his mother a cup, and he proceeds to serve wine to the Olympians whose unquenchable laughter begins as they see the smith breathing (*ποιπνύοντα*) through the palace (1.600). The odd verb *ποιπνύω* is formed on *πνέω* “to blow, to breathe,”

---

<sup>8</sup> Compare “grêles” by Mugler and “faibles” by Daremberg.

with an initial duplication suggesting an intensified respiration. Because Hephaestus is said to limp and because the gods laugh, the participle employed here has been understood as implying a difficulty in breathing, giving way to such translations as “puffing” (Murray and Wyatt 1999).<sup>9</sup> Yet, an intensified breathing is not necessarily synonymous with being out of breath. It may be due to an increase of mobility in a god whose movements are signified by such verbs as ἀν-αίσσω “to soar, dash forth,” ῥώομαι “to move with energy,” and ἐλίσσω “to revolve, turn around.”

Moreover, another verb, ἀσθμαίνω, meaning clearly this time “to breathe with difficulty,” is used in the *Iliad* to depict Diomedes and Ulysses running after Dolon and, finally out of breath (10.376), catching him. The same verb is used to indicate that Hector is critically wounded and can hardly breathe (15.10, 241; also 10.496). By opposition, the verb πνέω “to blow, to breathe” appears, for instance, when Athena breathes onto a warrior to increase his *menos*, that is, his heat and energy (10.482; 17.456; 11.508; 15.235). With the prefixes *ana-* and *am-*, πνέω means that the person is catching his or her breath.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, the verb ποιπνύω, denoting Hephaestus’ breathing on Mount Olympus, should not be read as implying a lack of breath.

In his smithy, Hephaestus revolves around his bellows. The action of blowing and its correlate, breathing, are essential to the work of the smith, who thereby controls the heat of his element, fire. As he begins to forge new weapons for Achilles, Hephaestus is shown ordering his twenty bellows to adapt their speed to the varying needs of his art. The breath of the speeding bellows echoes the winds called forth by Iris for the sake of Achilles after Patroclus’ death: the pyre of Patroclus does not kindle and Achilles implores Zephyrus and Borea to blow on the funeral flames. The winds soared “with a wondrous din, driving the clouds tumultuously before them. And swiftly they came to the sea to blow on it, and the wave swelled beneath the shrill blast; and they came to the deep-soiled land of Troy, and fell on the pyre, and greatly roared the wondrous blazing fire. So the whole night long as with one blast they beat on the flame of the pyre, blowing shrill (φυσῶντες λιγέως)” (Murray and Wyatt 1999:23.212-18).

---

<sup>9</sup> Lattimore (1951) avoids the problem with “bustling.” For Burkert (1985:168), “the *Iliad* makes Hephaestus the occasion and object of Homeric laughter when he assumes the role of the beautiful youth Ganymede and hobbles and wheezes around, pouring out wine to the gods.”

<sup>10</sup> *am-* 22.222; 22.475; *ana-* 15.235; 16.42, 302; 19.227.

Hephaestus is a πέλωρ αἴητον (18.410-11). It may be that he is not puffing: he was perhaps originally a prodigious being with a respiration similar to the blowing of winds on the sea (ἀήμεναι, verb ἄημι “to blow”), winds that generate storms and blazing flames. Like them, he moves with force and rapidity, and, on Mount Olympus, he breathes with an intensity accompanied with divine laughter, while in his smithy around his bellows he melts bronze and gold, mastering the flames, as do winds when blowing on Patroclus’ pyre.

The laughter of the Olympians has been made to imply that the gods are ridiculing Hephaestus. But laughter does not perforce imply mockery. In the *Homeric Hymn* devoted to him, Hermes plays his lyre in front of Apollo, who begins to laugh for joy, “for the sweet throb of the marvelous music went to his heart, and a soft longing took hold on his soul as he listened” (420-23). Both Hermes and Hephaestus create not only movements, but also emotions and their related physical manifestations—in this instance, laughter. Hephaestus’ intervention was aimed at calming the strife between Hera and an increasingly angry and menacing Zeus, and in fact Hephaestus succeeded and modified the mood of the entire assembly. Thus laughter may be seen as having the same status as fire: both originate from a capacity to move and to be moved. Laughter among the Olympians may be understood as an outburst of energy due to the fire god’s increased breathing. Hephaestus’ intervention in this regard is similar to that of Athena’s breathing onto a warrior to increase his heat and energy.

Hephaestus’ mobility is akin to his force, that of fire. In the *Hymn to Hermes*, fire is called the strength of glorious Hephaestus. Hermes produces the first means to make fire as well as fire itself (111); he piles dry wood, and the flame begins to glow: “the strength of glorious Hephaestus was beginning to kindle the fire” (115). A hot breath is exhaled when the twig is in the palms of the god who is responsible for the invention of nothing less than fire. In the *Iliad*, Hephaestus contends with the river Xanthus, burning all in his path, including Achilles’ countless victims, the vegetation of the plain, and the fish in the streams of Xanthus who are said to be tormented by the breath of skillful Hephaestus (21.355). The breath of ingenious Hephaestus (21.366-67) distresses the drying river who cries: “Hephaestus, there is no one of the gods who has the power to contend with you, nor will I fight you, ablaze with fire as you are” (21.357-358). Revolving, burning, and blowing, the divine smith seems neither handicapped nor out of breath. When Zeus sends the gods to fight among the Trojans and the Achaeans, Hephaestus goes with them, “exulting in his might, limping, his thin legs moving rapidly beneath him” (20.36-37).

Yet it is clearly said that Hephaestus limps. The god's lameness is thematized in the narration of his ancient fall. Both Zeus and Hera are said to have hurled him down from Mount Olympus. Zeus seized Hera's son by the foot when he was trying to protect his mother, and cast him away in a descent that lasted for a whole day and ended up in Lemnos among the Sintian people (1.591-94); and Hera, in order to hide his lameness, threw her offspring down onto the earth where he was saved by Thetis and Eurynome, who hid him for nine years and taught him the art of metallurgy (18.394-99). Marie Delcourt saw in the god's double fall the sign of an initiatory ordeal by which a divinity acquires the power that will thereafter characterize him/her (1982:136). In both instances Hephaestus' lower limbs are mentioned, and in the second case the god becomes a smith. These details may account for the idea that a smith moves abnormally, for only an extraordinary mobility can be the origin of flames.

Flames do not exist except in motion; an immobile fire is an impossibility. Movements of flames are not straightforward and predictable, and neither are Hephaestus' contradictory movements. The etymology of *χολός* ("lameness") is obscure (Bailly 1950:s.v.) and it may be that motor deficiency should not be inferred. By opposition, the verb *σκάζω* "to limp" (linked to Sanskrit *khāñjati* "to limp") clearly indicates a difficulty in walking, as Ulysses and Diomedes are said to be limping (*σκάζοντε*, 19.47) owing to wounds they received, and similarly Eurypylus has to limp out from the battle (*σκάζων*, 11.811) because of being struck with an arrow in the thigh. Significant semantic nuances may originally have distinguished the two words, *χολεύω* and *σκάζω*, which later became synonymous.

Abnormal foot direction and gait appear in Strabo and Pliny as curiosities. Strabo writes that, according to Megasthenes, some exotic monsters have their heels turned in front and their toes and soles turned backward (*Geography* 15.1.57), while in Pliny some human beings, inhabitants of a region called Abarimon, have their feet turned backward behind their legs and are endowed with extreme velocity (*Natural History* 7.2.11). Although these descriptions have little meaning since they have been dissociated from any mythical logic, it is noteworthy that the inversion of the ankle, instead of inducing a limitation of movements, is in fact linked with greater speed. This connection tends to confirm that Hephaestus' bidirectionality should be understood as a sign of an exceptional mobility that has been expressed by apparently contradictory information in the *Iliad*. Analogous to the unreadable traces of Hermes, the textual signs of Hephaestus' mobility have proven unreadable to the literate mind for which meanings are conveyed by forms and organs, not by movements.

### The dragon in *Beowulf*

The concept of body *signifies* differently depending on the logic in use in a given text. The figures of Hephaestus in the *Iliad* and of Hermes in his *Homeric Hymn* manifest the idea that the signifying mode of a body may reside in its movements rather than in its substance and shape. *Beowulf* also stages bodies in a way that partakes more of the psychodynamics of orality than of literacy. Indeed, bodies in the poem are defined primarily in terms of mobility and physical power. Beowulf's essential quality is that his grasp (*mundgripe*) has the might of thirty men (379-80). This aspect of the Geat seems so relevant that it is announced by the Danish king Hrothgar before Beowulf presents himself, and the fight with Grendel is narrated so as to confer an exponential power on the grasp; later, Beowulf's clenching fist tears off the entire arm (the organ of grasping) of Grendel.

The dismemberment takes place because both warriors pull with equal strength. If Grendel's might were inferior to that of Beowulf, the rest of his body would follow his arm. But instead, the force he opposes gives way to a lethal articular wound: the tendons spring apart and the locks of the bones burst asunder (817-18).<sup>11</sup> Later, Beowulf explains his failure to slay Grendel—who, although maimed, manages to escape—by saying that the enemy was “too mighty in his movements,” “to foremihtig . . . on feþe” (969-70). Klaeber translates *feþe* by “going, pace.” The phrase *on feþe* can be translated by “on foot,” but Klaeber insists that *feþe* is not related to *foþ* “foot.” It would therefore be misleading to refer to the organ when in fact motion is signified, and it is more accurate to translate *on feþe* by “in his movements.”

An abnormal relation to metal and metallurgy characterizes Grendel. Grendel's nails are similar to steel (*style gelicost*, 987), and all gazing at his torn arm agree that no metal in the world—even if it were the oldest and strongest iron—could touch the terrible limb (987-90), a claim proven when Beowulf's companions try to come to the rescue in Heorot during the fight and realize that Grendel's body is immune against metal (798-805). Similarly, Grendel's mother is protected against weapons, and her mobility is so powerful that she manages to make the hero fall on the ground by means of her fierce grasps (*grimman grapum*, 1537-44), a feat not to be underestimated in the heroically codified context of the poem. But Beowulf finally overcomes her and beheads her with a gigantic sword found in the cave, the only sword capable of injuring her body.

---

<sup>11</sup> For more on joints and dismemberment in *Beowulf*, see Bolens 2000:ch. 4.

Immediately after the decapitation, a light shines in the cave (1570-72).

Lixte se leoma, leoht inne stod,  
efne swa of hefene hadre scineð  
rodores candel.

(1570-72)

Light shone, brightness gleamed within, just as the candle of the sky shines clearly from heaven. (Swanton 1978)

The light within the lair is compared to nothing less than that of the sun, the sky-candle. This image is difficult to account for, and Andersson decided to ignore it altogether (1991:230): “The final extermination of monsters should be an occasion for some crowning revelry, but the poet shrinks back again. Instead of a hymn of release, we are now given a view of Beowulf’s companions on the shore despairing of the outcome and fully expecting that Beowulf has succumbed.” But it is not the poet who shrinks back again; it is the critic who unduly jumps ahead, for the scene with the companions comes later. In the meantime, seven signifiers are used to state that light has been produced. The text does not explain how, by whom, from where, or why, but the fact is that the cave, sunk deep under water, is filled with a light so bright that it approximates solar radiance.

Martin Puhvel considers the source of luminosity to be the gigantic sword and justifies the chronology of the description with an anachronistic aesthetic judgment (1979:37): “The fact that the light phenomenon is described only after the account of the decapitation is hardly significant, as the description of the violent act is brief and breathless—to interrupt it with a simile of some length would be very awkward.” To make a point of the poet’s alleged sense of awkwardness is itself awkward. Besides, the “violent act” is hardly brief; it takes the poet 71 lines to narrate it (1500-70). The textual order is relevant and ought to be respected: the light phenomenon takes place immediately after the beheading in the diegesis as well as in the text. It is consequently more accurate to say that a violent physical event is followed by a massive production of light. This idea departs from that of an object endowed with magical qualities such as a luminescent sword. Admittedly, the word *brond* “burning, fire” is used at line 1454 to denote a sword, and the sword brought by Beowulf and first swung at Grendel’s mother is called *beado-leoma* “light of battle” (1523). But this weapon is ineffectual and the hero soon discards it and fights bare-handed until he finds the giants’ sword. If the light in the cave is due to the appearance of the sword itself, it seems (this time indeed) awkward that the



weapon should not be denoted by the compound that associates light and swords. It is therefore certainly significant that the giants' sword is never said to be the cause—as magical object—of the phenomenal light. Light is created by a corporeal event.

In the final part of the poem, heat, light, and fire issue from the body of an extraordinary being called *lig-draca*, “dragon of fire” (2333). From him, lights of battle sprang widely (2582-83); burning (2272, 2569) and surrounded by fire (2274), he produces a burning light (*bryne-leoma*, 2313) and belches flames (2312). To impose on the text the conventional image of dragons as it has been progressively frozen and passed down by tradition is a methodological mistake. In *Beowulf*, the only information we have about the physical appearance of the dragon is that he is fifty feet long when lying dead (3042-43), that he is bare (2273), and that his position shapes him into a ring (2561). He is never said to have wings, but he is said to fly high and wide (2315, 2346) and to move swiftly (2832, 2288). It is thus his mobility that is relevant, not his organs.

The flames belched by the dragon come neither from his mouth nor from his head, but from his *gewitte*, his intellect or senses (2882). *Gewitte* has been variously translated by “head” (Swanton 1978, Jack 1994, Donaldson 1975, Heaney 1999), “breast” (Gordon 1967), “jaws” (Crossley-Holland 1968), and “cerveau” [brain] (Crépin 1991), all of these renderings amounting to efforts to inscribe the unreadable phenomenon within organicity. However, when the same word is used to refer to Beowulf (the only other instance of this noun in the text), its primary meaning is this time respected: “*Pa gen sylf cyning / geweold his gewitte*” (2702-03), “Then the king himself again / controlled his senses” (Swanton 1978), “Then once more the king himself was master of his thoughts” (Gordon 1967), “Alors le roi se ressaisit en recouvrant ses sens” (Crépin 1991). Heaney is consistent with his departure from accurate meaning and translates “Once more the king gathered his strength” (1999). Later, the adjective *gewittig* is associated with *cwico* and *wis*: “[Beowulf] was still *cwico* (“alive, quick”), *wis* (“alert, wise, sound in mind”), and *gewittig* (“conscious, capable of thinking”)” (3093). The noun *gewitte* denotes an intellectual capacity. Beowulf's dragon is akin to Hermes *polutropos* and to Hephaestus *polumetis* (*metis* meaning intelligence).<sup>12</sup> Dichotomies such as physical-mental, concrete-abstract, and subject-object do not apply here and cannot account for the phenomenon as it appears to have been understood by an oral mindset. The dragon's intellect is the source of flames because fire is produced not by organs but by a psychophysical event.

---

<sup>12</sup> See Détiéne and Vernant 1974.

Forseeing the fight to come, Beowulf speaks of the deadly fires, the breaths, and poisons of his adversary (2522-23). Provoked by Beowulf, the dragon appears, preceded by his breath and his hot battle-blood, *hat hildeswat* (2557-58) springing forth from the cave. We saw that the association of fire and breath are present in the characterization of Hephaestus. As for the word *swat*, it denotes “sweat” or “blood.” Crépin (1991) opted for “sweat” with “brûlante sueur de mort” (“burning sweat of death”) and Swanton (1978) translated *swat* by “vapour,” although they both maintained the meaning of blood (“gore”) when the *swat* of Grendel’s mother makes the giants’ sword melt to the hilt (1666b-68a):

Ða þæt hildebil  
forbarn, brogdenmæl, swa þæt blod gesprang,  
hatost heaþoswata.

Then that war-sword, the patterned blade, burned away as the blood gushed out,  
the hottest of battle-gore. (Swanton 1978)

Yet the earlier use of the word *blod* surely leaves no doubt which bodily fluid the text refers to (1616). The female monster’s blood is so hot that even the best of iron melts on contact with it (1617). The same verb *gemeltan* (“to melt”) is used in the Sigemund episode when the warrior transfixes the dragon with his sword (897). Blood and fire spring from Beowulf’s dragon, Sigemund’s dragon melts as metal does, the blood of Grendel’s mother is so hot that it causes metal to melt, and Grendel and his mother are protected against weapons. In short, the text conveys the idea that extraordinary bodies have an atypical relation to heat and are thereby capable of transforming metal. The capacity to increase heat to a melting degree is expressed via fire production and projection of blood.

The association of fire production and projection of blood also appears in the Celtic epic *Táin Bó Cúalnge* (*The Cattle-Raid of Cooley*), in the description of Cuchulainn’s contortions. The hero undergoes a series of inversions until light, fire, and poison are emitted and a jet of blood springs from the top of his head. The inversions are extremely puzzling and have produced various interpretations.<sup>13</sup> I propose that the physical phenomenon is coherent in that each stage of the contortions is an inversion of normal bodily order. Indeed, every part and joint shakes; the direction of the body is inverted within the skin and the front part of the legs turns backward. Tendons and muscles, no longer spread all over the body structure, gather up and bulge out; dual organs such as the eyes are no longer double, as one

---

<sup>13</sup> See Bolens 2000:ch. 3 and Sayers 1985.

of them disappears within the head while the other protrudes; inner organs such as the lungs, the throat, and the liver can be perceived externally. These inversions enact five conceptual pairs: jointed-shaking (that is, disjointed), front-back, spread-gathered, dual-unique, and internal-external. Without the idea of inversion, this manifold physical event seems chaotic, whereas an analysis of it in terms of movements shows that it is cognate with the Homeric epithet for Hephaestus (*amphiguêeis*), with Hermes' polytropic revolutions, and with the production of fire, light, heat, and blood in *Beowulf* via the figures of the dragon and Grendel's mother.

Finally, a Greek weapon dance called the pyrrhic, attested in Greek art as early as the eighth century, was a rite of passage for the adolescent or ephobic warrior at Athens "with social and spiritual meanings" (Lonsdale 1993:139, 140). A great number of iconographic representations of the pyrrhic dance exist, and in the majority of them the head of the dancer is "turned sharply backward" (*ibid.*:147). Running speed is indicated by portraying the legs far apart and bent at the knees.<sup>14</sup> The adjective "pyrrhic" is derived from πῦρ (*pyr*) "fire" (via πυρρός "red like fire," Delavaud-Roux 1993:53), and a fragment attributed to Aristotle (frg. 519) explains its appellation on the basis that "Achilles allegedly first performed the pyrrhic around the pyre (*pyr*) of Patroclus" (Lonsdale 1993:148). Aristotle interestingly associated the Iliadic context, fire, and a turning movement—an explanation that, however, fails to account for the inversion of the head. Bidirectionality, contradictory directions, and revolving motion characterize the mobility of Hephaestus, Hermes, and Cuchulainn; each of them is related to fire production, and the pyrrhic is "the dance of fire." The name of the dance may therefore be explained by the logic of its choreography, which has to do essentially with performing bidirectionality in the body.

We may conclude that Hephaestus was originally seen as the god of fire precisely because he was characterized by his revolving in contradictory directions. In order to be a good smith—and what is more, a divine smith—one must be able to spin! The passage from orality to literacy gradually precluded the readability of a logic soon to become alien to the very culture that had produced it. A form-oriented thinking inferred maimed organs from abnormal movements and converted Hephaestus into a cripple. The mobility of fire and of prodigious beings associated with its power (Hephaestus, Hermes, *Beowulf*'s dragon, Cuchulainn) could not be successfully communicated through literacy, for textuality has one fundamental and non-negotiable limit: it is irremediably still.

---

<sup>14</sup> A great number of reproductions can be found in Delavaud-Roux 1993.

*University of Geneva, Switzerland*

### References

- Allen et al. 1980 T. W. Allen, W. R. Halliday, and E. E. Sikes. *The Homeric Hymns*. Amsterdam: Adolf M. Hakkert.
- Andersson 1991 Theodore M. Andersson. "Tradition and Design in *Beowulf* (1980)." Rpt. in *Interpretations of Beowulf: A Critical Anthology*. Ed. by R. D. Fulk. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. pp. 219-34.
- Bailly 1950 Anatole Bailly. *Dictionnaire Grec-Français*. Rev. by L. Séchan and P. Chantraine. Paris: Hachette.
- Bolens 1999 Guillemette Bolens. "Homeric Joints and the Marrow in Plato's *Timaeus*: Two Logics of the Body." *Multilingua*, 18:149-57.
- Bolens 2000 \_\_\_\_\_. *La Logique du corps articulaire*. Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes.
- Burkert 1985 Walter Burkert. *Greek Religion*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Carrington 1974 John F. Carrington. *La Voix des tambours: Comment comprendre le langage tambouriné d'Afrique*. Kinshasa: Centre Protestant d'Éditions et de Diffusion.
- Chantraine 1968 Pierre Chantraine. *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque*. Paris: Klincksieck.
- Daremborg 1865 C. Daremborg. *La Médecine dans Homère*. Paris: Didier.
- Delavaud-Roux 1993 Marie-Hélène Delavaud-Roux. *Les Danses armées en Grèce antique*. Aix-en-Provence: Publications de l'Université de Provence.
- Delcourt 1982 Marie Delcourt. *Héphaïstos ou la légende du magicien*. Paris: Les Belles Lettres.

- Deroy 1956 Louis Deroy. "À propos de l'épithète homérique d'Héphaistos ἀμφιγυήεις." *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions*, 150:129-35.
- Détienne and Vernant 1974 Marcel Détienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant. *Les Ruses de l'intelligence: La Mètis des Grecs*. Paris: Flammarion.
- Foley 1991 John Miles Foley. "Orality, Textuality, and Interpretation." In *Vox Intexta: Orality and Textuality in the Middle Ages*. Ed. by A. N. Doane and Carol Braun Pasternack. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press. pp. 34-45.
- Goody 1987 Jack Goody. *The Interface Between the Written and the Oral*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gordon 1967 R. K. Gordon, trans. *Anglo-Saxon Poetry*. Everyman's Library. London: Dent.
- Kahn 1978 Laurence Kahn. *Hermès passe ou les ambiguïtés de la communication*. Paris: Maspero.
- Lonsdale 1993 Steven H. Lonsdale. *Dance and Ritual Play in Greek Religion*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- O'Brien O'Keefe 1990 Katherine O'Brien O'Keefe. *Visible Song: Transitional Literacy in Old English Verse*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ong 1982 Walter J. Ong. *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. London: Methuen.
- Puhvel 1979 Martin Puhvel. *Beowulf and Celtic Tradition*. Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press.
- Sayers 1985 William Sayers. "The Smith and the Hero: Culann and Cú Chulainn." *Mankind Quarterly*, 25:227-60.
- Schaefer 1991 Ursula Schaefer. "Hearing from Books: The Rise of Fictionality in Old English Poetry." In *Vox Intexta: Orality and Textuality in the Middle Ages*. Ed. by A. N. Doane and Carol Braun Pasternack. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press. pp. 117-36.
- Stock 1983 Brian Stock. *The Implications of Literacy: Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

### Primary Sources

- Aristotle Aristotle. *Movement of Animals*. Ed. and trans. by E. S. Forster. Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993.
- Aristotle \_\_\_\_\_. *Fragmenta*. Lipsiae: Teubner, 1886.
- Crépin 1991 André Crépin, ed. and trans. *Beowulf. Edition diplomatique et texte critique, traduction française, commentaires et vocabulaire*. 2 vols. Göppingen: Kümmerle Verlag.
- Crossley-Holland 1968 Kevin Crossley-Holland, trans. *Beowulf*. London and Melbourne: Macmillan.
- Donaldson 1975 E. Talbot Donaldson, trans. *Beowulf: The Donaldson Translation*. Ed. by Joseph F. Tuso. New York and London: Norton.
- Evelyn-White 1914a H. G. Evelyn-White, ed. and trans. *Homeric Hymns*. In his *Hesiod, the Homeric Hymns and Homeric*. Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. Rpt. 1982.
- Evelyn-White 1914b \_\_\_\_\_. *The Theogony*. In his *Hesiod, the Homeric Hymns and Homeric*. Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. Rpt. 1982.
- Fagles 1990 Robert Fagles, trans. *The Iliad*. New York: Penguin. Rpt. 1991.
- Guyonvarc'h 1994 Christian Guyonvarc'h, trans. *(La) Razzia des vaches de Cooley*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Heaney 1999 Seamus Heaney, trans. *Beowulf*. London: Faber & Faber.
- Humbert 1976 Jean Humbert, ed. and trans. *Homère, Hymnes*. Paris: Les Belles Lettres.
- Jack 1994 George Jack, ed. *Beowulf: A Student Edition*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

- Jones 1961 H. L. Jones, ed. and trans. *Strabo, Geography*. Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Kinsella 1969 Thomas Kinsella, trans. *The Tain: Translated from the Irish Epic Táin Bó Cúalnge*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Klaeber 1922 F. Klaeber, ed. *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*. Boston: D.C. Heath.
- Lattimore 1951 Richmond Lattimore, trans. *The Iliad*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Rpt. 1961.
- Mugler 1989 Frédéric Mugler, ed. and trans. *L'Iliade*. Paris: La Différence.
- Murray and Wyatt 1999 A. T. Murray, ed. and trans. *Iliad*. 2 vols. Rev. by William Wyatt. Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. Orig. ed. 1924.
- O'Rahilly 1970 Cecile O'Rahilly, ed. and trans. *Táin Bó Cúalnge: From the Book of Leinster*. Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies.
- Rackham 1924 H. Rackham, ed. and trans. *Pliny, Natural History*. Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. Rpt. 1961.
- Swanton 1978 Michael Swanton, ed. and trans. *Beowulf*. Manchester: Manchester University Press. Rpt. 1986.

# Homer and Rhapsodic Competition in Performance<sup>1</sup>

Derek Collins

## Introduction

One legacy of Homeric studies since the pathbreaking work of Milman Parry, Albert Lord, Gregory Nagy, and John Miles Foley has been an emphasis on the earliest stages of composition and performance. These scholars have shown in detail how poet-singers compose while they perform, and perform while they compose epic poetry. However, we have yet to apply the valuable insights gained from their research to later stages of a poetic tradition, particularly after the poetic “texts” have become stable and written down, while live performances of these “texts” continue. The time has now come to attempt such an application, but with important qualifications. This is because a performance tradition that takes place against a body of fixed texts is governed by different rules, as it were, than one that is as yet in a more fluid stage. For one, audience expectation will be different, and greater allusive precision may be achieved by live performers who modify and improvise textual elements to surprise, shock, or delight their audiences. It is important to stress at the outset that a fixed text need not be an impediment, and indeed it may be an impetus, to the contingent and improvisational demands of live poetic performance.

Scholars are only beginning to apply these insights to the long tradition of rhapsodic performances of Homeric poetry.<sup>2</sup> Although rhapsodes have received increasing attention in recent scholarship,<sup>3</sup> there has

---

<sup>1</sup> Earlier versions of this paper were given at the annual meeting of the American Philological Association (December 1998), and before audiences at the Universities of Michigan, Iowa, and Missouri. I wish to thank all the participants for their encouragement and advice.

<sup>2</sup> For a general overview of rhapsodes, see Aly 1920, Pfeiffer 1968:8-12, and Ford 1988:300-7.

<sup>3</sup> See e.g. Nagy 1999 and Martin 2000.



still been no recent attempt to organize all of the evidence into a coherent whole.<sup>4</sup> This is not a task that I wish to undertake in the present paper. Instead, in what follows I aim to broaden a line of exploration concerning the competitive performance of rhapsodes,<sup>5</sup> which has faltered due to an ancient and modern prejudice against their “creative” abilities.<sup>6</sup> We know, for example, that improvisation<sup>7</sup> and innovation within the tradition is attested for rhapsodes as early as the mention of Kynaithos, sometime in the late sixth century B.C.E., apart from the etymological evidence for the term *rhapsôidos*, which may imply an improvisational capacity even earlier. We have evidence of a variety of rhapsodic games, which can be used to argue that rhapsodes were competent at many levels of poetic performance: they could, for instance, competitively recite memorized verses, improvise verses on the spot for elaboration or embellishment, and take up and leave off the narrative wherever they saw fit, all the while setting metrical and thematic challenges for their adversaries and attempting to win the audience to their side. These performance tactics comport in many respects with what we know about the quadrennial, greater Panathenaia, which unlike any other festival furnishes us with actual “rules” for rhapsodic performances.

Moreover, the sophist Alcidamas, who elsewhere shows an interest in rhapsodic performances (*On Sophists* 14), demonstrates several kinds of rhapsodic improvisation in his *Certamen Homeri et Hesiodi* (“Contest of Homer and Hesiod”) or some earlier version of the same, no doubt garnered

---

<sup>4</sup> A point well emphasized by Herington 1985:167; see his discussion of rhapsodes on pp. 10-15 and his partial collection of testimonia in Appendix II.

<sup>5</sup> On competition in Greek poetry in general, see the fundamental article by Griffith (1990).

<sup>6</sup> Pavese (1998:64) and Nagy (1990a:42, 1996:113) remain opponents (correctly in my view) of the simplistic distinction between a “creative” *aidos* and “reduplicative” *rhapsôidos*. This distinction still finds favor with some scholars, however, e.g. Powell 2000:118-19.

<sup>7</sup> Fundamental here is Hammerstaedt 1996; I thank Johan Schloemann for this reference. In this paper, I use the term “improvisation” to mean the spontaneous recomposition of traditional material (diction, formulae, etc.), rearranged in a novel way. McLeod (1961:323) compares the improvisation of rhapsodes with the formulaic nature of oracles after 400 B.C.E.

from his experience viewing rhapsodic contests.<sup>8</sup> The *Certamen* as we have it in manuscript form dates to the Antonine period, although much of the content including the contest proper was probably contained in Alcidamas' *Mouseion*.<sup>9</sup> As I will show, in the "epic" part of the *Certamen* (107-37) Alcidamas represents a hexameter dueling game that highlights the importance of enjambement as a connective technique, which can be compared to examples of enjambement found in Homeric poetry itself. At a later stage of the Homeric performance tradition, rhapsodes and, possibly, *Homêristai* continue to display improvisational skills during performances as reflected in the "eccentric" Ptolemaic papyri of Homer.

This suggests that we will have to revise our notion that rhapsodes merely "recited" memorized lines of Homer. Comparative research in cultures with live song, storytelling, and poetic contests also argues emphatically against such a notion. Clearly, rhapsodes also improvised their memorized lines or deployed traditional material in novel ways, though I do believe that they did so against the background of a stable body of texts, fixed perhaps by the time of Hipparkhos.<sup>10</sup> Throughout this discussion I will stress that the technical features of their improvisation cannot be understood apart from the competitive context in which they performed. Indeed, to press the point further, the competitive context of rhapsodic performances provides the best explanation for the types of creative improvisation that we find.

---

<sup>8</sup> Rhapsodic contests were frequent and widespread enough that we may safely assume that Alcidamas, like thousands of other Greeks, had seen them. Cf. Xenophon, *Symposium* 3.6, where Nikeratos says that he sees rhapsodes reciting "nearly every day."

<sup>9</sup> See *Certamen* 33 and 240, and the testimonia collected in Allen 1912:218-20. Background on Alcidamas' *Mouseion* and the relationship of the *Certamen* to the Michigan papyrus 2754 can be conveniently found in Richardson 1981 and M. West 1967.

<sup>10</sup> This is a highly contentious issue, and while I do not think there is evidence for a Peisistratean recension *per se*, such rhapsodic improvisation as I will present it is more readily understandable against the background of relatively (and perhaps rigidly) fixed texts. See Allen 1924:226-38 for a collection of the primary evidence relating to the Peisistratean question. Kotsidu (1991:188, n. 56) rightly stresses that the question of Homeric recension and the Panathenaic rule need not be connected in any direct way. My view of the Homeric texts at this stage corresponds with what Nagy (1996:110) describes as his third, "definitive" period for Homeric textual fixation.

## Modes of Innovation

The evidence of rhapsodic performance as we have it suggests that there were at least three basic types of improvisational activity in which rhapsodes engaged. The first involves the “stitching” or “weaving” of song, the second involves the insertion of newly composed “Homeric” verses into a preexisting text, and the third involves capping with hexameter verses. We are often at pains to determine which of these types was employed at a given performance venue, but we certainly have enough evidence to provide some suggestive indications. Let us begin with some familiar passages and scholia with regard to the etymology and meaning of the word *rhapsôidos* as “he who stitches the song.” The *locus classicus* for this word, as well as for the description of the mechanics of rhapsodic performance, is Pindar’s *Nemean* 2.1-3<sup>11</sup> and the scholia on those lines. At the beginning of *Nemean* 2, Pindar claims that he will begin where the Homeridae begin (Pindar, *Nemean* 2.1-3):

“Ὄθεν περ καὶ Ὀμηρίδαι  
ῥαπτῶν ἐπέων τὰ πόλλ’ ἀοιδοί  
ἄρχονται, Διὸς ἐκ προοιμίου

From the very point where the Homeridae,  
singers [*aidoi*] of stitched-together [*rhapta*] utterances [*epê*], most often  
begin, from a proem of Zeus

Pindar’s view that the Homeridae are singers of stitched-together utterances agrees with the linguistic evidence that *rhapsôidos* must derive from the verb *rhaptô* and the noun *aidê*.<sup>12</sup> Scholars are in relative agreement on this derivation as opposed to the other one attested in the Pindar scholia, which holds that the first component of *rhaps-ôidos* derives from the noun *rhabdos* “staff” (scholia to *Nemean* 2.1c 29-30 Drachmann). Matters are much more complicated when it comes to defining exactly what it is that rhapsodes

---

<sup>11</sup> All text citations of Pindar are taken from Snell and Maehler 1987. All translations are by the author.

<sup>12</sup> Schmitt 1967:300-30 and Chantraine 1968:s.v. ῥαψωδός. Cf. Tarditi (1968:144), who argues that the basic activity of the ῥαψωδός involves the interweaving (*intessere*) of individual material into that derived from epic tradition, while performers like the Homeridae stitch (*cucire*) together Homeric material. Such a distinction is too rigid in my view because it presupposes a clear sense of what was “Homeric” versus “individual” poetry, but this demarcation is not so clear.

weave. Of course they weave poetry or song, in the broad sense, but opinions have differed since Harald Patzer's important article on whether they weave together patches or segments of narrative, or perhaps smaller units of verse.<sup>13</sup> The Alexandrian scholiasts on *Nemean* 2.1-3 are themselves divided on this point.

There are several other testimonia in the same scholia, where we read that the poetry of Homer had been at some unspecified time scattered and divided into parts, so that to sing it rhapsodically meant to do something on the order of sewing the parts together to produce a whole (scholia to Pindar, *Nemean* 2.1c 30.5-8 Drachmann):

οἱ δὲ φασὶ τῆς Ὀμήρου ποιήσεως μὴ ὕφ' ἐν συνηγμένης,  
σποράδην δὲ ἄλλως καὶ κατὰ μέρη διηρημένης, ὅποτε  
ῥαψωδοῖεν αὐτήν, εἰρωμῶ τινι καὶ ῥαφῆ παραπλήσιον ποιεῖν, εἰς  
ἐν αὐτὴν ἄγοντας.

Some say that, since the poetry of Homer had not been brought together under one thing, and since it was otherwise scattered and separated into parts [*merê*], whenever they would sing it rhapsodically [*rhapsôideô*] they would do something similar to sequencing or sewing, producing it into one thing.

However one chooses exactly to define the word here for part, *meros*, clearly this definition of *rhapsôidos* or *rhapsôideô* suggests that each part was a longer segment of narrative, perhaps on the order of what we are told in Plato's *Ion*, where popular scenes from the *Iliad* or *Odyssey* are singled out for mention by Socrates—such as Nestor's advice to Antilokhos from *Iliad* 23, Odysseus at the moment when he leaps upon his threshold to kill the suitors from *Odyssey* 22, or the scene when Achilles lunges at Hektor in *Iliad* 22 (all featured at *Ion* 535b3-7), each of which might constitute a performable “part.”<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> As a response to Fränkel 1925, Patzer 1952:322-23 argued that the “stitch” (*Stich*, i.e., a line of hexameter verse) was the basic unit of composition implied by *rhaptein*, but he nevertheless conflated (like the scholiasts) the metaphors of weaving and stitching found in the scholia to Pindar.

<sup>14</sup> I do not agree with Taplin (1992:29-31), reflecting a wider assumption in scholarship, that the entire *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, from what we know as their beginnings to their ends, was performed at the Panathenaia. For the moment, I leave open the possibility that “parts,” of the type just described in Plato's *Ion*, could have been performed in isolation and in no particular order. Cf. the testimony of Dionysios of

The scholia on *Nemean* 2.1-3 also include other descriptions of how rhapsodes perform, notably from Philochorus (scholia to Pindar, *Nemean* 2.1c 31.7-9 Drachmann=*FGrH* 328 F 212):

Φιλόχορος δὲ ἀπὸ τοῦ συντιθέναι καὶ ῥάπτειν  
τὴν ᾠδὴν οὕτω φησὶν αὐτοὺς προσκεκλησθῆναι.

Philochorus says that they [=rhapsodes] were thus called on account of the putting together [*suntithêmi*] and stitching [*rhaptô*] of the song [*aoidê*].

In this passage Philochorus, who may simply have rationalized his explanation based upon *Nemean* 2.1-3, connects the idea of assembling (*suntithêmi*) a song with the verb *rhaptô*. More tantalizing is that in conjunction with this Philochorus then cites a fragment attributed, perhaps wrongly, to Hesiod (F 357 Merkelbach-West):

ἐν Δήλῳ τότε πρῶτον ἐγὼ καὶ Ὅμηρος ἀοιδοὶ  
μέλπομεν, ἐν νεαροῖς ὕμνοις ῥάψαντες ἀοιδὴν,  
Φοῖβον Ἀπόλλωνα χρυσάορον, ὃν τέκε Λητώ.

At that time, Homer and I, as singers, sang for the first time on Delos, stitching together [*rhaptô*] a song [*aoidê*] in new hymns [*humnos*] about Phoibos Apollo of the golden sword, whom Leto bore.

In this fragment Homer and Hesiod are imagined as rhapsodes who sing a song about Apollo ἐν νεαροῖς ὕμνοις ῥάψαντες ἀοιδὴν “stitching together a song in new hymns.” What interests me here is that Hesiod and Homer work together to sing *one* song about Apollo—a point that is often overlooked, as some scholars assume that Homer and Hesiod each sing a hymn to Apollo—and that they appear to do it by means of new verses or segments (if we can extract those meanings out of *humnos*<sup>15</sup> here), which could mean that they improvise them.<sup>16</sup>

---

Argos (scholia to *Nemean* 2.1d 31.2 Drachmann) that early rhapsodes sang whatever “part” of the tradition they wanted (ἕκαστος ὃ τι βούλοιοτο μέρος ᾗδε).

<sup>15</sup> Cf. *Odyssey* 8.429, where the expression ἀοιδῆς ὕμνος implies that *humnos* is a subdivision of song.

<sup>16</sup> As Richard Martin has recently argued (2000:411-15), if Hesiod F 357 MW can be taken to refer to the *Homeric Hymn to Apollo*, we may plausibly account for the Delian and Pythian division of that poem as the competitive contributions performed respectively by “Homer” and “Hesiod.” As to the Homeric poems themselves, especially

Balanced against all of this evidence for a stitching metaphor, in which preexisting segments are brought together into a whole, the scholia to *Nemean* 2.1-3 also contain hints of a different kind of metaphor for rhapsodic activity, that of weaving. Here I understand weaving to mean the criss-cross combination of warp and woof. As an example, a fragment attributed to Callimachus is adduced by the scholiast, in which the verb *huphainô* is used to describe the activity of song being wrapped around a staff:

καὶ τὸν ἐπὶ ῥάβδῳ μῦθον ὑφαίνόμενον

.....

ἤνεκές ἀείδω δεδεγμένος

and the narrative [*muthos*] woven around a staff [*rhabdos*]

.....

I received and sing continuously (Callimachus 26.5, 8 Pfeiffer)

It has long been noted that this fragment hints at both derivations (from *rhabdos* and *rhaptô*) for the first component of *rhaps-ôidos*. In the metaphor behind the verb *huphainô*, threads of song corresponding to a warp and woof are more easily imaginable here than patches or quilts, which is what the sewing or stitching metaphor assumes.<sup>17</sup> I take this hint—and it is nothing more—to suggest a related kind of activity in which rhapsodes weave smaller segments of verse, or perhaps individual verses themselves, into a larger whole.

For this reason, a fragment from the historian Menaikhmos in the same *Nemean* 2 scholia (2.1d 14-15 Drachmann) may also be relevant. It mentions the term *stikhaoidos*, which Menaikhmos says a rhapsode was thus called because the *rhabdos* could also be called a *stikhos*. However, the term *stikhaoidos* has been taken by scholars like Ritoók (1962:226, n.7) to correspond not only with the false etymology of *rhapsoidos* as the singer who holds the staff, but also with the idea of the “singers of lines of verse,” or *stikhoi*. The word *stikhaoidos* is actually attested in the *Greek Anthology* (16.316), and is there compared to the public speaker. Parenthetically, I note that Menaikhmos might well have had the singing of verses in mind, as he was a native of Sikyon, and Sikyon had its own earlier native tradition of

---

the *Iliad*, Eustathius already believed that many stylistic features could be explained through Homer’s improvisation; see Van der Valk 1976:xxvi-xxvii with note 1, and xxxix with note 3.

<sup>17</sup> The sewing metaphor is embraced by Nagy 1996:66.

rhapsodic contests. Indeed, our first mention of rhapsodic performance at contests comes by way of Herodotus, who mentions the contests at Sikyon that were banned by Kleisthenes (5.67).<sup>18</sup>

A second type of improvisational activity by rhapsodes is attested in one final example from the scholia to *Nemean 2* (2.1c 9-18=*FGrH* 568 F 5):

᾽Ομηρίδας ἔλεγον τὸ μὲν ἀρχαῖον τοὺς ἀπὸ τοῦ ᾽Ομήρου γένους, οἳ καὶ τὴν ποίησιν αὐτοῦ ἐκ διαδοχῆς ἤδον· μετὰ δὲ ταῦτα καὶ οἱ ῥαψῳδοὶ οὐκέτι τὸ γένος εἰς ᾽Ομηρον ἀνάγοντες, ἐπιφανεῖς δὲ ἐγένοντο οἱ περὶ Κύναιθον, οὓς φασι πολλὰ τῶν ἐπῶν ποιήσαντας ἐμβαλεῖν εἰς τὴν ᾽Ομήρου ποίησιν. ἦν δὲ ὁ Κύναιθος τὸ γένος Χίος, ὃς καὶ τῶν ἐπιγραφομένων ᾽Ομήρου ποιημάτων τὸν εἰς ᾽Απόλλωνα γεγραφῶς ὕμνον ἀνατέθεικεν αὐτῷ. οὗτος οὖν ὁ Κύναιθος πρῶτος ἐν Συρακούσαις ἐραψώδησε τὰ ᾽Ομήρου ἔπη κατὰ τὴν ξθ' ᾽Ολυμπιάδα, ὡς ᾽Ιππόστρατός φησιν.

Originally they called the descendants of Homer the Homeridai, who sang [*aoidō*] his poetry in succession; after this the *rhapsōidoi* could no longer trace their lineage to Homer. Apparently they were from Kynaithos, who, they say, after composing [*poieō*] many utterances [*epē*] they [= the rhapsodes] put them into [*emballō*] the poetry of Homer. Kynaithos's family was from Chios, and of the poems that bear Homer's name, he wrote the *Hymn to Apollo* and attributed it to Homer.<sup>19</sup> This Kynaithos was the first to sing rhapsodically [*rhapsōideō*] the epics of Homer in Syracuse, in the 69th Olympiad [504/1 B.C.], as Hippostratos says.

In this rather long example, we learn both about the clan of the Homeridae, who once claimed to have descended from Homer, and then about Kynaithos, who is said to have been the first person to sing the epics of Homer rhapsodically at Syracuse.<sup>20</sup> We also learn in the next sentences in this passage that Kynaithos composed his own utterances (*epē*), which here most likely mean individual verses, and then put them into the poetry of Homer. We do not know whether Kynaithos composed his

<sup>18</sup> As Nagy (1990b:22, n. 22) suggests, the context of Kleisthenes' war with Argos makes it likely that the content of these epic performances involved material from the Theban cycle.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Martin (2000:419, n. 58), who suggests that the expression ἀνατέθεικεν αὐτῷ may mean that Kynaithos "dedicated it [the hymn] to *him* (*autōi*=*Apollo*)" (italics in original).

<sup>20</sup> For more on Kynaithos, see M. West 1975.

utterances extempore during a performance and passed them off as Homer's, or whether this is something he did prior to his performance. Either way, two points are important here: 1) the Homeric poems are envisioned by this commentator (that is, Hipponostratos) as being relatively fixed, and 2) Kynaithos composed lines that he then inserted into Homer. This story represents a type of rhapsodic improvisation in which a rhapsode creates his own lines for performance and display against the background of a more stable body of Homeric narrative. What remains implicit in the description of Kynaithos is *why* (beyond some generic desire for notoriety) he composed epic verses and a hymn and passed them off as Homer's. I will return to this point later, but the evidence for rhapsodic performance as it accumulates will suggest that Kynaithos created new material to compete with his rhapsodic opponents rather than with Homer.

Later Greek literature gives us a third series of improvisational activities by rhapsodes, all roughly organized around the principle of capping. As scholars have observed,<sup>21</sup> the *Certamen* itself depicts several different types of poetic competition: hexameter exchanges of philosophical questions and answers (lines 75-101, 140-75), completion of verse couplets or capping (107-37), and recitation of complete passages (180-204).<sup>22</sup> If we can be reasonably sure that the hexameter exchange of philosophical questions and answers is at least as old as the sixth century,<sup>23</sup> as the contest between Kalkhas and Mopsos suggests,<sup>24</sup> I see no reason why these other forms of competition cannot be as old.

---

<sup>21</sup> E.g., Dunkel 1979:252-53.

<sup>22</sup> Although not involving rhapsodes, Dunkel (1979:252-53), following Dornseiff 1944:135, points to the parallel between these modes of poetic competition and those represented in Aristophanes' *Frogs* between Aeschylus and Euripides: general tests of σοφία (1420-65), recitation of passages (1126-87), capping a couplet given by the opponent (ληγύθειον ἀπώλεσεν, 1208-45). As an additional mode in the *Frogs*, the judge has them recite a line simultaneously to weigh the "heaviness" of its imagery (1378-1403).

<sup>23</sup> See Richardson 1981:1-2.

<sup>24</sup> From Hesiod's *Melampodia*=Frag. 278 MW. Cf. the tradition of the rhapsodic performance (*rhapsôidêsai*) of Empedocles' *Purifications* (31 A 1 Diels-Kranz).



Let us now turn to a more detailed examination of the types of improvisational activity that we find in Alcidamas' *Certamen*.<sup>25</sup> The *Certamen* is important not only because it depicts a fictional poetic contest that illustrates many of the features of rhapsodic performance for which I have been arguing, but also because we know that Alcidamas valued the extemporaneous speaking ability of sophists (*On Sophists* 3, 22-23, 24, 34), which he called *καίρω*,<sup>26</sup> and that he depicts this ability in several ways in the *Certamen*.<sup>27</sup> One of the most striking of these involves what I would call the epic part, lines 107-37, where the fictional Hesiod and Homer are made to duel with mock-epic hexameter lines. In this connection I am following the work of Ritoók, who believed that the *Certamen* represented the best point of support for the basic, archaic notion of the rhapsode as a creative stitcher of verse (1962:228-29). To be fair to Ritoók, however, I must note that he followed Davison in believing that rhapsodes merely recited memorized verses at an event like the Panathenaia. What I am interested in is the knowledge of hexameter versification that is presupposed by the fictional Hesiod and Homer, and whether we may generalize from that to actual rhapsodic performances in Alcidamas' day.

With respect to the epic part of the *Certamen*, Konrad Heldmann has observed that "the problem consists in continuing one verse, which must be as absurd as possible, through another verse so that both together to a certain extent produce a meaningful unity."<sup>28</sup> This is true, yet it all but wrings out the humor and improvisational artistry of the game. Even Wilamowitz had recognized in 1916 that the *Certamen* was, as he put it, "ein besonderes

---

<sup>25</sup> All text citations from the *Certamen* are taken from Allen 1912. For general background to the *Certamen*, especially the issue of dating, see Richardson 1981, which is a response to M. West 1967.

<sup>26</sup> See the discussion by Ritoók (1991:160) and the more detailed analysis of Alcidamas' views in O'Sullivan 1992.

<sup>27</sup> For example, cf. the *amphibolos gnômê* at *Certamen* 170-71, where Hesiod asks: τῆς σοφίης δὲ τί τέκμαρ ἐπ' ἀνθρώποισι πέφυκεν; ("what is the mark of wisdom for men?"), to which Homer replies: γιγνώσκειν τὰ παρόντ' ὀρθῶς, καίρω δ' ἄμ' ἐπεσθαι ("to perceive present affairs correctly, and to keep pace with the right moment"). The translation cannot do full justice to this exchange, which among other things can be taken to reflect the skills demanded in the very improvisational game in which Hesiod and Homer are engaged.

<sup>28</sup> Heldmann 1982:81. The original reads: "Die Aufgabe besteht darin, einen Vers, der möglichst absurd sein muß . . . durch einen anderen Vers so fortzusetzen, daß beide zusammen eine einigermaßen sinnvolle Einheit ergeben. . . ."

Spiel ἐξ ὑποβολῆς” (“a special game by cue”).<sup>29</sup> In any event, the humor in the *Certamen* is already evident in Hesiod’s opening gambit to Homer (lines 97-98), Μοῦσ’ ἄγε μοι τά τ’ ἐόντα τά τ’ ἐσσόμενα πρό τ’ ἐόντα / τῶν μὲν μηδὲν ἄειδε, “Come, Muse, sing to me nothing” (*mêden aeide*—which is clearly a pun on the opening line of the *Iliad*, and perhaps simultaneously of *Iliad* 1.70 and Hesiod’s *Theogony*, 38) “of what exists, what will come, and what has come before,” σὺ δ’ ἄλλης μνήσαι ἀοιδῆς, “you [Homer] remember another song.” This last line plays on the standard ending of many Homeric hymns, where the voice of the poet says that he will now remember another song. Here Hesiod would rather Homer not sing anything traditional, and this request in some sense authorizes the improvisational gaming to follow.

The game continues with Hesiod’s first challenge verse, in which he says: δεῖπνον ἔπειθ’ εἶλοντο βοῶν κρέα καὶ χένας ἵππων (“then they took as their meal the flesh of cattle, and the necks of horses . . .”). At this point, which is to say right after the bucolic diaeresis, the noun *aukhên* looks as if it is going to remain the object of the verb *haireomai* (“take”), until Homer successfully enjambes the next line with a verb and participle in agreement with the noun, ἔκλυον ἰδρώοντα (“they unyoked [those necks] dripping with sweat”), and then fills out the rest of the line with a further comment, ἐπεὶ πολέμοιο κορέσθην (“when they had tired of war”). This does not just take a meaningless line of verse and turn it into a meaningful one, as Heldmann had so flatly observed, but rather successfully converts the outlandish idea of eating horses—a barbaric practice, perhaps reminiscent of what Herodotus tells us about the Scythians (4.61)—into a more mundane one about relieving them from their burdens during wartime.

These examples suggest that the game entirely depends upon enjambement, particularly upon where the sense break occurs in the lead verse spoken by Hesiod, which structures what kind of word can be placed in the runover position at the beginning of Homer’s following line. Moreover, we are simply not able to recover from the texts themselves any metalinguistic signals, such as changes in intonation or emphasis, let alone any kind of gestural cues, that could have been used by one rhapsode to signal the next rhapsode as to exactly what feature of the lead verse he would need to focus on for his enjambement. But we may take such clues for granted, I believe, in a medium like this where dramatic enactment (or, shall we say, *mimêsis*) also constitutes part of the rhapsodic performance of

---

<sup>29</sup> Wilamowitz 1916:402. The expression ἐξ ὑποβολῆς, to be discussed below, is from Diogenes Laertius 1.57=FGrH 485 F 6 and refers to rhapsodes at the Panathenaia.

Homer.<sup>30</sup> We may recall that the rhapsode Ion tells Socrates how he is able to move his audience to tears with a riveting performance, or inadvertently to laughter with a poor one (Plato, *Ion* 535b-e).<sup>31</sup>

Sometimes the fictional Homer in the *Certamen* must wait until he hears the words that occupy the whole adonic at verse-end before he can know how to enjamb them. So for example at lines 119-20, Hesiod sings that ὥς οἱ μὲν δαίνυντο πανήμεροι, οὐδὲν ἔχοντες (“so they feasted all day long, having nothing”), at which point Homer should be confounded, yet he twists the idea around by enjambing an adverb οἴκοθεν (“having nothing . . . from home”) ἀλλὰ παρείχεν ἄναξ ἀνδρῶν Ἀγαμέμνων (“but Agamemnon lord of men supplied them”). On this occasion the enjambement is an adverb, at other times it may be a noun or participle coordinated with the end of the previous verse by its case.

In this section of the *Certamen*, where the challenge is one of responding to *amphiboloi gnômai* (102-3), Homer’s technical mastery of enjambement is what is on display. Even if he does not win in the end, there can be no question that Alcidamas is manipulating a rhapsodic framework,<sup>32</sup> which resembles what we are told about rhapsodes at the Panathenaia. Moreover, references to improvisation (*skhediazēin*)<sup>33</sup> are explicit elsewhere in the *Certamen* (*skhediasai* 279, again Homer), and therefore make it likely that Alcidamas is presenting a composite picture of rhapsodic and improvisational performance in the section on hexameter-dueling.

---

<sup>30</sup> Herington 1985:12-13. Rhapsodes are frequently compared to actors at Plato, *Ion* 532d, 536a, and *Republic* 395a; Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1403b22 and *Poetics* 1462a5-6; and Alcidamas, *On Sophists* 14. On the comparison between sophists and oral poets in Alcidamas, see Ritoók 1991.

<sup>31</sup> Ion (Plato, *Ion* 535e) comes right to the point: δεῖ γάρ με καὶ σφόδρ’ αὐτοῖς τὸν νοῦν προσέχειν· ὥς ἐὰν μὲν κλαίοντας αὐτοὺς καθίσω, αὐτὸς γελάσομαι ἀργύριον λαμβάνων, ἐὰν δὲ γελῶντας, αὐτὸς κλάσομαι ἀργύριον ἀπολλύς (“I must pay very close attention to them [the audience], since if I set them crying, I myself will laugh because of the money I get, but if I set them laughing, I myself will cry because of the money I lose”).

<sup>32</sup> Note the usage of the verb *rhapsôideô* to describe Homer at *Certamen* 56. Cf. Plato, *Republic* 600d, in which both Homer and Hesiod are described as rhapsodes (*rhapsôideô*).

<sup>33</sup> For a discussion of the terminology of improvisation, see Hammerstaedt 1996:1215.

It turns out that what Alcidas' Homer is doing with these enjambements is not unlike what we can find in the Homeric poems themselves. As those who have studied enjambement<sup>34</sup> have well recognized, the runover position is one of the most characteristic features of Homeric style.<sup>35</sup> As an example from Homer of the kind that we have just seen, where a verb is enjambed and governs a noun in the preceding verse, consider these lines from the *Iliad*:<sup>36</sup>

ὅς καὶ νῦν Ἀχιλῆα ἕο μέγ' ἀμείνονα φῶτα  
ἡτίμησεν

And now he has Achilles, a much better man than him,  
dishonored

(*Iliad* 2.239-40)

In this example we see that the noun *phōs* (“man”) is governed by a verb in the runover position, and lest we think this is a formula, consider this next verse in which the same noun in the same position is governed by a different verb:

ἔγχος μὲν τόδε κείται ἐπὶ χθονός, οὐδέ τι φῶτα  
λεύσσω

This spear of mine lies on the ground, and I can no longer any man  
see

(*Iliad* 20.345-46)

In the *Certamen* Homer also enjambes infinitives to limit and transform a leading verse from Hesiod. So for example at lines 131-32, Hesiod's lead verse says: αὐτὰρ ἐπεὶ σπεῖσάν τε καὶ ἔκπιον οἶδμα θαλάσσης (“but when they poured libations and drank, the swell of the sea . . .”), which makes no sense until Homer enjambes it with the infinitive

---

<sup>34</sup> On Homeric enjambement in general, I mention only Basset 1926; Edwards 1966; Kirk 1976:146-82; Foley 1990:152, 163-64; and Higbie 1990. The work on enjambement by Bakker 1990 and 1997:152-55, focusing as it does on cognitive units rather than the runover position in hexameter verse, is not relevant to the game in the *Certamen*.

<sup>35</sup> Edwards 1966:138.

<sup>36</sup> All text citations of Homer are taken from Monro and Allen 1920, and Allen 1917.

*pontoporein* and makes it depend on *mellô*, *ποντοπορεῖν ἤμελλον ἐυσσέλμων ἐπὶ νηῶν* (“there were minded to sail [the swell of the sea] on well-benched ships”). We may compare this to another example from the *Iliad*, which although not exactly the same, similarly enjambes an infinitive that governs a preceding noun:

ἐξέλετ' ἄσπετα πολλά· τὰ δ' ἄλλ' ἐς δῆμον ἔδωκε  
*δαίτρευειν*, μή τις οἱ ἀτεμβόμενος κίοι ἴσης.

[Neleus] took a huge amount; but the rest he gave to the people  
 to *distribute*, so that no one would go away without a just share.  
 (*Iliad* 11.704-5)

In this example, Nestor recalls how his father Neleus, in a dispute with the king of Elis, took for himself a vast amount of spoil and “the rest he gave to the people to distribute, so that no one would go away without a just share.” Here the infinitive *daitreuein* is enjambes in what appears to be a redundant way, as Bassett once noted about this line (1926:122), and the rest of the line does not appear to add anything substantial to the sense. If Neleus gave spoils to the people, he clearly did so for them to distribute among themselves. More striking is the fact that Zenodotus actually rejected line 705 and Aristarchus athetized it, believing that it borrowed a verse (it is almost identical with *Odyssey* 9.42). Yet I want to suggest that this is exactly the kind of thing we should expect from a performing rhapsode, who at this point could have used the enjambling infinitive and the remainder of the verse as a transition to the next part of the story, which in fact does shift somewhat as it begins to describe another battle between the men of Pylos and Elis.

In the epic part of the *Certamen* as a whole, the bucolic diaeresis and verse-end, as we might expect, are the most prominent sense breaks that are used by the fictional Homer to create his enjambements. In passing, I note that there is a pervasive assumption underlying current Homeric enjambement studies of a performance model involving one singer, for whom enjambement has served diachronically as a mnemonic device. If I am right, however, enjambement can also serve the immediate performance demands of rhapsodes competitively leaving off and taking up the narrative stream where they see fit. It is tempting to speculate further that rhapsodic gaming of this kind actually *generated* longer narratives,<sup>37</sup> but even if that

---

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Martin (2000:410) again on the *Homeric Hymn to Apollo*. His notion of expansion of Homeric formulae can be found at 1989:209-10 (splitting and replacement), 214-15 (elaboration), and 216-19 (telescoping).

cannot be proven, we may more narrowly conclude that such gaming contributed to the development of enjambement as a connective technique.

The most prominent rhapsodic competition that we know about took place at the Panathenaia in Athens. In this competition rhapsodes performed by exchange and by cue in a manner that seems to reflect, albeit indirectly, what we observed in the *Certamen*. I will only discuss here the two most prominent testimonia for what J. A. Davison (1955, 1958) once called the “Panathenaic Rule.” The first relates how the rules were laid down by Hipparkhos:

Ἱππάρχῳ, ὃς τῶν Πεισιστράτου παίδων ἦν πρεσβύτατος καὶ σοφώτατος, ὃς ἄλλα τε πολλὰ καὶ ἔργα σοφίας ἀπεδείξατο, καὶ τὰ Ἑομήρου ἔπη πρῶτος ἐκόμισεν εἰς τὴν γῆν ταυτηνί, καὶ ἠνάγκασε τοὺς ῥαψωδοὺς Παναθηναίοις ἐξ ὑπολήψεως ἐφεξῆς αὐτὰ διέναι, ὥσπερ νῦν ἔτι οἶδε ποιοῦσι.

Hipparkhos, who was the eldest and wisest of the sons of Peisistratos, and who, among the other many and beautiful deeds that he displayed as proof of his wisdom, first brought the utterances of Homer to this land [=Athens], and required [*anankazô*] the rhapsodes at the Panathenaia to go through [*dia-ienai*] these things [*auta*=utterances] in sequence [*ephexês*], by relay [*ex hupolêpseôs*], as they [=rhapsodes] still do even now.

([Plato], *Hipparchus* 228b-c)

In this passage we are told that Hipparkhos, a son of Peisistratos, first brought the Homeric poems (*epê*, which most likely means in written form<sup>38</sup>) to Athens,<sup>39</sup> and then required that rhapsodes at the Panathenaia go through them in sequence (*ephexês*<sup>40</sup>) and by relay (*ex hupolêpseôs*, from the verb *hupolambanô* “to take up, reply”). This idea of relay is crucial, because as we have seen in the example of the Homeridae, they also stitched or wove their poetry together by turn-taking, and it seems to me that if this practice

---

<sup>38</sup> I agree with Nagy (1996:133) that texts of Homer were not essential to the origin and early development of rhapsodic competitions, but I believe that written texts are assumed by the author of this passage. At Alcidamas, *On Sophists* 14, written texts are also assumed in the performance of rhapsodes and actors.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. the related account of Lycurgus, who brought the Homeric poems from the descendants of Kreophylos of Samos back to the Spartans (Plutarch, *Life of Lycurgus* 4.4). Discussion in Burkert 1972 and Nagy 1996:79, with testimonia given in his Appendix 1.

<sup>40</sup> I take *ephexês* to refer to the sequence of performance by rhapsodes, that is, one after another, rather than to the sequence of poetic material. Cf. Schwartz 1940:5.

was institutionalized by Hipparkhos, then it must in some sense represent a distinguishing characteristic of rhapsodic performance at the Panathenaia,<sup>41</sup> as opposed to, say, the competitions between kithara or pipe players. The Panathenaia might have allowed for the display of various improvisational techniques, such as embellishing and the sequencing of scenes in expansion, as well as a clever pick-up through enjambement by one rhapsode from the previous rhapsode. Although the evidence does not permit definitive answers here, it is important to stress that all of these possibilities are conceivable within Hipparkhos' rules for performance. Any claim that the entire *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were recited from beginning to end at the Panathenaia is simply insupportable.<sup>42</sup>

The idea of exchange between rhapsodes is refined in the reference to the Panathenaic Rule in Diogenes Laertius, who attributes it to Solon:

τά τε Ὅμηρου ἐξ ὑποβολῆς γέγραφε ραψωδῆσθαι, οἷον ὅπου ὁ πρῶτος ἔληξεν, ἐκεῖθεν ἄρχεσθαι τὸν ἐχόμενον.

He [=Solon] wrote a law that the poetry of Homer was to be performed rhapsodically [*rhapsôideô*] by cue [*ex hupobolês*, from *hupoballô*], so that where the first person left off, from that point the next one would begin.

(Diogenes Laertius 1.57 [*Life of Solon*])

Here we read that Solon wrote a law that the poetry of Homer was to be performed rhapsodically *ex hupobolês* “by cue,” and that where the first singer left off, the next one would begin at that point.<sup>43</sup> What this means exactly is not as clear as scholars like H. A. Shapiro would have us believe:

---

<sup>41</sup> There may be ideological implications to the Panathenaic rule as well, which I intend to address in a forthcoming work. Some attempt has been made to treat the democratic nature of the Panathenaia (particularly with respect to the *euandria* contest) after the accession of Kleisthenes; see Neils 1994.

<sup>42</sup> E.g. by Sealey (1957:342, 349); strong hints of the same position can be found in Shapiro (1993:104). Doubts on this point have (rightly in my view) been expressed by Burkert (1987:50) and Boyd (1994:118). Kotsidu (1991:44), although suggesting that *die Reihenfolge des Textes*—whatever this is exactly—had to be maintained by rhapsodes, does not assume that both epics were performed at the Panathenaia. Yet she does assume that at least one of them was performed in its entirety. This same view was expressed much earlier by Meyer (1918:332). As we shall see, the evidence as we have it does not even support this claim.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. the related but derivative accounts of the “Panathenaic Rule” in Lycurgus, *Against Leocrates* 102 and Plutarch, *Pericles* 13.6.

it could mean, as he argues (1993:104), that after a coherent scene, of the kind mentioned earlier in connection with Plato's *Ion*, one rhapsode stops and the next one begins. But there is no reason to assume that possibility only. It could also be the case that two rhapsodes may both be engaged in singing by turns the same "scene," just as Homer and Hesiod were engaged on Delos to sing one hymn to Apollo, and they alternated with one another in producing it. We do not know the frequency with which rhapsodes, given this performance mode, might have alternated with one another. In the list of performable scenes given by Socrates in the *Ion* (535b), the possible length appears to vary from as little as seven lines (*Iliad* 22.430-36 concerning Hekabe) to several hundred (*Iliad* 24.144-717 on Priam). Although Ion in Plato's dialogue can recite whole scenes himself, this does not mean that recitation on such a scale was the only performative mode at the Panathenaia.<sup>44</sup> If this is correct, it provides an answer to the interesting problem of how rhapsodes were prevented from arbitrarily appropriating to themselves the better scenes (a point originally raised by Sealey [1957:343]), however we conclude what makes a scene better or worse in Homer. This concern does not arise if rhapsodes are performing the same scenes together, and equally importantly, it does not arise if we assume that what was competitive about rhapsodic performance lay not primarily in the content of what was performed, but rather in the technical and dramatic skill with which it was performed.

The term *ex hupobolês* deserves a special note. I follow *LSJ*'s basic translation of this phrase, but I do not agree with their suggestion that rhapsodes recited from an external cue, as if the cue here were some kind of actor's prompt.<sup>45</sup> Research in cultures with living oral traditions shows that in competitive poetic contests oral cues can be given by one singer to another in performance, without any difficulty and at times with great virtuosity. The cues are sometimes as simple as a given word that is handed off, as it were, leaving it up to the next singer to do something innovative with it, or to do something that is not necessarily innovative but nonetheless shows a mastery of the game. As one non-Greek example, I cite a dueling rhyme game discussed by Alan Dundes (1987) that has been documented among modern Turkish boys, aged roughly 8-14. In this rather simplistic

---

<sup>44</sup> And it certainly does not exclude the kinds of improvisation, especially the addition or elaboration of verses, for which I have been arguing.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Boyd 1994:115, n.16, where he unnecessarily posits the existence of "attendants" or "officials" who preside over the competition and who clock each rhapsode's performance.



game, the object is to cast an opponent into a passive homosexual role. One boy starts by giving an image, say a bear (in Turkish, *ayı*). The next boy must then say something clever like “let a violin bow enter the bear,” saying it in such a way that the final word of his sentence, “bow” (*yayı*), rhymes with the word for bear. The violin bow, by the way, is a particularly appropriate image because it is long and thin, and the bowing motion itself suggests sexual motion. Then the first boy must find an equally apposite retort, perhaps something to the effect that it is better if a real man replaces the bow and enters the second boy, again making his line-end rhyme with the previous line-end.<sup>46</sup> Provided each boy makes a successful retort with end-rhyme, linking image to image, the game continues, sometimes with dozens of exchanged lines. Sometimes the exchanged lines are improvised on the spot, but just as frequently certain of them are in fact traditional responses, and so part of the object of the game is to show by means of these responses how well one has mastered the traditional repertoire. The loser will be the boy who fails poetically to thwart his opponent’s attempts to cast him in a passive homosexual role or who breaks the rhyme scheme. As these non-professional games show, cueing and exchange between players are dictated by the internal dynamics of the game and by the tradition. Similarly in the case of Greece, we need not look beyond the performing rhapsodes themselves for the *hupobolê*.

We actually have later evidence in Greece (particularly in Ionia) that rhapsodic exchange, as a general performance mode, also took place at the non-professional level of boys’ games. Plato in the *Timaeus* (21b) mentions that boys at the festival of Apaturia were said to engage in “rhapsodic contests” (*aithla rhapsôidias*) set up by their fathers, where the objective was apparently to exchange the elegiac verses of Solon. Perhaps the most interesting boys’ games are documented in inscriptions from Chios and Teos, dated to the second century B.C.E., set up to commemorate the victors. In the inscription from Chios (*CIG* 2214=*SIG* 959), we read about competitions between different age levels of boys in *rhapsôidia*, as well as *anagnôsis* (reading), *kitharismos/kitharisis* (lyre-playing), and *psalmos* (harp-playing), not to mention more physical exercises like the *diaulos* (running race). Dittenberger, following Boeckh, in his commentary on this inscription, relates this description of events to the inscription from Teos (*CIG* 3088=*SIG* 960n1), which lists many of the same competitive events but also mentions an event *hupobolês antapodoseôs* for the older age-set of boys (*hêlikia*). This is possibly some kind of give-and-take competition by cue, a game Wilamowitz (1884:266) connected to the *Certamen*. The give-

---

<sup>46</sup> These examples in Dundes 1987:86.

and-take competition seems parallel to the mention of *rhapsôidia* in the Chios inscription, as well as to the more advanced and specialized rhapsodic competitions at the Panathenaia. Following Dittenberger and Boeckh, I would argue that the reference to *hupobolê* certainly suggests the exchange of poetic verses, and again that, contrary to *LSJ*, these boys' competitions, as in the Turkish example, need not entail any external prompt. Rhapsodes, moreover, with their extensive memorization and mastery of Homeric texts,<sup>47</sup> would surely not have needed any external cue by which to exchange verses.

There is widespread evidence from all over Greece that rhapsodic performances continued vigorously for centuries—the Panathenaia itself is attested down to the third century C.E.<sup>48</sup> But when we look at the period between roughly the fourth and first centuries B.C.E., some innovations in the structure and content of professional rhapsodic performances begin to emerge. Victory lists for this period found in inscriptions from a wide array of cities in Greece, usually in the context of festivals in honor of gods or local cult heroes, which have been thoroughly studied by Maria Pallone,<sup>49</sup> show quite clearly that not only rhapsodes were victorious, but also a new breed of contestant, the ποιητῆς ἐπῶν or “poet of epic,” began to win. Pallone has explained that, beginning in the fourth century, new works of poetry in hexameter began to be composed for these festival contests, and that they were performed either by a rhapsode or occasionally by the poet himself, who may be listed as victorious under both the title of poet and rhapsode.<sup>50</sup> Typically the content of these new epic creations is mythological, historical, or what Pallone calls “court” epics. So for example there were poems composed about the deeds of Herakles or the Argonauts, the exploits of Dionysus, as well as more localized stories about individual communities and their foundation legends. As a model for these compositions, Pallone suggests (1984:163), we might compare the seventh- and sixth-century B.C.E. compositions of the Epic Cycle poems, attributed

---

<sup>47</sup> Memorization by rhapsodes is assumed at Xenophon, *Symposium*, 3.6.

<sup>48</sup> See the inscriptions cited in M. West 1996:1312. Cf. Herington 1985: Appendix II.

<sup>49</sup> Pallone 1984. Cf. the brief treatment of this period in Gentili 1990:174-76.

<sup>50</sup> E.g. *Inscriptiones Graecae* 7.419.14-17 (first century B.C.E.).

to rhapsodes such as Leskhes of Lesbos or Arktinos of Miletus,<sup>51</sup> which covered the exploits of Herakles and the Theban and Trojan wars. However, the difference between the Hellenistic compositions and those of elite Alexandrian poets such as Apollonius of Rhodes, Callimachus, and Theocritus, to name only a few, are that the former were composed for popular performance and competition at these localized festivals, not for a narrow circle of literati directly associated with the Library of Alexandria.<sup>52</sup>

### Variatio Homerica

We may correlate this period of innovation in rhapsodic performances, roughly from the fourth to the first centuries B.C.E., with a small corpus of Homeric papyri from the Ptolemaic period (305-145 B.C.E.) that stand out for the peculiarity of their divergences from the vulgate of Homer. The Ptolemaic papyri of Homer, collected and edited by Stephanie West (1967), give us many examples of so-called “plus-verses,” which are additional verses that survive but do not appear in the vulgate Homer as it becomes standardized after the editorial activity of Aristarchus, perhaps in 150 B.C.E. or so. These papyri, dating from about 300 to 150 B.C.E. are considered “eccentric” or “wild” because they diverge so much from the Roman papyri of Homer, which deviate much less from the medieval manuscripts. As West points out, these papyri “cannot be explained by the processes of mere mechanical (that is to say, scribal or copyist) corruption” (1967:11). The divergences simply show too intimate a knowledge of the Homeric texts to be errors in the usual sense, and are more readily understandable as the product of a still lively poetic tradition.<sup>53</sup>

Many scholars, including Thomas Allen (1924:267), have argued that these variations are specifically due to the performance of rhapsodes.<sup>54</sup> This

---

<sup>51</sup> See Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* 1.144 and Aly 1920:246 on Leskhes’ contest with Arktinos. Leskhes is said to have won.

<sup>52</sup> Pallone 1984:162-64 and Gentili 1990:174.

<sup>53</sup> Foley (1990:22-26, espec. 26) presents a forceful argument for this view and emphasizes the contribution of rhapsodes.

<sup>54</sup> Stephanie West is another; see S. West 1967:13, and her essay “The Transmission of the Text” in Heubeck et al. 1988:33-48, espec. 35, though I emphatically disagree with her notion that rhapsodes thought of themselves as “improving” the text.

same conjecture was made in the nineteenth century (in the wake of Friedrich August Wolf's rhapsodic *Liedertheorie* of the composition of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*), but at that time scholars like Arthur Ludwich regarded rhapsodes (such as Kynaithos) as inferior forgers and falsifiers of the Homeric text.<sup>55</sup> Allen adopted this same prejudice when, following Ludwich, he argued that rhapsodes were attempting to "increase and improve" the Master (1924:326), that is Homer, whence he proceeded to give an allusion to Mozart's supplements to Handel. More recently, Michael Apthorp has argued along similar lines that the Ptolemaic papyri should be understood as "lapses of memory" or the result of inevitable "alterations and additions to the poems in the process of recitation" by rhapsodes that arise during an oral performance (1980:67-68). Instead, it is more likely that these papyri reflect new ground rules for (competitive) improvisation in performance, or the representation of improvisation in performance in Hellenized Egypt. As we have seen, the papyri appear during the same period in which other types of innovation in rhapsodic performances in Greece emerge, which included the creation of new epic material. So it is more pertinent to ask why some Greeks in Egypt preferred, at least in the eccentric papyri, to reorganize the text of Homer rather than to create new material. Their actions reflect a very specific performance demand, rather than merely, as others have argued,<sup>56</sup> a generalized reintroduction of fluidity into the textual tradition.

In this connection it is worth noting two related details about rhapsodes that involve the manipulation of Homeric material within individual verses, which give added dimension to the potential subtlety of their performances. The first involves an anecdote in Plutarch about Ptolemy II Philadelphus on his wedding day.<sup>57</sup> Ptolemy II married his sister

---

<sup>55</sup> See Ludwich 1898:159-64, espec. 160, n.1, where he specifically attacks the earlier arguments of Kirchoff (1893:903), who thought that the variations derived from "Memorirexemplare der Rhapsoden" who used the variations in performance, along the lines of what we are told about Kynaithos (see above). Although it is not clear that rhapsodes created their own texts as memory-aides for performance, Kirchoff's point about a rhapsode's freedom to manipulate Homer in performance is very close to my own. Ludwich (1898:160-61), however, refused to regard rhapsodes like Kynaithos as anything but forgers, and certainly not poets. We should distinguish between what the variations tell us about improvisation in live performances from their relationship to the origin of the vulgate text of Homer.

<sup>56</sup> E.g., Nagy 1996:144.

<sup>57</sup> Cf. the discussion of this passage in Nagy 1996:161-62.

Arsinoe, who would become one of the most important women rulers in Egypt, yet at the time the marriage was considered scandalous by Greeks. In any case, Plutarch relates the story of the rhapsode whom Ptolemy II had hired to perform at his wedding, and this rhapsode became famous for beginning his performance with a line from book 18 of the *Iliad*:

καὶ ὁ μὲν ῥαψωδὸς εὐθύς ἦν διὰ στόματος πᾶσιν, ἐν τοῖς  
Πτολεμαίου γάμοις ἀγομένου τὴν ἀδελφὴν καὶ πράγμα δρᾶν  
ἀλλόκοτον νομιζομένου καὶ ἄθεσμον ἀρξάμενος ἀπὸ τῶν ἐπῶν  
ἐκείνων·  
Ζεὺς δ' Ἡρην ἐκάλεσσε κασιγνήτην ἄλοχόν τε (from *Iliad*  
18.356)

and the rhapsode was the talk of everyone—the one who, at the wedding of Ptolemy, who by marrying his sister was believed to be doing something unnatural and unlawful, began with the following verses:

‘And Zeus summoned Hera, his sister and wife’ (from *Iliad* 18.356)

(Plutarch, *Quaestiones convivales* 736e)

Whoever this rhapsode was, he was clever enough to begin his performance by adducing an apt line from Homer, but there is greater subtlety to his recitation than scholars have noticed. In the vulgate of Homer, this line does not say that Zeus summoned (καλέω) Hera, with its more stately implication, but rather the following:

Ζεὺς δ' Ἡρην προσέειπε κασιγνήτην ἄλοχόν τε

And Zeus addressed Hera, his sister and wife (*Iliad* 18.356)

In other words, according to the vulgate Zeus merely spoke to or addressed (προσεείπω) Hera at this point, since what follows this line is actually a speech by Zeus. Although we do not know the source of Plutarch’s quotation, it is possible that our rhapsode not only aptly quoted this line of Homer, but also that he improvised the verb to make the whole line more consonant with the circumstances of Ptolemy’s wedding.

The second example comes from the T scholia to *Iliad* 21.26. After a description of Achilles’ slaughter of Trojans in the Xanthus river, the great hero wearies of killing and then takes twelve Trojan youths as a recompense for the dead Patroklos. Of Achilles’ fatigue specifically, we read:

...ὁ δ' ἐπεὶ κάμε χεῖρας ἐναίρων

... and when he tired in his hands from killing (*Iliad* 21.26)

The idiom in Greek requires that the noun *χείρας*, in the accusative, represent the body part that is fatigued in connection with the verb *κάμνω* “to weary,” while the participle *ἐνάιρων* (from *ἐνάιρω* “to slay, kill”) describes the action from which one is fatigued. However, the T scholia report that a rhapsode named Hermodoros (otherwise unknown) placed a different construction on this line. The scholion reads:

Ἑρμόδωρος ὁ ῥαψωδὸς χείρας ἐνάιρων ἤκουε ‘χειροκοπῶν,’  
κατεχρήσατο δέ.

The rhapsode Hermodoros for *χείρας ἐνάιρων* heard “hand-cutting,” and used it wrongly.

If we distinguish Hermodoros’ interpretation of the line from the scholiast’s condemnation of his syntactic knowledge, we may detect a hint of deliberate playfulness and an “improvised” interpretation of Achilles’ actions at this point in the narrative. By taking the noun *χείρας* as the direct object of the participle *ἐνάιρων* rather than with *κάμνω*, Hermodoros represents Achilles as actually cutting off the hands of the twelve youths whom he will take in the following lines (21.27-8) as recompense for Patroklos. Rather than a misunderstanding or misapplication of Greek syntax, I interpret Hermodoros’ play as a purposive improvisation meant to depict Achilles in a more gruesome fashion. As in the previous example, such minor variations considered from the standpoint of a modern textual editor or an Alexandrian scholiast may seem irrelevant, and yet these very types of changes may be further direct evidence of performance improvisations characteristic of rhapsodes. The fact that Hermodoros’ interpretation is reported at all suggests that his violation of Greek syntax nevertheless resulted in a striking and memorable image.

Yet rhapsodes alone may not be the only performers responsible for textual changes or improvised interpretations. We must also briefly consider the figure of the *ὀμηριστής* (Latin *homerista*),<sup>58</sup> about whom much less is known but who is closely related to the rhapsode. In at least one account (Athenaeus 620b) the *homêristês* is actually said to be identical with the rhapsode. There has been some dispute over the exact historical relationship

---

<sup>58</sup> Nagy 1996:156-74 is fundamental. I draw heavily upon his discussion in what follows.

between rhapsodes and *homêristai*, because the name *homêristês*, derived from the verb *homêrizein* (“to act Homer”),<sup>59</sup> in other contexts suggests that they both recited and mimed Homeric poetry.<sup>60</sup> Nevertheless, the connection between them seems to relate to the degree of acting involved in the performance of Homer, with the *homêristai* representing a more dramatic phase in the tradition.

In the third quarter of the fourth century, when Demetrius of Phalerum (ruled 317-307 B.C.E.) was at the height of his political and cultural influence in Athens, we are told that he was the first to introduce those who are now called *homêristai* into the theaters:

ὅτι δ' ἐκαλοῦντο οἱ ῥαψῳδοὶ καὶ Ὀμηρισταὶ Ἀριστοκλῆς εἶρηκεν ἐν τῷ περὶ Χορῶν. τοὺς δὲ νῦν Ὀμηριστὰς ὀνομαζομένους πρῶτος εἰς τὰ θεάτρα παρήγαγε Δημήτριος ὁ Φαληρεύς. Χαμαιλέον δὲ ἐν τῷ περὶ Στησιχόρου καὶ μελωδηθῆναί φησιν οὐ μόνον τὰ Ὀμήρου, ἀλλὰ καὶ τὰ Ἡσιόδου καὶ Ἀρχιλόχου, ἔτι δὲ Μιμνέρμου καὶ Φωκυλίδου. Κλέαρχος δ' ἐν τῷ προτέρῳ περὶ Γρίφων τὰ Ἀρχιλόχου, φησὶν, Σιμωνίδης ὁ Ζακύνθιος ἐν τοῖς θεάτροις ἐπὶ δίφρου καθήμενος ἔρραψῳδεῖ. Λυσανίας δ' ἐν τῷ πρώτῳ περὶ Ἰαμβοποιῶν Μνασίωνα τὸν ῥαψῳδὸν λέγει ἐν ταῖς δεῖξεσι τῶν Σιμωνίδου τινὰς ἰάμβων ὑποκρίνεσθαι. τοὺς δ' Ἐμπεδοκλέους Καθαροὺς ἔρραψῳδησεν Ὀλυμπίασι Κλεομένης ὁ ῥαψῳδός, ὡς φησιν Δικαίαρχος ἐν τῷ Ὀλυμπικῷ. Ἰάσων δ' ἐν τρίτῳ περὶ τῶν Ἀλεξάνδρου Ἱερῶν ἐν Ἀλεξανδρείᾳ φησὶν ἐν τῷ μεγάλῳ θεάτρῳ ὑποκρίνασθαι Ἠγησίαν τὸν κωμῳδὸν τὰ Ἡσιόδου, Ἐρμόφαντον δὲ τὰ Ὀμήρου.

That rhapsodes were called also *Homêristai* Aristocles says in his book *On Choruses*. Demetrius of Phalerum first introduced those now called *Homêristai* into the theatres. Chamaeleon, in his book *On Stesichorus*, says that not only the poetry of Homer was sung melodically, but also that of Hesiod and Archilochus, and even that of Mimnermus and Phocylides. Clearchus, in the first of his two books *On Riddles* says, “Simonides of Zacynthus, seated on a stool, used to perform rhapsodically the poetry of Archilochus in the theatres.” Lysanias, in the first book of his *On the Iambic Poets*, says that Mnasion the rhapsode used to act in public performances some of the iambic poems of Simonides. And Kleomenes the rhapsode performed rhapsodically the Purifications of Empedocles at Olympia, as Dichaearchus says in his book the *Olympic*. Jason, in the

<sup>59</sup> For the verb *homêrizein* in Achilles Tatius 8.9.2-3, see Nagy 1996:164-65.

<sup>60</sup> Nagy 1996:167 *contra* (e.g.) Robert 1936:237.

third book of his work on the *Divine Honors to Alexander*, says that in the great theatre of Alexandria Hegesias the comedian acted the poetry of Hesiod, and Hermophantos acted that of Homer (Athenaeus 620b-c).

I quote this passage at length because it provides significant background on the wide variety of poetry that was performed in theatres, such as the hexameters of Hesiod and Empedocles, and also the iambic poems of Archilochus and Simonides. Most significantly for the present, however, is that the great theatre of Alexandria is singled out as the locale for the acting (*hupokrinomai*) of Hesiod and Homer. To follow Athenaeus' logic of presentation, even the fact that the poetry of Homer and Hesiod was acted by comedians (*κωμῳδός*) in Alexandria can be seen as a development of the greater theatricalization of Homeric performance begun by Demetrius.

Athenaeus says explicitly that the term *homêristai* was another name given to rhapsodes, hence our need to confront the *homêristai* more directly. In general our evidence for the nature of their performances is very scant, but other literary evidence in conjunction with several papyri suggest that both in large-scale public and smaller-scale private venues *homêristai* performed well into the third century C.E. So, for example, one incidental reference to what the *homêristai* did comes to us from the *Interpretation of Dreams* by Artemidorus, dated to the third century C.E., in which there is an anecdote about a surgeon who once dreamed that he was acting Homer. The surgeon draws an analogy between the motions made by *homêristai* as they gesture in performance and those made by a surgeon as he operates:

καὶ γὰρ οἱ ὁμηριστὰὶ τιτρώσκουσι μὲν καὶ αἰμάσσουσιν, ἀλλ'  
οὐκ ἀποκτεῖναί γε βούλονται· οὕτω δὲ καὶ ὁ χειρουργός

just as the *homêristai* injure and draw blood, but do not intend to kill, so also does the surgeon (Artemidorus 4.2, ed. Pack).

Another passage from Petronius' *Satyricon* is more descriptive, but also gives some indication of the changing venues for *homêristai* performances. In this passage, Trimalchio, a poorly educated but degenerately wealthy aristocrat who is in the midst of feasting his friends at his home, asks that everyone be festive and watch the Homeristae as they make their entrance:

'*simus ergo, quod melius est, a primitiis hilares et Homeristas spectemus.*  
*intravit factio statim hastisque scuta concrepuit. ipse Trimalchio in*  
*pulvino consedit, et cum Homeristae Graecis versibus colloquerentur, ut*  
*insolenter solent, ille canora voce Latine legebat librum.*



‘Let us be festive, which is better, from the start and watch the *Homêristai*.’ Immediately a troupe entered clanging on their spears and shields. Trimalchio himself sat on a cushion, and while the Homeristae were dialoguing in Greek verses in their usual bombastic manner, he read along in Latin in a loud voice. (Petronius, *Satyricon* 59.2-3)

There is much humor in this scene—of course, not only are the *homêristai* lavishly decked out in military armor but their dialogue is loud and affected. Moreover, Trimalchio obviously knows no Greek and therefore must read along in his Latin translation of Homer to follow the performance. Trimalchio becomes more of a fool in what follows, when he asks the *homêristai* to stop while he explains the plot to them. He completely confuses the characters by saying that the brothers concerned were Diomedes and Ganymede (instead of Agamemnon and Menelaos); that their sister was Helen, whom Agamemnon rescued and substituted a deer for Diana. He goes on to say that Agamemnon gave his own daughter Iphigeneia as a wife to Achilles, but that on account of this (instead of Achilles’ armor) Ajax went insane (59.4-6). This is all quite absurd, but finally, at the mention of Ajax, Trimalchio’s servants begin to scurry about making preparations for the entry of a boiled calf, which is brought in on a heavy tray with a helmet on its head. Then a man dressed as Ajax, possibly a *homêristês*, comes in with a sword and begins to mime as if he were the insane Ajax madly cleaving at herds of cattle, all the while collecting bits of meat on the end of his sword and passing it to the guests who look on in amazement (59.6-7). For our purposes, this parodic display does at least support the idea that the *homêristai*, who not only performed in theatres but as we have just seen could also be hired out for elite dinner parties, both recited Homeric verses and mimed the dramatic action.<sup>61</sup>

Other evidence for *homêristai* performances comes from papyri dated from the second-third centuries B.C.E. that are contemporary with the eccentric papyri of Homer. As the papyrologist Geneviève Husson has demonstrated, there are at least five papyri from Oxyrhynchus, some of which are contracts for actual performances (with fees indicated) in which *homêristai* are sometimes paired with mimes. This suggests that the *homêristai* recited Homer while the mimes did the acting;<sup>62</sup> however, the

---

<sup>61</sup> Robert (1936:237) argued that *homêristai* only mimed Homeric battle scenes.

<sup>62</sup> Husson’s third text, *SB* 7336 (1993:97, n. 18), mentions payment to a reader (*anagnôstês*) who might have read out loud while the *homêristai* mimed the scenes. The question remains: what exactly was read?

content of their performances is not described. But the setting would once again have been of large-scale public performances like that of rhapsodes—we know for example that the theatre at Oxyrhynchus could hold upwards of 11,000 people<sup>63</sup>—and the context for these performances would likely have been competitive. Indeed one papyrus, *P.Oslo* 3.189.19 studied by Husson (her text 2) mentions a contest of poets (*agôn poiêtôn*), somewhat along the lines of the Hellenistic victory inscriptions discussed earlier.

Taken together, then, this evidence for *homêristai* suggests that, by virtue of their performance need to recite Homer, they too could be responsible for the variations that we find in the eccentric papyri. If rhapsodes are occasionally credited with textual changes in the Homeric scholia,<sup>64</sup> this may reflect their (historically) greater prestige as public performers as compared to the *homêristai*. But from the standpoint of trying to explain the Ptolemaic textual variation, we cannot exclude other performers of Homer like the *homêristai*,<sup>65</sup> the content of whose performances largely elude us but which could have demanded the special effects achieved in the eccentric papyri.

To restate the argument briefly: the evidence we have for rhapsodic performance suggests that they could competitively recite memorized verses, improvise verses on the spot for elaboration or embellishment, and take up and leave off Homeric (or other) narratives wherever they chose. Further evidence suggests that rhapsodes could modify words within a verse, or modify Greek syntax where plausible to create new meaning from a known verse. To the extent that *homêristai* performed in a manner comparable to rhapsodes, we may attribute the same skills to them. Viewed in this light, the Ptolemaic eccentric papyri show direct evidence of this kind of manipulation. What we now need to explain is the effects achieved by the plus-verses, which are the distinguishing feature of these papyri.

The creation of a vivid and memorable image is a case in point. A typical example comes from *Iliad* 22.316, in the scene where Achilles lunges at Hektor. This is, by the way, one of the several performable scenes or episodes mentioned by Socrates in Plato's *Ion* (535b). In the *Iliad* scene, Hektor and Achilles have exchanged some boasts and abuse, and then

---

<sup>63</sup> Bowman 1986:144.

<sup>64</sup> Ludwich (1898:163) already noted how infrequently rhapsodes are mentioned in the scholia. *Homêristai* do not appear to be mentioned at all.

<sup>65</sup> In this sense, it is irrelevant whether they are considered “low-class” actors, as M. West (1996:1312) dismissively states.

Hektor calls upon his brother Deïphobos to give him a spear. Realizing that Deïphobos is not near enough to do this, Hektor senses that his fate is near, and so gathers himself together and makes a run at Achilles. At this moment, Achilles charges in return, and we hear about his helmet, with its golden plumes, glittering in the sun:

χρύσειαι, ἄς Ἡφαιστος ἔει λόφον ἄμφι θαμειάς

golden, which Hephaistos had let fall thick along the crest of the helmet  
(*Iliad* 22.316)

In the Papyrus labeled P<sup>12</sup> (in the Bodleian Library at Oxford and University Library in Heidelberg), datable to the early to mid-third century B.C.E., we find three plus verses to accompany line 316, which I give below:

P<sup>12</sup> *Iliad* 22.316a, b, c = 22.133-35

316 [χρύσειαι, ἄς Ἡφαιστος ἔει λόφον] ἄμφι θαμειάς,

316a [σειῶν Πηλιάδα μελίην κατὰ [δεξιὸν] ὤμον  
shaking the Pelian ash spear by his right shoulder

316b [δεινήν· ἄμφι δὲ χαλκὸς] ἐλάμπ[ε]το [εἵκελος αὐγῆι  
dangerous; and the bronze all around shone like a ray

316c [ἢ πυρὸς αἰθομένου ἢ ἡελίου] ἀνιόντ[ο]σ.  
either of blazing fire or of the rising sun

Note especially that the enjambling word (*seiōn*) in 316a is a participle, a frequent and flexible type of enjambement in Homer and the *Certamen*, and that this is consistent with the uses of enjambement by rhapsodes for which I argued earlier. In any case, these three verses are identical to verses 133-35 from the same Book 22 of the *Iliad*, as transmitted through the vulgate. Now the question is, simply, why do these plus verses appear at line 316 in this eccentric papyrus?

I think we can provide an answer, but in order to do so we have also to supply a little imagination. All we really have to suppose is that our audience knows book 22 well enough to know the context of lines 133-35, and that they were used in a rhapsodic or homeristic performance. Before those lines occur, King Priam and Queen Hekabe have unsuccessfully attempted to keep Hektor from battling Achilles. Hektor then reflects on the tight position that he is in: if he retreats he will be ridiculed, but since he has

by his own recklessness endangered the Trojans, he feels compelled to continue fighting. He then debates in his heart about refusing to fight, giving up Helen, and even laying down his armor and propitiating Achilles. This does not seem satisfactory either, and so he resolves to let Zeus decide the victor. It is at this moment that we see Achilles beginning to close in on Hektor, shaking his dangerous Pelian ash spear by his right shoulder with his helmet blazing in the sun. So go verses 22.133-35. Now when Hektor sees this, he can no longer stand his ground and so flees, frightened, toward the base of the Trojan wall. Clearly the appearance and description of Achilles is decisive for Hektor at this moment, yet it is not until Achilles' next lunge for Hektor, at lines 312 and following, with our plus verses in the papyrus, that he will make the fatal spearthrust through Hektor's throat.

Therefore what I am suggesting is that, given a hypothetical performance context, lines 316a-c could well be an improvisation on the part of one rhapsode or *homêristês* who is simply embellishing and intensifying the description of Achilles at the fatal moment for Hektor. For an audience who knows their Homer, they add even more pungency to the description of Achilles' final lunge at verse 312 and following. Of course we cannot determine whether a rhapsode might have embellished line 316 as a virtuoso flourish, or whether a *homêristês* used them parodically to accentuate the presentation of a costumed mime, impersonating Achilles, as he stood there brandishing a spear in defiance (as the following lines indicate).

In all this I am not suggesting that we assume a one-to-one correspondence between papyrus P<sup>12</sup>, or any papyrus, and a given performance, or that these texts are necessarily scripts or memory-aides for performance. This suggestion goes back to Kirchoff in the nineteenth century (1893:903) and, while it remains an attractive hypothesis, we still do not know the true origin of these papyri. However, the advantage of the approach outlined here is that it offers an alternative to attributing such plus verses and variations to pedantic scribes or misinformed copyists, or to dismissing them as uncreative interpolations of inferior performers. The variations suggest that knowledge of Homeric texts, and an ability to manipulate passages, was of primary importance to the authors and performers of these papyri because the innovation here involves the novel deployment of traditional material. The motivation for the variations is best explained by the competitive context of rhapsodic performances or, possibly, by the parodic context of homeristic performances. However, the "stitching" nature of the variations in the papyri on the whole incline me toward the rhapsodic performance scenario. What we can probably exclude

is the possibility that the variations are due to poets,<sup>66</sup> because as we saw earlier in the discussion of Hellenistic performances from the fourth to the first centuries B.C.E., the so-called poets of epic (ποιητῆς ἐπῶν, ἐποποιός) typically were rewarded for the creation of new epic material largely treating historical and mythological subjects.<sup>67</sup> What we may conclude is that these papyri reflect the interests of a delimited group of performers/authors who specialized in Homer, because we do not find the same extent of verse manipulation in Homeric papyri after 150 B.C.E., while rhapsodic (and homeristic) performances continue until the third century C.E. I regard it as more than probable that these papyri have issued from the Ptolemaic equivalent of the Homeridae of Chios or the Kreophyleoi of Samos.

## Conclusion

Nearly fifty years ago Raphael Sealey cautioned his readers that in regard to the Homeridae, the fifth-century clan from Chios who at one time claimed exclusive descent from Homer (1957:315),

the distinction that has been drawn . . . between a poet and a mere reciter is one that must be handled with care; doubtless there were men at some time in Greece who did both things. They composed poems of their own and they recited poems that they had learned from other poets; as reciters they may have modified the poems that they learned by introducing much of their own. Nevertheless it is possible to identify the extremes of the distinction.

For Sealey, and many scholars before and after him, Phemios and Demodokos in the *Odyssey* represent the poets (*aoidoi*) who compose while they perform, while Ion, the rhapsode (*rhapsôidos*) featured in Plato's dialogue by that name, represents the opposite extreme of the largely recitational performer. The case for creativity among rhapsodes has not been made easier by the prejudices of Plato (as evidenced in the *Ion*) and Xenophon, who ranks them among the stupidest of men (*Symposium* 3.6, *Memorabilia* 4.2.10). For Plato and Xenophon, although rhapsodes may recite Homer's words correctly, they simply do not know what they mean.

---

<sup>66</sup> Unless, as is occasionally attested, a given poet competes as both poet and rhapsode, on which see Pallone 1984:162.

<sup>67</sup> Pallone 1984:162-66.

Even in the largely defamatory treatment of rhapsodes in Plato's dialogue *Ion*, however, we may detect a hint of the importance of improvisation. When Ion of Chios boasts of his victory at a rhapsodic contest at Epidauros, he says:

Καὶ μὴν ἄξιόν γε ἀκούσαι, ὦ Σώκρατες, ὡς εὖ κεκόσμηκα τὸν Ὅμηρον· ὥστε οἶμαι ὑπὸ Ὀμηριδῶν ἄξιός εἶναι χρυσῶ στεφάνῳ στεφανωθῆναι.

And indeed it is worth hearing, Socrates, how well I have embellished [*kosmeō*] Homer; so that I think that I am worthy of being crowned with a golden crown by the Homeridae (Plato *Ion*, 530d6-9).

The verb *kosmeō* (“embellish, adorn”), as others have noted,<sup>68</sup> elsewhere in the *Ion* refers to adornment with regard to clothing (530b5, 535d1), and in itself cannot be translated as “improvise.” However, given the improvisational skills of rhapsodes that we have seen, I suggest that Ion's “embellishment” of Homer be interpreted broadly to subsume the totality of rhapsodic performance activities surveyed here—including mimetic and gestural elements, vocal range, and improvisation of verses. Verbal improvisation against tradition is thus integral (but admittedly not exclusive) to the popular appeal of rhapsodic competition in performance, and we must see that such competition is essentially a poetic game. The master of that game, like Ion, will be the one who most deftly displays the range of rhapsodic abilities discussed here.

The negative, conventional view of rhapsodes should be taken to reflect the narrow intellectual preoccupations of Xenophon and especially Plato, who sought to vitiate the claim that by knowing the “thought” (*dianoia*) of Homer about a given subject, a rhapsode could translate that into direct experience.<sup>69</sup> Such hostile views are simply not commensurate with the widespread evidence for public interest in rhapsodic performance attested from the sixth century B.C.E. down to the third century C.E. This evidence surely bespeaks the popularity of *rhapsōidia* as a mode of live performance, and it is the hold of this type of performance over the

---

<sup>68</sup> E.g., Boyd 1994:116.

<sup>69</sup> Murray 1996:129. In the *Ion*, ridicule is sharply made of Ion's claim that by knowing from Homer the sort of speech appropriate to a general, he could in fact become a general (*Ion* 540d-541c), on which see Stehle 1997:16. For more on the *dianoia* of Homer, see Nagy 1999:143, n.4.

imagination of the Greeks that we should seek to explain. Although we cannot be certain that all performances by rhapsodes were competitive, we can be certain that the major contests, such as those at the Panathenaia and at Sikyon, were indeed competitive.<sup>70</sup>

So why, to put it simply, were rhapsodic performances so engaging?<sup>71</sup> One answer, as I have outlined it here, is that the damning opinions of Plato and Xenophon have overshadowed a degree of creative improvisation in rhapsodic performance. Such improvisation in the context of competition allowed for spontaneity and audience engagement against the backdrop of an extremely well known body of poetry. Moreover, Ion's statement cited above also suggests that his creative embellishment, rather than the popularity of Homeric poetry itself, would prompt the Homeridae to reward him. Thus a rhapsode's ability to embellish was central to his technique.

The most important practical implication to be derived from this perspective is that by incorporating a more fluid model of live performance into our understanding of the performance tradition of Homer, we may be able more effectively to account for variations in the manuscript tradition, including the eccentric papyri.<sup>72</sup> But we must first dismiss the idea that the variations we find by rhapsodes (or *homêristai* for that matter) were meant to compete with "Homer," an idea that inevitably leads to the conclusion that their innovations are inferior.<sup>73</sup> Until we remove the stigma attached to rhapsodes by the likes of Plato and Xenophon,<sup>74</sup> we will not make any headway in understanding the context for their variations. And yet these

---

<sup>70</sup> Signaled foremost by the term *agôn* (e.g. Herodotus 5.67.1) and the verb *agônizesthai* (e.g. Plato, *Ion* 530a).

<sup>71</sup> Not all rhapsodic performances, of course, were engaging. Diodorus Siculus 14.109 reports that Dionysius, tyrant of Syracuse, sent rhapsodes to perform his own poetry at the Olympic games in 388 B.C.E. At first the rhapsodes impressed the crowd, but subsequently the badness (*kakia*) of Dionysius' poetry was such as to cause the audience openly to ridicule him and his rhapsodes.

<sup>72</sup> Nagy's work (1996:7-38) is essential here.

<sup>73</sup> Cf. Labarbe (1949:425), who subordinates the verses attributed to rhapsodes to the *génie* of Homer.

<sup>74</sup> Similarly, Isocrates' negative mention of rhapsodes who perform Homer and Hesiod at the Lyceum (*Panath.* 18 and 33) should not be taken to reflect a rhapsode's verbal artistry. For the most part, the attacks of Plato, Xenophon, and, indirectly, Isocrates are limited to a rhapsode's ability to understand and interpret Homer; on which, see Murray 1996:20-21.

variations, such as they are, may give us direct access to how Homer was actually performed, and interpreted in performance, which simply cannot be recovered from the vulgate alone. The analogy with the performance of tragic poetry is instructive: we know that by 330 B.C.E. the Athenian statesman Lycurgus sought, for better or worse, to curtail the improvisations of actors with a decree limiting their lines to fixed texts of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides ([Plutarch], *Lives of the Ten Orators* 841.43).<sup>75</sup> My claim here is that we see the same underlying process at work in the performance tradition of rhapsodes: fixed texts of Homer provided the backdrop<sup>76</sup> to innovations and extemporaneous flourishes produced in live performances to win over the audience, which, as Plato's *Ion* (535e) reminds us, was always the ultimate arbiter of victory.<sup>77</sup>

*University of Michigan*

### References

- Allen 1912                      Thomas W. Allen, ed. *Homeri Opera* 5 (Hymns, Cycle fragments, etc). 2nd ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Allen 1917                      \_\_\_\_\_, ed. *Homeri Opera* 3 and 4 (*Odyssey*). 2nd ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Allen 1924                      \_\_\_\_\_. *Homer: The Origins and Transmission*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Aly 1920                         Wolfgang Aly. “‘Παψφδός.’” *Real-Encyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft* (2nd series), 1:244-49.

---

<sup>75</sup> For more, see Page 1934. In this connection we may also note the remarks of Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria* 10.1.66, that the Athenians allowed Aeschylus' tragedies, unpolished and disorganized as they were, to be corrected by later poets, on which see Nagy 1996:176. I intend to deal further with the implications of state-sponsored restrictions on performance, and their relationship to the popularity of improvisation, in a forthcoming work.

<sup>76</sup> Foley (1991:6-9, espec. ch. 2) is essential to understanding the performance of Homer as re-enactment against a body of known material. Further pertinent observations can be found in Bakker 1993:10-12.

<sup>77</sup> I would like especially to thank the specialist reviewer at *Oral Tradition* for many helpful and clarifying suggestions.



- Apthorp 1980 M. J. Apthorp. *The Manuscript Evidence for Interpolation in Homer*. Heidelberg: Carl Winter University Press.
- Bakker 1990 Egbert Bakker. "Homeric Discourse and Enjambement: A Cognitive Approach." *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, 120:1-21.
- Bakker 1993 \_\_\_\_\_. "Activation and Preservation: The Interdependence of Text and Performance in an Oral Tradition." *Oral Tradition*, 8:5-20.
- Bakker 1997 \_\_\_\_\_. *Poetry in Speech: Orality and Homeric Discourse*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Bassett 1926 Samuel Bassett. "The So-called Emphatic Position of the Runover Word in the Homeric Hexameter." *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, 57:116-48.
- Bowman 1986 Alan Bowman. *Egypt after the Pharaohs: 332 BC-AD 642 from Alexander to the Arab Conquest*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Boyd 1994 Timothy Boyd. "Where Ion Stood, What Ion Sang." *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, 96:109-21.
- Burkert 1972 Walter Burkert. "Die Leistung eines Kreophylos: Kreophyleer, Homeriden und die archaische Heraklesepeik." *Museum Helveticum*, 29:74-85.
- Burkert 1987 \_\_\_\_\_. "The Making of Homer in the Sixth Century B.C.: Rhapsodes vs. Stesichorus." In *Papers on the Amasis Painter and His World*. Ed. by Marion True, Andrea Belloli, Benedicte Gilman, et al. Malibu, CA: J. Paul Getty Museum. pp. 43-62.
- Chantraine 1968 Pierre Chantraine. *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque*. Paris: Klincksieck.
- Davison 1955 John A. Davison. "Peisistratus and Homer." *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, 86:1-21.
- Davison 1958 \_\_\_\_\_. "Notes on the Panathenaia." *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, 78:23-41.

- Diels-Kranz 1951-52      Hermann Diels and Walther Kranz, eds. *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*. 8<sup>th</sup> ed. Berlin: Weidmannsche Verlagsbuchhandlung.
- Dornseiff 1944            Franz Dornseiff. "Review of W. Schadewaldt, *Legende von Homer, dem fahrende Sanger* (Leipzig 1942)." *Gnomon*, 20:134-40.
- Drachmann 1903-27      Anders B. Drachmann, ed. *Scholia Vetera in Pindari Carmina*. 3 vols. Leipzig: Teubner.
- Dundes 1987             Alan Dundes. "The Strategy of Turkish Boys' Verbal Dueling Rhymes." In his *Parsing Through Customs*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press. pp. 82-117.
- Dunkel 1979             George Dunkel. "Fighting Words: Alcman *Partheneion* 63 μαχονται." *Journal of Indo-European Studies*, 7:249-72.
- Edwards 1966            Mark W. Edwards. "Some Features of Homeric Craftmanship." *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, 97:115-79.
- Foley 1990               John Miles Foley. *Traditional Oral Epic: The Odyssey, Beowulf, and the Serbo-Croatian Return Song*. Berkeley: University of California Press. Rpt. 1993.
- Foley 1991               \_\_\_\_\_ . *Immanent Art: From Structure to Meaning in Traditional Oral Epic*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Ford 1988                Andrew Ford. "The Classical Definition of ΠΑΨΩΙΔΙΑ." *Classical Philology*, 83:300-7.
- Frankel 1925            Hermann Frankel. "Griechische Wortel." *Glotta*, 14:1-13.
- Gentili 1990             Bruno Gentili. *Poetry and Its Public in Ancient Greece: From Homer to the Fifth Century*. Trans. by A. Thomas Cole. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Griffith 1990            Mark Griffith. "Contest and Contradiction in Early Greek Poetry." In *Cabinet of the Muses: Essays on Classical and Comparative Literature in Honor of Thomas R. Rosenmeyer*. Ed. by Mark Griffith and Donald J. Mastronarde. Atlanta: Scholars Press. pp. 185-207.

- Hammerstaedt 1996 Jürgen Hammerstaedt. "Improvisation." *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*, 17:1212-84.
- Heldmann 1982 Konrad Heldmann. *Die Niederlage Homers im Dichterwettstreit mit Hesiod*. Hypomnemata, 75. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- Herington 1985 John Herington. *Poetry into Drama: Early Tragedy and the Greek Poetic Tradition*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Heubeck et al. 1988 Alfred Heubeck, Stephanie West, and J. B. Hainsworth. *A Commentary on Homer's Odyssey*. Vol. 1. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Higbie 1990 Carolyn Higbie. *Measure and Music: Enjambement and Sentence Structure in the Iliad*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Husson 1993 Geneviève Husson. "Les Homéristes." *The Journal of Juristic Papyrology*, 23:93-99.
- Kirchoff 1893 A. Kirchoff. "Beiträge zur Geschichte der griechischen Rhapsodik." *Sitzungsberichte der Berliner Akademie der Wissenschaften*, 42:893ff.
- Kirk 1976 Geoffrey Kirk. *Homer and the Oral Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kotsidu 1991 Haritini Kotsidu. *Die musischen Agone der Panathenäen in archaischer und klassischer Zeit*. Munich: Tuduv.
- Labarbe 1949 Jules Labarbe. *L'Homère de Platon*. Liège: Université de Liège.
- Ludwich 1898 Arthur Ludwich. *Die Homervulgata als voralexandrinisch erwiesen*. Leipzig: Teubner.
- Martin 1989 Richard Martin. *The Language of Heroes: Speech and Performance in the Iliad*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Martin 2000 \_\_\_\_\_. "Synchronic Aspects of Homeric Performance: The Evidence of the *Hymn to Apollo*." In *Una nueva visión de la cultura griega antigua hacia el fin del milenio*. Ed. by Ana M. González de Tobia. Argentina: National University of La Plata. pp. 403-32.

- McLeod 1961 Wallace McLeod. "Oral Bards at Delphi." *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, 92:317-25.
- Merkelbach-West 1970 Friedrich Solmsen, ed. *Hesiodi Theogonia, Opera et dies, Scutum*; Reinhold Merkelbach and M. L. West, eds. *Fragmenta Selecta*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Meyer 1918 Eduard Meyer. "Die Rhapsoden und die homerischen Epen." *Hermes*, 53: 330-36.
- Monro and Allen 1920 David B. Monro and Thomas W. Allen. *Homeri Opera 1 and 2 (Iliad)*. 3rd ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Murray 1996 Penelope Murray. *Plato on Poetry: Ion; Republic 376e-398b9; Republic 595-608b10*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nagy 1990a Gregory Nagy. *Greek Mythology and Poetics*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Nagy 1990b \_\_\_\_\_. *Pindar's Homer: The Lyric Possession of an Epic Past*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Nagy 1996 \_\_\_\_\_. *Poetry as Performance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nagy 1999 \_\_\_\_\_. "Homer and Plato at the Panathenaia: Synchronic and Diachronic Perspectives." In *Contextualizing Classics: Ideology, Performance, Dialogue*. Ed. by Thomas Falkner, Nancy Felson, and David Konstan. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield. pp. 123-50.
- Neils 1994 Jennifer Neils. "The Panathenaia and Kleisthenic Ideology." In *The Archaeology of Athens and Attica under the Democracy*. Ed. by William Coulson, Olga Palagia et al. Oxford: Oxbow Monographs, 37. pp. 151-60.
- O'Sullivan 1992 Neil O'Sullivan. *Alcidamas, Aristophanes, and the Beginnings of Greek Stylistic Theory*. Stuttgart: Steiner.
- Page 1934 Denys Page. *Actors' Interpolations in Greek Tragedy*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Pallone 1984 Maria Pallone. "L'Epica agonale in età ellenistica." *Orpheus*, 5:156-66.
- Patzer 1952 Harald Patzer. "ΠΑΨΩΙΔΟΣ." *Hermes*, 80:314-25.

- Pavese 1998 Carlo O. Pavese. "The Rhapsodic Epic Poems as Oral and Independent Poems." *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, 98:63-90.
- Pfeiffer 1968 Rudolf Pfeiffer. *History of Classical Scholarship: From the Beginnings to the End of the Hellenistic Age*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Pfeiffer 1949-53 \_\_\_\_\_, ed. *Callimachus*. 2 vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Powell 2000 Barry Powell. "Text, Orality, Literacy, Tradition, Dictation, Education, and Other Paradigms of Explication in Greek Literary Studies." *Oral Tradition*, 15:96-125.
- Richardson 1981 Nicholas J. Richardson. "The Contest of Homer and Hesiod and Alcidamas' *Mouseion*." *Classical Quarterly*, 31:1-10.
- Ritoók 1962 Zsigmond Ritoók. "Rhapsodos." *Acta Antiqua Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae*, 10:225-31.
- Ritoók 1991 \_\_\_\_\_. "Alkidamas über die Sophisten." *Philologus*, 135:157-63.
- Robert 1936 Louis Robert. "ΑΡΧΑΙΟΛΟΓΟΣ." *Revue des études grecques*, 49:235-54.
- Schmitt 1967 Rüdiger Schmitt. *Dichtung und Dichtersprache in indogermanischer Zeit*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.
- Schwartz 1940 Eduard Schwartz. "Der Name Homeros." *Hermes*, 75:1-9.
- Sealey 1957 Raphael Sealey. "From Phemios to Ion." *Revue des études grecques*, 70:312-55.
- Shapiro 1993 H. Alan Shapiro. "Hipparchos and the Rhapsodes." In *Cultural Poetics in Archaic Greece: Cult, Performance, Politics*. Ed. by Carol Dougherty and Leslie Kurke. Oxford: Oxford University Press. pp. 92-107.
- Snell and Maehler 1987 Bruno Snell and Herwig Maehler. *Pindari Carmina cum Fragmentis*. Pars I. Leipzig: Teubner.

- Stehle 1997                   Eva Stehle. *Performance and Gender in Ancient Greece: Nondramatic Poetry in its Setting*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Taplin 1992                   Oliver Taplin *Homeric Soundings: The Shaping of the Iliad*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Tarditi 1968                   Giovanni Tarditi. "Sull'origine e sul significato della parola rapsodo." *Maia*, 20:137-45.
- Van der Valk 1976           Marchinus Van der Valk. *Eustathii Commentarii ad Homeri Iliadem Pertinentes*. Vol. 2. Leiden: Brill.
- M. West 1967                M. L. West. "The Contest of Homer and Hesiod." *Classical Quarterly*, 17:433-50.
- M. West 1975                \_\_\_\_\_. "Cynaethus' Hymn to Apollo." *Classical Quarterly*, 25:61-70.
- M. West 1996                \_\_\_\_\_. "Rhapsodes." In the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*. Ed. by Simon Hornblower and Anthony Spawforth. 3rd ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press. pp 1311-12.
- S. West 1967                Stephanie West. *The Ptolemaic Papyri of Homer*. Papyrologica Coloniensia, 3. Cologne: Westdeutscher Verlag.
- Wilamowitz 1884           Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff. *Homerische Untersuchungen*. Berlin: Weidmann.
- Wilamowitz 1916           \_\_\_\_\_. *Die Ilias und Homer*. Berlin: Weidmann.

**Performance and Norse Poetry:  
The Hydromel of Praise and the Effluvia of Scorn**  
*The Albert Lord and Milman Parry Lecture for 2001*

**Stephen A. Mitchell**

**Performance Studies and the Possibilities for Interpretation**

How should we moderns “read” a medieval text?<sup>1</sup> Thanks to the work of many scholars, not least the pioneering studies of Milman Parry and Albert Lord, we are today able to understand the nature and implications of a preserved medieval work’s background as an oral text much better than did the early and brilliant (but narrowly gauged) generations that included such giants within Old Norse as Jacob Grimm, Konrad von Maurer, Theodor Möbius, Rudolf Keyser, and N. M. Petersen.<sup>2</sup> Given these advances in our understanding of orality, performance, and the ethnography of speaking, how do we decode the social, religious, and literary worlds of northern

---

<sup>1</sup> By “read” I mean here the full range of decocting techniques employed by modern scholarship, including but not limited to those associated with traditional philology and folkloristics, as well as such emergent approaches as those collectively known as “cultural studies.” This essay was delivered as the 2001 Albert Lord/Milman Parry Memorial Lecture under the sponsorship of the Center for Studies in Oral Tradition at the University of Missouri. For their encouragement, sage comments, and helpful criticism, I warmly thank John Foley, Joseph Harris, Gregory Nagy, and John Zemke.

<sup>2</sup> Already as Parry was in the early stages of his research project in the Balkans, he envisioned its implications for the older works of northern Europe: “My purpose in undertaking the study of this poetry was as follows. My Homeric studies [. . .] have from the beginning shown me that Homeric poetry, and indeed all early Greek poetry, is oral, and so can be properly understood, criticized, and edited only when we have a complete knowledge of the processes of oral poetry; this is also true for other early poetries such as Anglo-Saxon, French, or Norse, to the extent they are oral. This knowledge of the processes of an oral poetry can be had up to a certain point by the study of the character of a style, e.g., of the Homeric poems; but a full knowledge can be had only by the accumulation from a living poetry of a body of experimental texts” (Mitchell and Nagy 2000:ix).

Europe in the Middle Ages? How, for example, do we understand the role of poetry in Nordic society and how do we view the composition of poetry in that world? And how do we take advantage of these advances while at the same time resisting the temptation to ignore what can be gained by old-fashioned philology and the study of mythology?<sup>3</sup> Of course, the role of orality in the composition of Old Norse poetry and prose has been a dominant heuristic theme in the history of modern scholarship in that region. Whether investigators have been focussed on such literary and cultural issues as compositional techniques, or modern nationalistic efforts to lay claim to these wonderful medieval texts from the periphery of Europe, or the historical value of the contents of such works, the degree to which the basic shape, form, and character of these materials was imparted by a background either in a popular (and thus oral) or a courtly and ecclesiastical (and thus written) cultural matrix has been at the heart of a generations-long debate, an argument that significantly parallels the concerns of Homeric analysts and unitarians.<sup>4</sup>

In Old Norse studies, these opposing views came to be crystallized around the dichotomy *Freiprosa* - *Buchprosa* (“Freeprose – Bookprose”) scholarly strife that also reaches back into the nineteenth century. As with comparable debates in adjacent fields, serious intellectual goods were at stake in this heavily dichotomized clash of views between advocates of an essentially neo-romantic and passionately democratic perspective on the one side, and a fundamentally restrictive and equally passionate elitist view on the other.<sup>5</sup> In addition, the Freeprose - Bookprose debate in northern Europe was fraught with significant nationalist overtones that can be conveniently summarized as “Who owns the sagas?” Are they to be understood as part of the cultural legacy of all of Scandinavia, the product of an oral culture that had migrated to Iceland in the ninth and tenth centuries and had been recorded there in the 1200s (and thus cultural goods to which other Nordic

---

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Bauman 1996:17, “...the enduring importance of the intellectual problems that the philological synthesis was forged to address constitutes a productive basis on which we as folklorists might orient ourselves to our cognate fields and disciplines.”

<sup>4</sup> On the Homeric debate, see Foley 1988:4-6 *et passim* and Nagy 1996a:93-94, 133-34 *et passim*, and the relevant entries in Foley 1985 (available online at [www.oraltradition.org](http://www.oraltradition.org)).

<sup>5</sup> Cf., for example, Andersson 1964, Byock 1984, and Clover 1985:239-40; for a recent review of positions, see Harris 1998; on the outlines and implications of the Freeprose - Bookprose controversy, see Mitchell 1991:1-6 *et passim*; for a review of works on Eddic poetry, see Harris 1985 and Acker 1998:85-100.



countries, Norway in particular, might legitimately lay claim)? Or are they the product of a specifically written literary culture that develops uniquely in Iceland in the Middle Ages (and to which only the Icelanders might lay claim)? This debate needs to be understood against the backdrop of inter-Nordic colonialism and the fact that the nineteenth-century nationalist movements in both Norway and Iceland were at just this point in time agitating for independence after more than half a millennium of political and cultural dominance from afar. The Freeprose - Bookprose debate was then not “only” about literature and culture, and not “only” a matter of concern within the rarified atmosphere of the academy. It was all of that, to be sure, *plus* an emotionally charged political topic about which many had opinions and in whose outcome everyone in that region of the world had a stake.

Whereas one might reasonably expect to gain a great deal from a close examination of the oral-written debate in Old Norse studies in those earlier periods, for the most part this opportunity was seriously compromised by inflexible and unsubtle thinking by advocates of the two opposing sides of the argument. In recent decades, however, a number of those in the field have advocated a view that looks to take the best of the hardened Freeprose - Bookprose positions and forge a synthesis that has no *a priori* theoretical conclusions but looks only for practical and useful ways to understand the texts that the antiquarianism and narrative sensibility of the medieval Icelanders have bequeathed to us.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps one of the most important developments in this kind of thinking has been the realization that the question should no longer be styled as, to quote one noted scholar’s confident conclusion in 1964, that “the inspiration of the sagas is ultimately oral.”<sup>7</sup> This sort of understandable (if regrettable) formulation can naturally only give rise to endless debate—we will never possess the sort of litmus test that would allow us to address without doubt such an assertion. Rather, the question needs to be framed as “How do we best understand the Norse materials?”

Fortunately, just as the pronouncement concerning the ultimate “orality” of the sagas (above) appeared, a promising way out of the morass was being developed by anthropologists and folklorists: what is variously referred to as the “ethnography of speaking,” performance studies, and so

---

<sup>6</sup> Cp., for example, the sometimes contrasting views in Andersson 1966, Lönnroth 1976 and 1978, Byock 1982, Harris 1983, Clover 1986, and Mitchell 1987 and 1991; despite the different orientations of these authors, however, they appear to share the view that a new synthesis of approaches is a desideratum.

<sup>7</sup> Andersson 1964:119. It should be noted that Andersson’s early embrace of the oral character of the sagas seems to have loosened considerably in the intervening years.

on.<sup>8</sup> The tenets of such an approach—that we conceive of such cultural monuments as artistic communication and attempt to situate them in history and social life using tools drawn from a wide variety of disciplines—do not from today’s vantage point sound especially earth-shaking, but occasionally the results have been. In addition to its inherent intellectual benefits, a performance-based analysis of Old Norse literature brings with it a further advantage—namely, it allows scholars in the field to step back from approaches that are implicitly politically sensitive within the discipline; in other words, it represents an important means of escaping the fossilized and largely unproductive positions associated with the *Buchprosa - Freiprosa* debate. Some years ago folklorist Richard Bauman applied this “ethnography of speaking” approach specifically to Old Norse in an important discussion (1986a; cf. 1992), but one that, unfortunately, has been largely overlooked by scholars of Old Norse. To a great extent, the following comments owe their existence to the works of Bauman, Geertz, Hymes, Foley, Nagy, and so many other practitioners of such studies—all of whom implicitly (and several explicitly) build on Parry’s and Lord’s ethnographic observations from the 1930s, a project looking to set “lore against literature,”<sup>9</sup> the lore of a living tradition against the literature of a long-gone world.<sup>10</sup> The collective approach that precipitates out of the works of these scholars exhibits far less rigidity than did the old oral versus written debate. Moreover, the emerging consensus shows how by understanding living traditions of oral literature, by a sophisticated application of folklore theories and practices, and by abandoning what were still in the main (although heavily disguised) legacies of nineteenth-century romanticism and class wars, we can improve our ability to apprehend the long-lost cultural moment of the medieval literary enterprise. Toward these

---

<sup>8</sup> The clarion cry of this new movement had already been sounded in 1959 with Erving Goffman’s *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, but with respect to our materials, the beginnings are much more naturally seen, I would argue, in Hymes 1962, followed shortly thereafter by Hymes 1964, an introduction to a collection that included such influential studies as Frake 1964. Within the anthropological tradition, the works of Hymes, Geertz, and Victor Turner have been of particular moment, perhaps especially on those of us in allied fields. A specific, and early, application of such a contextualizing approach to the Icelandic sagas can be seen in Turner 1971.

<sup>9</sup> E.g., Bauman 1977 and 1986b, Foley 1991, 1992, and 1995, Geertz 1973, Hymes 1962 and 1964, and Nagy 1990, 1996a, and 1996b. The phrase “lore against literature” I take from the 1935 typescript of Milman Parry’s “The Singer of Tales” (see Mitchell and Nagy 2000:viii).

<sup>10</sup> This symbiosis is deftly outlined in Foley 1995:1-29.

ends, I present in the sections that follow: 1) a discussion of poetics and performance in the Old Norse world, specifically of how a range of alimentary images is used in Old Norse conceptualizations of poetry, and then 2) a discussion of how our appreciation for this metaphor enables us to understand in new ways important aspects of performance, and the representation of such performances, in the Old Norse world.

### Poetry, Potables, and Physiology

Before examining how Icelanders understood and presented the performance of poetry in the narratives of the thirteenth century (mainly), it is important to recognize the high status poetry had in the Nordic world, a region notably devoid of epic verse but otherwise much enamored of the art of poetry. Indeed, poetry was so highly prized in the Old Norse world that the chief god of their pagan pantheon, Óðinn, was reported to have spoken entirely in meter (*Mælti hann allt hendingum, svá sem nú er þat kveðit, er skáldskapr heitir*) and in that context, it is said that his priests were called songsmiths (*ljóðasmiðir*) (Aðalbjarnarson 1962:17). The most famous and prized form of poetry in the world of northern Europe from the ninth to the thirteenth century was a style of verse that represented a metrically very demanding development from the original narrative forms of verse common to the Germanic world. This kind of poetry was associated with the scalds, the court poets, mainly Icelanders in later periods, who declaimed their works at the various Nordic courts.<sup>11</sup> So central to the Scandinavian world was this verse form that its acknowledged originator within Old Norse tradition appears to have been raised to godhead status within a century of his death. Bragi Boddason the Old is the oldest known scald, a historical ninth-century figure, famous as the primogenitor of the art. But Bragi is also the name of the god specifically associated with poetry. According to our principal guide to the world of Norse mythology, Snorri Sturluson's thirteenth-century *Edda*, "There is one [god] called Bragi. He is renowned for wisdom and especially for eloquence and command of language. Especially he is knowledgeable about poetry, and because of him poetry is called *brag*. . ." (Sturluson 1987:25) (*Bragi heitir einn. Hann er ágætr at speki ok mest at málsnilld ok orðfimi. Hann kann mest af skáldskap, ok af honum er bragr kallaðr skáldskapr. . .* [Jónsson 1954:43]). This apotheosis

---

<sup>11</sup> For an introduction to scaldic poetry, see Holtmark 1982, Frank 1978 and 1985; although dated, Hollander 1945 remains a useful overview.

of Bragi Boddason the Old into the god Bragi is by no means certain, but represents the widely accepted understanding of the relationship.<sup>12</sup>

The complete aetiological myth about the origins of poetry is, significantly, a story told in Snorri's *Edda* by the god Bragi himself, where it is Óðinn who acquires poetry for men and the gods from the giants. Briefly, the story runs as follows: as a resolution of the Æsir gods' war with the Vanir gods, a man named Kvasir is created from the spittle the gods have spat into a vat (cf. the version in Snorri's *Ynglingasaga*, Aðalbjarnarson 1962:12-13). Kvasir is so wise that no one can ask him a question he cannot answer, and he spends his days traveling and teaching people. The dwarves secretly kill him, drain his blood, mix it with honey, and turn it into the mead that makes all who drink it a poet or a scholar (. . . *hverr, er af drekk, verðr skáld eða fræðamaðr*; Jónsson 1954:102). The dwarves, when asked about Kvasir, claim that he has suffocated on the wealth of his knowledge because no one was sufficiently educated to ask him questions. Now the giants come into possession of the mead, and Suttungr places it inside a mountain called Hnitbjörg watched over by his daughter Gunnlöð. Óðinn arranges for the servants of Suttungr's brother to kill each other and he works in their place in expectation of getting hold of the mead as a reward. When he is refused a drink, Óðinn has the brother bore a hole into the mountain; the god changes himself into a snake, and crawls through the hole to the place where Gunnlöð guards the mead. Óðinn sleeps with Gunnlöð for three nights and she allows him to drink three draughts of the mead. He consumes all the mead, turns himself into an eagle and flies back to the home of the gods, pursued by Suttungr, also in the shape of an eagle. When Óðinn arrives in Ásgarðr, he spits the mead up (. . . *þá spýtti hann upp miðinum*; Jónsson 1954:104) into the containers the other gods have set out. But during his escape, as Óðinn looks back and sees Suttungr chasing him, “. . . he sent some of the mead out backwards, and this was disregarded” (Sturluson 1987:64) (. . . *at hann sendi aftr suman mjöðinn, ok var þess ekki gætt*; Jónsson 1954:104). Anyone is allowed to use it, and that is what is known as the poetaster's share (*Hafði þat hverr, er vildi, ok köllum vér þat skáldfífla hlut*; Jónsson 1954:104). Otherwise, Óðinn apportions the mead out to the Æsir and “. . . to those people who are skilled at composing poetry” (Sturluson 1987:64) (. . . *ásunum ok þeim mönnum, er yrkja kunnu*; Jónsson 1954:104).

This myth, especially in its full and complete form, is of course chock-a-block with symbols and meaningful associations; naturally, there

---

<sup>12</sup> See Mogk 1887 and Turville-Petre 1975:186, who notes that “[Bragi] was an historical poet, whom mythological speculators had promoted to the rank of godhead.”

exists a long list of interpretations, not least those based on the story's connections with other traditions, especially Indic and Celtic, that suggest a background in Indo-European mythology.<sup>13</sup> The centrality in this myth of what looks to be a reflex of Greek *ambrosia* and Vedic *soma* and *amrita*—an intoxicating drink whose consumption imparts special power to the drinker—has naturally been the focal point of much scholarly attention.<sup>14</sup> And part of our understanding of this myth is the “shamanistic” view according to which Óðinn changes himself into a snake, drinks the hydromel, escapes as a bird and regurgitates the mead for the use of the gods and men—much as a bird would do in feeding its young. A recent observation has added a further, fresh perspective on our aetiological myth of the acquisition of poetry, and that is the degree to which it relates to *comparanda* from several traditions where similar myths apparently look to explain text as recomposition-in-performance. Citing examples from Persian, Telegu, Irish, French, and Greek, Gregory Nagy points out that in a number of traditions there exist myths in which “the evolution of a poetic tradition [. . .] is reinterpreted by the myth as if it resulted from a single incident” (Nagy 1996a:70). In these instances, the myth treats the tradition as though it were an original book that has been scattered and is now held by various performers within the tradition, a scenario in which “paradoxically a myth about the synthesis of oral traditions [. . .] is articulated in terms of written traditions” (Davidson 1985, here quoted from Nagy 1996a:70). Clearly our Norse myth about the origins of poetry is of a somewhat different sort, yet there are important points of contact as well. In our materials we have a story in which poetry has a single origin in the anthropomorphic being Kvasir, the wisest man in the world, who is slain (dismembered?) and his blood turned into the stuff of poetic composition. This elixir is rescued from the Otherworld of giants and dwarves by Óðinn, acting on behalf of men and the gods. But this potent liquid is, despite

---

<sup>13</sup> Discussions on this issue range from the imaginative (e.g., Stephens 1972) to the skeptical (e.g., Frank 1981). For a general orientation to this myth, see Turville-Petre 1975:35-41; perhaps the broadest frame for understanding the text has been suggested in Meletinskij 1973, summarized and developed in Meletinskij 1977. This myth is also found in *Hávamál* 104-10, and referred to in several tenth-century scaldic verses, as well as the 8th-century (?) Lärbro stone on Gotland.

<sup>14</sup> On the parallel of Indra obtaining *soma*, see especially Dumézil 1973; the parallels to the use of spittle are explored in Stübe 1924; on the broader associations with the use of intoxicating liquors, see especially Doht 1974. Of course, the connection between other intoxicants, such as wine, and poetry is known in many other traditions in roughly comparable periods. See, for example, Harb 1990 and Scheindlin 1984.

Óðinn's best efforts, not restricted to those whom he chooses but is in the form of the "lost" portion also spread out in the world and available to all. As in those other traditions, Norse composition as articulated in the form of the mead is scattered through the deeds of the principal deity.<sup>15</sup>

This reification of poetry—projecting inspiration, skill with words, and wisdom into the physical image of mead—is widely employed in the Norse world. The poet consumes intoxicating drink and then metaphorically "regurgitates" words of poetry, just as Óðinn has consumed and regurgitated the mead. This connection between such liquids, wisdom, and poetry is strong in Norse tradition. In fact, in addition to the mead of poetry, Norse mythology also speaks of a special elixir containing all wisdom coming from the well of Mímir, a figure who can boast numerous associations with wisdom, knowledge, and foresight. It is for a drink from this well that Óðinn gives one of his eyes. Once he has quaffed the liquid in exchange for the partial loss of his physical sight, he gains insight.<sup>16</sup> A connection rarely made with this aspect of Óðinn's career is the degree to which it would appear to conform to other culture heroes who are viewed as being formative in the creation of the poetic tradition—Homer as a blind singer is the prime example, of course, but one notes also the existence of a figure like the Ćor Huso about whom Parry heard so much in the Balkans of the 1930s.<sup>17</sup> To what extent an Icelandic poet who engaged in the composition and recitation of his art was mindful of such filiations as those with Óðinn is uncertain, although both in the Norse world and elsewhere the argument has been made that poets were aware that their craft had divine inspiration, perhaps even a mimetic function during the performative moment.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> Cf. the remarks in Foley 1998 and 1999 :49-63, where Foley demonstrates (1998:149) "how the legendary singer, although represented as a once-living individual by the lesser, real-life bards who follow in his footsteps, is also a way of designating the poetic tradition."

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Andrews 1928, whose clever construction of this complex is worth noting: he suggests that Mímir is actually a skull used as a drinking vessel, and thus would be the fountain of wisdom from which Óðinn drinks.

<sup>17</sup> See the remarks on Isak/Hasan Ćoso, Ćor Huso, and Homer in Foley 1998 and 1999:49-63.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. the Homeric case as outlined in Nagy 1996a:96-97: "I must insist that this kind of 'acting' in the context of archaic Greek poetry is not a matter of pretending: it is rather a merger of the performer's identity with an identity patterned on an archetype—a merger repeated every time the ritual occasion recurs." On the relationship between the

How thoroughly Óðinn's acquisition of the poetic mead was meaningfully integrated into Norse presentations of poets and poetry is indicated by the following scene from *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, a saga whose eponymous hero is often associated with Óðinn.<sup>19</sup> In this tale, Egill's enemies have plotted to kill him and his men by poisoning them. Egill undertakes to consume all the alcohol as the only one who will not be harmed by the poison (Pálsson and Edwards 1980:188-89):<sup>20</sup>

One man was given the job of serving each toast to Egil and his men, and kept egging them on to drink up quickly, but Egil told his men not to have any more, and he drank their share, that being the only way out of it. When Egil realized that he couldn't keep going any longer, he stood up, walked across the floor to Armod, put both hands on his shoulders and pressed him up against the pillar, then heaved up a vomit of massive proportions (*Siðan þeysti Egill upp ór sér spýju mikla. . .*) that gushed all over Armod's face, into his eyes, nostrils and mouth, and flooded down his chest so that he was almost suffocated. When he recovered his breath he spewed up (*. . . þá gaus upp spýja. . .*) and all of his servants there began to swear at Egil. What he'd just done, they said, made him the lowest of the low, and if he'd wanted to vomit (*spýja*) he should have gone outside, not made a fool of himself inside the drinking hall.

'I shouldn't be blamed by anyone for this,' said Egil, 'I'm only doing the same as the farmer. He's spewing (*spýr*) with all his might, just like me.'

Then Egil went back to his seat, sat down and asked for a drink. After that he recited this verse at the top of his voice:

With my spew I swear  
 Thanks for your sociability!  
 We have witnesses that  
 I could walk the floor:  
 Many a guest's gift  
 Is even more gushing;  
 Now the ale has ended up  
 All over Armod.

---

scald and his art see, for example, Clover 1978 and the works noted in Frank 1985:180-81. For the specific example of Egill Skalla-Grímsson in this regard, see Olsen 1936.

<sup>19</sup> Many aspects of Egill's career tie him to Óðinn, such as the gouging out of Ármóðr's eye, making him appear like "one-eyed Óðinn." See Olsen 1936 for a treatment of this relationship on more aesthetic grounds.

<sup>20</sup> All citations from the original are to Nordal 1979:225-27.

Armod jumped to his feet and ran out, but Egil asked for something more to drink. The housewife told the man who had been serving all evening to carry on as long as they wanted to drink, and make sure they had enough. The man took a great ox-horn, filled it and gave it to Egil, who swilled it down in one draught. Then he said:

Let's swallow each swig  
 This sailor keeps serving;  
 The bard is kept busy  
 With barely a break:  
 Not a lick shall I leave  
 Of this malted liquor,  
 Though the fellow keep filling  
 Fresh horns till day break.

Egil kept on drinking for some time, tossing down each horn he was given, but there was little fun to be had in the room as not many were still drinking. Then Egil and his companions got up, took down their weapons from the wall where they had hung them, and went over to the granary where their horses were kept. There they lay down on the straw and slept through the night.

Crude though we understand this scene to be, many have perceived in it a reflex of ancient concerns with intoxicants, ingestion, and the production of poetry as a kind of regurgitation, a recurring theme in this saga in particular.<sup>21</sup> Of interest in this connection is the fact that the author of *Egils saga* here uses the verb *spýja*, cognate with the term used in the corresponding section in *Snorra edda* about the acquisition of the poetic mead, *spýta* (< \*spyēu-, \*spyū-; see Buck 1988:264-66), rather than, for example, *hrækja* ("to spit"). Important here too is the fact that Kvasir himself is made from the spittle the gods have spat into a vat. The conservative lexical choices of the saga's author, often suggested to be Snorri Sturluson himself,<sup>22</sup> have been shown elsewhere to reflect deep

---

<sup>21</sup> This same image of consumed liquid and produced poetry is used commonly elsewhere in *Egils saga*, as when, heavily despondent and contemplating death after his son has died, Egill refuses all food and drink. Egill's daughter tricks him into drinking milk and he goes on to compose one of his most famous poems, *Sonatorrek* (Nordal 1979:245-56). The concatenation of the rules of hospitality, drinking, vomiting, and poetry is pointedly used as well when Egill visits the king's steward, Atleyjar-Bárðr (Nordal 1979:106-11). Medieval texts frequently employ the image of vomiting to a different end, often the idea of the non-contrite sinner returning to his sins as a dog returns to its vomit. See Toswell 1993 for a discussion and further examples.

<sup>22</sup> The classic formulation of this argument is Hallberg 1962.



connections to Norse traditions (e.g., Mitchell 1998), and we may here have another instance of this trend. Not only are such themes woven into the subtle nature and meaning of every part of the narrative, the same reflexive awareness of poetry's archetypal background in the consumption of liquids and other sustenance is marked in Egill's poetry itself. Indeed, Egill frequently uses metaphors based on this association, paraphrases that specifically conjure the image of Óðinn's original act of bringing poetry to humanity—*arnar kjapta órð* ("seed or produce of the eagle's beak"); and *Viðurs þýfi* ("Óðinn's theft") (Nordal 1979:276, 246).

In fact, kennings, those elaborate metaphors in which Old Norse poetry delights, confirm and extend this association: paraphrases for the art of poetry include "Odin's drink," "the Æsir's drink," "Kvasir's blood," "dwarfs' drink," "the rain of dwarves," "Suttungr's mead," and "the liquid of Hnitbjörg." Óðinn's trip back to Ásgarðr in the shape of an eagle has also given rise to metaphors for poetry, as well as some opportunities for understanding yet further how the Norse viewed the full range of this image. Early in the twelfth century, Þórarinn Stutfeldr uses the kenning *leirr ens gamla ara* ("the mud of the old eagle") to refer to poorly executed poetry.<sup>23</sup> The reference comes in the context of what amounts to a competition between court poets, and in his verse, Þórarinn mocks both the bravery and poetic skill of his adversary. The kenning is built, of course, on Snorri's story, outlined above, of how Óðinn acquires the Poetic Mead, but "spills," as bowdlerized translations often gloss it, some of the mead during his escape.<sup>24</sup> What the text says, however, is that "he sent some of the mead out backwards" (*at hann sendi aftr suman mjöðinn*). This is not a case, as it often seems from polite translations, of spillage: Óðinn quite literally excretes this portion of the mead. This defecated mead has no merit or value, is not watched over by anyone, and this exudate, rather than the regurgitated mead, is what poetasters consume, with obvious results. "The mud of the old eagle" is euphemistic—the phrase quite clearly refers to "the dung of the old eagle" (cf. *leirr* "mud, filth, dung"; cf. Egilsson and Jónsson 1966:368). Þórarinn's meaning could not be more clear: his enemy's poetry is shit.

---

<sup>23</sup> Jónsson 1912-15:462. In addition to this twelfth-century occurrence, there exist both thirteenth- and fourteenth-century examples. See Frank 1978:100-01.

<sup>24</sup> Young's well-known translation reads, for example: "It was such a close shave that Suttung did not catch him, however, he let some fall, but no one bothered about that" (Sturluson 1973:102).

That this physiological frame of reference was, like the larger myth from which it derives, well-known and well-used can be established by exploring some of our saga texts. In Sturla Þórðarson's thirteenth-century *Íslendinga saga* (part of the so-called *Sturlunga saga*), we are told of troubles in the region around Miðfirði and Víðidal. At the heart of this discord is a man named Tannr Kálfsson: *Hann var orðillr. Hann orti ok var níðskár. Engi var hann manna sættir* (Jónsson 1948, II:58) ("a spiteful gossip, a man who spread rumor and malicious statements, and was on good terms with no man" [McGrew and Thomas 1970-74, I:155]). In typically laconic saga-style, we are immediately told that a certain lampooning verse appears in the region about the sons of Gísli, but its author is quite clearly to be understood as Tannr. A killing takes place, and now as part of the renewed verbal war the men of Víðidal tell a mocking story about the men of Miðfirði, according to which the latter make up a mare: one man is the back of the mare; another, the belly; yet another, the feet; still another, the thigh; and Tannr, "the arse. For, they said, he dirtied all who had anything to do with him with his filthy droppings" (McGrew and Thomas 1970-74, I:156) (*arsinn. Hann sögðu þeir skíta á alla þá, er við hann áttu, af hrópi sínu* [lit., "the arse. For, they said, he shat on all who had anything to do with him with his slanders."] [I:156; Jónsson 1948, II:59]).

This little slice of life from thirteenth-century Iceland draws on and explicates the myth of Óðinn's acquisition of the poetic mead—that myth is not just an explanation for how poetry came to be, or even why poor or inadequate poetry exists, but rather points to the social origins of versecraft. Many of the Old Norse terms connected with poetry derive from words that designate this sense of caviling or defaming. And although the synchronic moment, in this case mainly the thirteenth century and the periods immediately adjacent to it, is our principal subject, our understanding of that period is necessarily informed by the diachronic perspective. A short digression into etymology is then not out of order. Thus, *hróp* (vb., *hrópa*), for example, has here the old sense of "slander, defamation" (cf. Old English *hropan* "to shout, proclaim, howl"; modern Swedish, etc. *ropa* "call, cry, clamor"; cf. Low German *rufen*).<sup>25</sup> Of related interest is the probable etymology of the terms for poetry, poets, and so on, viz.—*skáld* (whence, *skáldskapr* "poetry," and so on). Despite a long-standing debate about the derivation of this term,<sup>26</sup> scholarship overwhelmingly accepts that it is

---

<sup>25</sup> See de Vries 1961:260; Buck 1988:1250-51.

<sup>26</sup> See the bibliographic discussion on this and related points in Holtsmark 1982 and Frank 1985:180-82, as well as the references in de Vries 1961. Important elements

cognate with English *scold* and, indeed, with a whole host of terms relevant to this discussion (e.g., modE *say*, *scold*; ON *saga* [all derived from \**sek*<sup>w</sup>-, “to say, utter”]). The very etymology of the act of poetry in Old Norse thus suggests a performative character. A related image emerges in *Porleifs þátr jarlsskálds*, where Porleifr employs the outward appearance of delivering praise poetry in order to gain a hearing at the Norwegian court. Once he has secured the venue, he recites instead an insulting lampoon (*nið*) to the king as a reward for the king’s earlier misdeeds. This same corrective quality is further underscored by medieval Nordic law, which contains provisions for what it terms a *skáldstöng* (“libel-pole”).<sup>27</sup> Nineteenth-century Icelandic popular tradition knew of such a concept, a custom believed to be a reflex of older practices (Cleasby 1874:455):

The beina-kerlinga-vísur of mod. times are no doubt a remnant of the old níðstöng;—certain stone pyramids (*varða*) along mountain-roads are furnished with sheeps’ legs or horses’ heads, and are called beina-kerling (*bone carline*) [. . .] a passing traveller alights and scratches a ditty called beina-kerlinga-vísa (often of a scurrilous or even loose kind) on one of the bones, addressing it to the person who may next pass by. . . .

*Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar* presents a scene that echoes this same idea: late in Grettir’s career, he steals a horse and is chased by the owner of the horse over a long distance. During the chase, Grettir stops for rest and food, composing verses as he does so, sometimes teaching the stanza to those nearby. His pursuer mimics this behavior, stopping at the same places and also composing poetry. When the two finally end the race harmoniously, they compare notes about their versecraft, assembling the whole episode for each other, have much fun from it, and part the best of friends (Jónsson 1964:147-53). The vignette cited earlier from *Egils saga* raises another important opportunity for our understanding of Norse poetry *in situ*: Egill is travelling and has taken shelter with Ármóðr. His “gushing” behavior thus comes in the context of his being a guest (and, of course, at the same time, the host is trying to poison him). Hospitality—and its rules—becomes then one of the central stylized features of this marked form of performative behavior. Utterances of scaldic verse can come almost anywhere and at any time (the so-called *lausavísur*; cf. Lie 1982 ), if we are

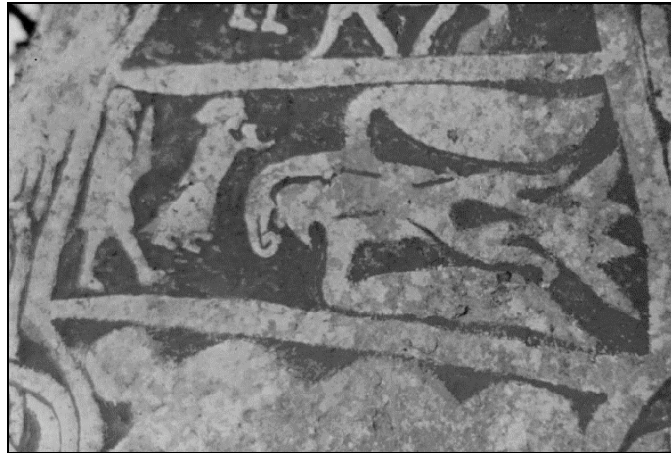
---

of this discussion are to be found in Olsen 1911, See 1964, and Steblin-Kamenskij 1969. Of related interest is the proposal in Werlich 1964 and 1967, refuted by Hollowell 1978.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Keyser and Munch 1846-95, I:430; more generally, see de Vries 1961:481, Falk and Torp 1904-06, Hellqvist 1957, and Buck 1988:1298-1300.

to believe the contexts provided in the narrative frameworks in the sagas, but marked, stylized presentations of elaborate praise compositions come predominantly within the asymmetrical context of guest-host relationships, especially as this literary marketplace increasingly comes to be characterized as Icelanders traveling from afar to the various Nordic courts. Old Norse literature is not so well-known as is Homeric literature, for example, for an obsession with the rules of hospitality. Still, large sections of the eddic *Hávamál* treat this issue (e.g., st. 2), encouraging reciprocity between host and guest (cf. st. 42: *gjalda gíof við gíof*) and the equitable treatment of strangers (sts. 2-7). The specific relationship between the king's hospitality and the poet's duty to respond with verse is noted directly in *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, when the eponymous hero comments in his so-called "Head Ransom" (*Höfuðlausn*), *Buðumk hilmir löð / þar ák hróðrar of kvöð / berk Óðins mjöð / á Engla bjöð*, "I offered myself to the king in [= responding to his] hospitality; I have the duty to praise him; I carry poetry (= "the mead of Óðinn") to England" (Nordal 1979:186).

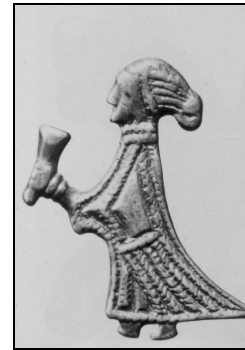
The ethnography of giving and receiving in medieval Scandinavia suggests that beyond the transparent and readily apprehended character of this relationship, much more subtle and complex filiations are acted out through various reciprocal acts of munificence (cf. Gurevitch 1968 and Mitchell 1983, with bibliography). The distinction between native purveyors of scaldic poetry, essentially an "aristocracy of the mind" within Norse society, to whom remuneration is owed in the form of hospitality, fellowship, and community contrasts sharply with the image that emerges of professional entertainers for whom little respect is shown (cp. the case of Old Swedish *lækæri* ["player"] in Schlyter 1822-77, I:36; cf. Mitchell 1997). That mead and hospitality were intimately connected in Germanic tradition has been the thrust of much scholarship and appears to be a common feature of the archaeological record, including the panel on the Gotlandic Lärbro stone that appears to parallel the story of Óðinn and the acquisition of the Poetic Mead (figure 1) and the many "valkyrie" figurines holding beakers of mead (?) recovered in northern Europe (figures 2-3); moreover, a number of literary texts treating the Germanic world, from *Waltharius* to saints' lives, testify to aspects of this same tradition (cf. Enright 1988; Bridges 1999). One scholar has argued that this image is reflected in *Beowulf* when the hero is welcomed by Wealpeow behaving within this "valkyrie tradition" (cf. Damico 1984). Despite the many differences of their views, all of these scholars argue that the triptych of mead, poetry, and hospitality possesses widespread and deep roots in northern Europe.

**Figure 1**

Óðinn flying with the Poetic Mead in the shape of an eagle?

**Figure 2**

Valkyrie with horn of mead greeting a warrior?

**Figure 3**

Valkyrie with horn of mead?

## Performing Poetry

Mindful of the truth of the comment that “oral tradition comes to life in performance” (Nagy 1996a:19), let us examine the fictional representations of such scenes in documents against the background of our discussion of hospitality, reciprocity, and this new understanding of the alimentary view of poetic creation among the Norse, and see if we cannot “unpack” the materials and arrive at a better understanding of the texts. It would seem to me to be obvious, but nevertheless worth noting, that the “cultural moment” is in every case for me contemporary with the written formulation of the surviving text—thus, a scenario set in the twelfth century

but coming to us in a text composed in the thirteenth century should clearly be understood (barring convincing evidence to the contrary) as a thirteenth- and *not* a twelfth-century phenomenon. Thus, although our texts treat many different periods, we must regard these settings as of little importance in this instance and focus on the period from which the documents derive, in most instances cited here, the 1200s (cf. my comments in Mitchell 1991:xii-xiii).

In one of the most famous scenes of *sagnaskemmtan* (“saga entertainment”), *Porgils saga ok Hafliða* (composed ca. 1237), we are told of how at a wedding at Reykhólar in 1119 several prosimetrical sagas are narrated, at least one of them including a long poem (*flokkr*) at the end. Yet for as often as this episode has been examined, the activities of the wedding guests in the period leading up to the saga narration are rarely connected with this well-known scene.<sup>28</sup> In this earlier episode, the saga tells of how various guests engage in dueling lampoons.<sup>29</sup> As the wedding feast progresses, the drinking keeps pace, and we are variously told that “there was no shortage of good drink” (*Skorti ok eigi drykk góðan*), later that “They all now drank happily and the drink soon made them boastful” (*Drukku nú glaðir, ok rekkir þá brátt drykkin*), and yet further that “Everyone now began to drink heavily and grew somewhat intoxicated” (*Þeir drukku nú ákaft, ok fær á þá alla nökkut*).<sup>30</sup> One exception to this heavy carousing is a guest named Þórðr, who is described as “not much of a drinking man” (*ekki mikill drykkjumaðr* [33]), cursed with a bad stomach, labored breathing, dyspepsia, a receding hairline, and sour breath. These features become the cause of several versified lampoons by other guests—e.g., “Whence comes this stink?” / “Þórð is breathing at table” (41) (*Hvaðan kennir gef þenna? / Þórðr andar nú handan* [34]). Þórðr responds in kind to each of the taunts, and his retorts and those of the others underscore the association between imbibing, items expelled from the mouth, and poetry. In fact, the image of poetry—apparently bad poetry—is in these exchanges explicitly expanded to include breathing (*andi*) and belching (*repta*), in particular the association between poor poetry and mephitic stench of constant burping.

---

<sup>28</sup> E.g., Liestøl 1945, Dronke 1947-48, Foote 1955-56, Lönnroth 1976:170-72, and See 1981.

<sup>29</sup> These stylized insults resemble, but perhaps do not rise to the level of, the so-called *senna* or *mannajafnaðr*. On the *senna*, see especially Harris 1979. Cf. Swenson 1991, although she does not take up the case of *Porgils saga ok Hafliða*.

<sup>30</sup> Text and translation from McGrew and Thomas 1970-74 :40-41 and Jónsson 1948, I:33, respectively. All subsequent references to *Porgils saga ok Hafliða* are given parenthetically in the text.

But what seems to be a jovial time for all—Þórðr is said to laugh heartily at the versified calumnies—turns bitter when a voice from the movable benches, where the low status guests are seated, utters an apparently more insulting and mocking verse. When Þórðr inquires of his hostess who the man is, and is told by her, he says that he will leave immediately if the offending poet—or poetaster—is not asked to depart. The refusal to turn him out precipitates a crisis and in the end Þórðr leaves, but not before two more insulting verses (presumably by the same man) have been thrown at him, and the episode concludes by noting that “it is not told that anyone spoke of giving him gifts” (43) (*En eigi er getit, at neitt yrði af gjöfum við hann* [37]). This phrase must be understood as a clear indication that the host-guest relationship has broken down entirely by the time Þórðr moves to others quarters. Immediately after this scene, the saga says that “there was increased merriment and joy now, good entertainment and many sorts of amusements—dancing, wrestling, and storytelling” (43) (*Þar var nú glaumr ok gleði mikil, skemmtan góð ok margs konar leikar, bæði dansleikar, glímur ok sagnaskemmtan* [37]).

After this section follow the vastly better known comments about the famous *fornaldarsaga* narrations with their verses: Hrólfr tells a saga about a viking, a barrow robber, and a berserker, “with many strophes too” (44) (*ok margar vísur með* [37]), while the priest Ingimundr narrates a story about the scald Ormr of Barra, “with many verses and, towards the end of the saga, many good *flokks* [poems] which Ingimund himself had composed” (44) (*ok vísur margar ok flokk góðan við enda sögunnar, er Ingimundr hafði ortan* [38]).<sup>31</sup> The sub-text of this portion of *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða* treats matters of status, host-guest responsibilities, and other aspects of the reciprocal relationship of this important dyad. If we consider these scenes in tandem, as they are presented in the saga, it would appear that one of the more honored and high-status guests has been insulted in verse by one of the low-status guests, but as this man is part of another high status guest’s followers—and indeed, even acts as his proxy in some ways—the hostess refuses to honor Þórðr’s request and he leaves in a huff. The scene as a whole forms a metanarrative in which the lampoons function as a proxy discussion about the host-guest relationship.

Although scaldic poetry was known throughout the Nordic world and is common enough in entirely domestic contexts in the Icelandic sagas (e.g.,

---

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Harris 1997 :134-35, on the prosimetrical character of the saga described here and the question of how tradition may dictate “a recurrent formal arrangement in which longer poems cluster at the end of a saga.”

*Grettis saga Ásmundarssonar*), the *locus classicus* for the *dróttkvætt* stanza is the *court*, as its very name implies (< *drótt* “comitatus”), and it is here we see the most elaborate presentations of it at work.<sup>32</sup> It would seem that each of the Nordic courts plays a role as the recipient (or would-be recipient) of this kind of poetry,<sup>33</sup> but none more so than the Norwegian court, to which Icelandic scalds traveled in hopes of delivering their elaborate poems and in still higher hopes of receiving remuneration, perhaps of even becoming a king’s man (cf. *Kounungsskuggsjá*).

Instructive in this regard, in part because it seems so atypical, is *Sneglu-Halla þáttr*, one of several dozen short narratives interwoven into the lives of the Norwegian kings. *Sneglu-Halla þáttr* differs from most of these short narratives, or *þættir*, by virtue of its relative lack of cohesive structure, apart from what seems to be the author’s need to supply a narrative to accompany Halli’s poetry. This story gets off to an unusual start, it would seem: as Halli’s ship arrives in Norway, they are greeted by some passers-by, one of whom, “a man in a red tunic,” turns out to be the king (Haraldr Sigurðarson, sometimes called *harðráði* or “hard-rule,” d. 1066). After he greets Halli and discovers that they have spent the night at a certain location, the king insultingly inquires, “Didn’t old Agði screw you?” (*sarþ hann yðr eigi þa Agði*).<sup>34</sup> Halli responds in the negative and when the king asks why this is so, Halli says in turn to the king, “he was waiting for a better man and was expecting you this evening” (244) (*beið hann at bettri manna venti þin þangað iquell* [235]). In fact, as jarring as this comment and its response may strike us today, it is a fitting opening for a tale filled with competitive, male witticisms. When later Halli is presented at the court, the king says that he must find his own lodgings, “but I will not be stingy with food for you” (244) (*en eigi spari ec mat við þic* [235]). Halli takes up residence and the king sets a series of poetic challenges for him and his opponent, the court scald Þjóðólfr, especially verses composed “on the spot,” based on events that have unfolded in front of them, such as a fight between a smith and a tanner. When Halli engages in a prank that impugns the quality—and especially the quantity—of the food from the king’s table, the king responds

---

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Frank 1978:21-33 for a general orientation to the *dróttkvætt* verse.

<sup>33</sup> See, for example, Mitchell 1997 on this point.

<sup>34</sup> Text and translation from Jónsson 1932 :235 and Andersson and Gade 2000:244, respectively. All subsequent references are given parenthetically in the text. In addition to the manuscript tradition found in Jónsson, *Sneglu-Halla Þáttr* is also found in Unger 1867:93-101.



to his hi-jinks that very night.<sup>35</sup> He has an entire roast pig sent to Halli's table with the following instructions: "Take this to Halli and tell him to compose a stanza before you get to his place. Deliver that message when you get halfway across the floor, and if he does not get the stanza finished, it will cost him his life" (246) (*fer þetta Halla s. h. oc seg honom at hann havi ort v. apr en þv kemr firir hann. oc mel þat þa er þv kemr amitt golfit. oc ef eigi er þa ort ser hann bana sinn* (238)]. Surprisingly, Halli manages this difficult assignment and thereby saves his life.

Attitudes toward this *þáttr* have generally been negative because of its apparently elusive, unsatisfying structure, but we are now better prepared to understand its intent: the abbreviated *senna*—the ritual exchange of insults—that begins the episode carries the burden of the narrative's meaning, and frames the *þáttr*'s fascination with hospitality, imbibing and eating, and competition, especially in the form of poetry. Indeed, virtually every element of this tale reflects concern with the reciprocal obligations of the guest and his host as they are actualized by consumption and poetic production. In the late fourteenth-century variant of this *þáttr* found in *Flateyjarbók*, for example, it was said to have been the king's custom to eat just a single meal each day, and when he had his fill, he would call for the tables to be cleared immediately, even if many were still hungry (Clark 2000:696).<sup>36</sup>

King Harald's custom was to eat one meal a day. The food was served first to him, as would be expected, and he was always very well satisfied by the time the food was served to the others. But when he was satisfied, he rapped on the table with the handle of his knife, and then the tables were to be cleared at once. Many were still hungry (*voru margir þaa huergi næri mettir*). It happened on one occasion that the king was walking in the street attended by his followers, and many of them were not nearly satisfied (*voru margir þaa huergi nærri mettir*). And then they heard a noisy quarrel at an inn. It was a tanner and a blacksmith, and they were almost attacking one another. The king stopped and watched for a while. Then he said, "Let's go. I don't want to get involved in this, but, Thjodolf, compose a verse about them" (*en þu þiodolfr yrk vm þa visu*).

---

<sup>35</sup> On Sneglu-Halli's transgressive behavior and the broader structural elements among such *þættir* of what Harris, in an adaptation of Vladimir Propp's schema, terms Alienation/Reconciliation, see Harris 1972:7-8, 11. On this narrative and the broader theme of verbal wit, see Harris 1976:7-16.

<sup>36</sup> Icelandic text from Vigfússon and Unger 1860-68:417.

The treatment of this subject—the stinginess of the king at his table, and Halli’s poetic and mocking responses—is, in fact, the principal sub-text of the *þátr*, as Halli time and again notes the hunger King Haraldr’s guests must endure and his own reactions to the condition. That the person responsible for the *Flateyjarbók* version of the tale apparently understands that the audience needs to have this meaning in mind and underscores the point by adding in the explanatory remarks about the king’s dining habits is undoubtedly attributable to the demise in the receptiveness of the Nordic courts to scalds and scaldic verses in the century and a half that separates the *Morkinskinna* and *Flateyjarbók* versions of *Sneglu-Halla þátr*. In other words, by the end of the fourteenth century, the once-flourishing interconnected relationship between the various dyads of poet : praised, honorer : honored, supplicant : superior, sender : receiver, Icelander : non-Icelander, guest : host has passed into oblivion, and for the audience to apprehend fully the nature of the text, it needs the clarification the later editor has supplied (cf. Mitchell 1997).

Yet of all scenes concerning the oral presentation of poetry and prose in the Old Norse world, the one that holds the most meaning for us—exactly because it provides us with a remarkable “snapshot” of distinctly different models of literary activity in the thirteenth century rather than a single uniform model, as is sometimes assumed—is the story of Sturla Þórðarson in *Sturlu þátr* and its famous scene of saga narration and declaimed praise poetry.<sup>37</sup> The text reports events that took place in 1263, when the Icelander Sturla Þórðarson came to King Magnús Hákonarson of Norway, to whom he has been defamed, looking to repair the damage of the misrepresentations. Reminiscent of the king’s behavior in *Sneglu-Halla Þátr*, the king here refuses to listen to him, but does allow him to accompany the royal party onboard ship, supplying him with food (Jónsson 1948, III:377-79; translation mine).<sup>38</sup>

---

<sup>37</sup> Cf. my earlier comments on this scene, Mitchell 1991 :98-102 and 1997 , discussions on which the current reading builds. Although I do not make direct reference to the “ethnography of speaking” in these earlier works on *Sturlu Þátr*, I take this opportunity to note the important influence this area of anthropology (and especially an encounter with Frake 1964, and the approach implicit in it, early in my studies in anthropology) had—and continues to have—on my conceptualization of cultural questions.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Kålund 1906-11, II:325-26. The compilation as a whole probably dates to ca. 1300.

And when men lay down to sleep, the king's forecandleman asked who should entertain them. Most remained silent at this. Then he asked:

'Sturla the Iclander, will you entertain [us]?'

'You decide,' says Sturla. Then he told (*sagði*) \**Huldar saga*, better and more cleverly than any of them who were there had heard (*heyrt*) before.

Many thronged forward on the deck and wanted to hear (*heyra*) it clearly, so that there was a great throng there.

The queen asked, 'What is the crowd of men on the foredeck?'

A man says, 'The men there want to hear (*heyra*) the saga that the Iclander is telling (*segir*).'

She said, 'What saga is that?'

He replied, 'It's about a great troll-woman, and it is a good story and is being well-told (*vel frá sagt*).'

The king told her to pay no heed to this but to sleep. She said, 'I think this Iclander must be a good fellow and much less to blame than he is said to be.'

The king remained silent. People went to sleep for the night. The following morning there was no wind, so that the king's ship was in the same place. When the men were sitting at table during the day, the king sent to Sturla some dishes from his table. Sturla's companions were pleased at this, and [said], 'Things look better with you here than we thought, if this sort of thing goes on.'

When the men had eaten, the queen sent a message to Sturla asking him to come to her and bring with him the saga about the troll-woman (*bað hann koma til sín ok hafa með sér tröllkonu-söguna*), Sturla went aft to the quarterdeck then and greeted the king and queen. The king received his greeting shortly but the queen received it graciously and easily. The queen then asked him to tell that same story (*segja þá sömu sögu*) that he had told in the evening. He did so, and told the saga for much of the day (*sagði mikinn hluta dags sögu*). When he had told [it] (*hafði sagt*), the queen and many others thanked him and understood that he was a knowledgeable and wise man.

As a result of his well-told troll saga, Sturla is given the opportunity the next day to declaim a panegyric he has composed in honor of the king, and he later delivers a further praise poem in honor of the king's father. Sturla's performances and poems ingratiate him to the king, and eventually the king awards Sturla what must have been one of the great literary commissions of the age, the responsibility for composing his father's saga, *Hákonarsaga Hákonarsonar*. Attempts to assess carefully whether the

narration of *\*Huldar saga* is to be understood as one about saga reading (the phrase “bring the saga with him” being understood as implying a manuscript) or saga telling (the phrase “better and more cleverly” being understood as implying an unfixed text) abound.<sup>39</sup> Despite the discord and consternation, the episode has engendered among such excellent readers of saga literature, a reasonable solution to its apparently contradictory information is available.

The author’s handling of the scene betrays his concern with a whole series of distinctions between the Norwegian court and his Icelandic hero: in one case, he is portraying a Danish-born queen who now lives at the Norwegian court, an institution that had been the center of an active translation industry for at least 35 years and possessed a noteworthy library. When she calls for Sturla to entertain them onboard the becalmed ship, the cultural frame established by her background (that is, the royal courts of Denmark and Norway) anticipates an entertainer who will come forward with a manuscript from which he will read. In fact, Sturla has no such manuscript. He arrives with no other possessions than his native talent and from it rebuilds his career, and, indeed, Sturla’s lack of worldly goods is underscored by the fact that he has with him no provisions, but must live instead off the good will of the royal couple. The ability of “Sturla *the Icelander*” to use poetry and saga narration as the means to become a Norwegian court favorite reflects a widespread idea in Scandinavia concerning Icelandic antiquarianism and narrative skill, a view one finds already in twelfth-century Danish and Norwegian historiographers,<sup>40</sup> and one the saga’s author is only too happy to perpetuate and exploit. Thus, the forecastleman’s question, *Sturla inn íslenzka, viltu skemta?* (“Sturla the Icelander, will you entertain us?”), which introduces Sturla’s obviously oral narration of *\*Huldar saga*, contrasts pointedly—and is intended to contrast—with the queen’s request that Sturla be sure “to bring the saga” with him when he comes before the royal couple. Here the author has neatly juxtaposed the traditional and modern, the non-elite and elite forms of literature (that is, “unaided narration” and “manuscript-based narration”), appropriate respectively to the ship’s forecastle and its quarterdeck, and the text carefully emphasizes the national, social, and aesthetic differences between the two forms as they are practiced and anticipated. In this episode, in fact, we witness the wide range of literary possibilities at mid-century:

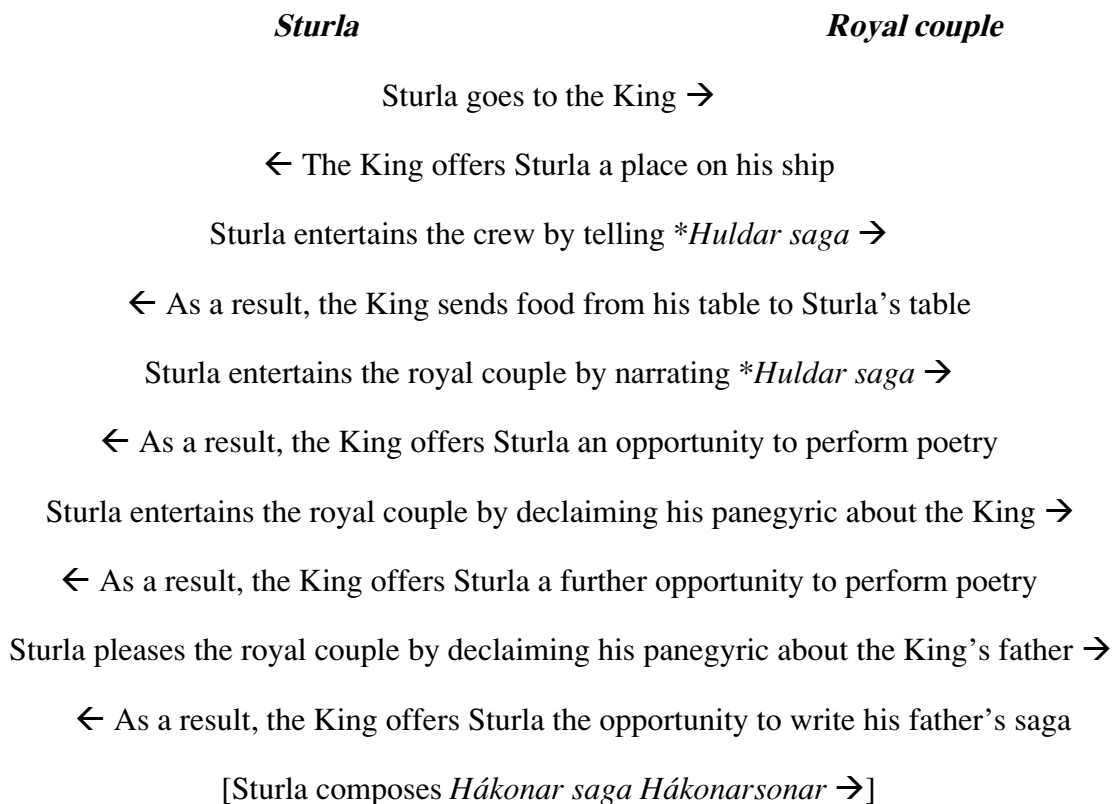
---

<sup>39</sup> E.g., Einarsson 1957 :158; Pálsson 1962 :52; Hofmann 1971 ; Lönnroth 1976:172; and Clover 1982:194. Cf. Mitchell 1991, 1997.

<sup>40</sup> E.g., Storm 1880:1 and Müller 1839, I:7-8.

oral saga narration (Sturla's two recitations of \**Huldar saga*); declaimed scaldic poetry (the panegyrics to Magnús and Hákon); and the written and read saga (*Hákonarsaga Hákonarsonar*, Queen Ingibjörg's expectations of \**Huldar saga*). This story thus captures Old Norse literary history at a liminal moment, and displays, on the one hand, through the queen's remarks about manuscript-based saga entertainment and the king's commissioning of Sturla to write a saga, the extent to which the increasingly prevalent custom of written narration had eaten away at oral recitation, while, on the other hand, it demonstrates the strength of, and the court's appreciation for, the venerable tradition of orally delivered scaldic praise poetry and oral saga narration.

Furthermore, Sturla's stay with the royal couple displays a pattern of ever more important exchanges between the poet and his host. Schematically, these reciprocal exchanges might be represented as follows:



That Sturla and the royal couple engage in a series of exchanges involving narration (especially poetry), sustenance, and hospitality seems beyond dispute, and indeed the degree to which food, poetry, and narration are

offered as tokens of honor is striking in this example.<sup>41</sup> A similar structure characterizes, it seems to me, *Sneglu-Halla þáttr* and several of the other texts under discussion here, although in several instances, what is exchanged is not honor but its obverse, ritual insult. But even this form of stylized malediction has its place in the hierarchy of verbal exchanges, representing a form of honor: Þórðr's difficulties in *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða* do not seem to derive from the nature of what is said but rather from its source, that is, from someone not of sufficient station to engage with him in this exchange of barbs. This apparently acceptable ritual behavior is interrupted when someone of the wrong—specifically lower—social status directs several lampoons at Þórðr. This contrarious behavior disrupts the orderly procession of the increasingly caustic barbs within the delicately balanced network of hospitality, stylized insult, and versified rejoinder.

## Conclusion

The Icelanders of the thirteenth century have, as even this incomplete review indicates, provided us with multiple opportunities to observe sagas and poetry in performance. By viewing these episodes through the prism of what Clifford Geertz (1973), borrowing from Gilbert Ryle, calls “thick description,” and Richard Martin terms the “grammar of context” (1989:4-10; cf. Bauman 1996), and the common ground John Foley has sought between “Immanent Art” and ethnopoetics (Foley 1995), interpretations emerge that differ significantly from what previous generations had concluded, working as they were within the framework of the dead, and deadening, argument of oral versus written, *Freiprosa - Buchprosa*, Freeprose - Bookprose. Of course, a fair question would certainly be whether or not this attempt to extract meaning from such scenes could not simply have been carried out in the strong light of traditional philology and mythology studies. My view is a qualified “no”—one need only look at the many decades of scholarly deadlock over whether Sturla did or did not own a manuscript to see how enervating the debate remained when it was framed by extreme views within the Freeprose - Bookprose controversy.

The advantages of this performance-oriented approach are even clearer when we remind ourselves of Bauman's tripartite dissection of such analyses (that is, *performance as practice*, of “cultural life as situated human accomplishment”; *cultural performances*, “framed, heightened, public, and

---

<sup>41</sup> On the much-discussed broader issue of the “ritual feast,” see Bauschatz 1978 and Enright 1988:179, and the bibliographies there.

symbolically resonant events”; and *the poetics of oral performance*, “performance as a mode of communication”; Bauman 1986a:132-33), all three of which are in play here in varying degrees. Through each of these performance approaches, and the occasion of performance provided by the sagas, our understanding of medieval Nordic prose and poetry is enhanced, and we are better positioned to formulate answers to the question posed above, “How do we best understand the Norse materials?” In fact, our examination of the Nordic mead of poetry underscores the reality for the Norse materials of what John Foley has so elegantly described as “the enabling event of performance and the enabling referent of tradition” (1995:208-13; cf. 1992): Icelandic narrative tradition frequently portrays “enabling events,” such as the declaiming of poetry at the courts; Nordic mythological and poetic tradition gives us numerous “enabling referents,” such as the hydromel of praise and the effluvia of scorn; and the study of performance provides modern scholarship with the *clavis hieroglyphica* that allows us to discover the meaning in the potent combination of the two.

*Harvard University*

### References

- Acker 1998 Paul Acker. *Revising Oral Theory: Formulaic Composition in Old English and Old Icelandic Verse*. Garland Studies in Medieval Literature, vol. 16. New York: Garland.
- Andersson 1964 Theodore M. Andersson. *The Problem of Icelandic Saga Origins: A Historical Survey*. Yale Germanic Studies, vol. 1. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Andersson 1966 \_\_\_\_\_. “The Textual Evidence for an Oral Family Saga.” *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, 81:1-23.
- Andersson and Gade 2000 \_\_\_\_\_ and Kari Ellen Gade, eds. *Morkinskinna. The Earliest Icelandic Chronicle of the Norwegian Kings (1030-1157)*. Islandica, vol. 51. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Andrews 1928 A. LeRoy Andrews. “Old Norse Notes: 7. Some Observations on Mímir.” *Modern Language Notes*, 43:166-71.

- Aðalbjarnarson 1962      Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson. *Snorri Sturluson. Heimskringla I. Íslenszk fornrit*, vol. 26. Reykjavík: Hið íslenszka fornritafélag. Original edition, 1941.
- Bauman 1977              Richard Bauman. *Verbal Art as Performance*. Rowley: Newbury House.
- Bauman 1986a             \_\_\_\_\_. "Performance and Honor in Thirteenth-Century Iceland." *Journal of American Folklore*, 99:131-50.
- Bauman 1986b             \_\_\_\_\_. *Story, Performance, and Event: Contextual Studies of Oral Narrative*. Cambridge Studies in Oral and Literate Culture, vol. 10. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bauman 1992             \_\_\_\_\_. "Contextualization, Tradition, and the Dialogue of Genres: Icelandic Legends of the Kraftaskald." In *Rethinking Context: Language as an Interactive Phenomenon*. Ed. by Charles Goodwin. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp. 125-45.
- Bauman 1996             \_\_\_\_\_. "Folklore as a Transdisciplinary Dialogue." *Journal of Folklore Research*, 33:15-20.
- Bauschatz 1978         Paul Bauschatz. "The Germanic Ritual Feast." In *Proceedings of the Third International Conference of Nordic and General Linguistics*. Ed. by John Weinstock. The Nordic Languages and Modern Linguistics, vol. 3. Austin: University of Texas Press. pp. 289-95.
- Bridges 1999             Margaret Bridges. "The King, the Foreigner, and the Lady with a Mead Cup: Variations on a Theme of Cross-Cultural Contact." *Multilingua*, 18:185-207.
- Buck 1988                Carl Darling Buck. *A Dictionary of Selected Synonyms in the Principal Indo-European Languages: A Contribution to the History of Ideas*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Original edition, 1949.
- Byock 1982              Jesse L. Byock. *Feud in the Icelandic Saga*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Byock 1984              \_\_\_\_\_. "Saga Form, Oral Prehistory, and the Icelandic Social Context." *New Literary History*, 16:153-73.



- Clark 2000 George Clark, trans. "The Tale of Sarcastic Halli." In *The Sagas of Icelanders: A Selection*. New York: Penguin. pp. 694-712.
- Cleasby 1874 Richard Cleasby. *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Clover 1978 Carol J. Clover. "Skaldic Sensibility." *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, 93:63-81.
- Clover 1982 \_\_\_\_\_. *The Medieval Saga*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Clover 1985 \_\_\_\_\_. "Icelandic Family Saga (*Íslendingasögur*)." In *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Critical Guide*. Ed. by Carol J. Clover and John Lindow. *Islandica*, vol. 45. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. pp. 239-315.
- Clover 1986 \_\_\_\_\_. "The Long Prose Form." *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, 101:10-39.
- Damico 1984 Helen Damico. *Beowulf's Wealhtheow and the Valkyrie Tradition*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Davidson 1985 Olga Davidson. "The Crown-Bestower in the Iranian Book of Kings." In *Acta Iranica, Hommages et Opera Minora 10: Papers in Honour of Professor Mary Boyce*. Ed. by Jacques Duchene-Guillemin and Pierre Lecoq. Leiden: Brill. pp. 61-148.
- de Vries 1961 Jan de Vries. *Altnordisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*. Hrsg. mit Unterstützung der Niederländischen Organisation für Reinwissenschaftliche Forschung (Z. W. O.). Leiden: Brill.
- Doht 1974 Renate Doht. *Der Rauschtrank im germanischen Mythos*. Wiener Arbeiten zur germanischen Altertumskunde und Philologie, vol. 3. Vienna: K. M. Halosar.
- Dronke 1947-48 Ursula Brown Dronke. "The Saga of Hrómund Gripsson and Þorgilssaga." *Saga-Book*, 13:51-77.
- Dumézil 1973 Georges Dumézil. *Gods of the Ancient Northmen*. UCLA Center for the Study of Comparative Folklore and Mythology. Publications, vol. 3. Berkeley: University of California Press.

- Egilsson and Jónsson 1966 Sveinbjörn Egilsson and Finnur Jónsson, eds. *Lexicon Poeticum antiquæ linguæ Septentrionalis. Ordbog over det norsk-islandske Skjaldesprog*. Rev. ed. Det kongelige nordiske Oldskriftselskab. Copenhagen: S. L. Møllers bogtrykkeri. Original edition, 1913-16.
- Einarsson 1957 Stefán Einarsson. *A History of Icelandic Literature*. New York: Johns Hopkins University Press for the American Scandinavian Foundation.
- Enright 1988 Michael J. Enright. "Lady with a Mead-Cup: Ritual, Group Cohesion and Hierarchy in the Germanic Warband." *Frühmittelalterliche Studien*, 22:170-203.
- Falk and Torp 1904-06 Hjlamar Falk and Alf Torp, eds. *Etymologisk ordbog over det norske og det danske sprog*. Oslo: H. Aschehoug & Co.
- Foley 1985 John Miles Foley, ed. *Oral-Formulaic Theory and Research: An Introduction and Annotated Bibliography*. Garland Folklore Bibliographies, vol. 6. New York: Garland. Rpt. 1988, 1992. Available in searchable on-line format with updates at [www.oraltradition.org](http://www.oraltradition.org).
- Foley 1988 \_\_\_\_\_. *The Theory of Oral Composition: History and Methodology*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. Rpt. 1992.
- Foley 1991 \_\_\_\_\_. *Immanent Art: From Structure to Meaning in Traditional Oral Epic*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Foley 1992 \_\_\_\_\_. "Word-Power, Performance, and Tradition." *Journal of American Folklore*, 105:275-301.
- Foley 1995 \_\_\_\_\_. *The Singer of Tales in Performance*. Voices in Performance and Text. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Foley 1998 \_\_\_\_\_. "Individual Poet and Epic Tradition: Homer as Legendary Singer." *Arethusa*, 31:149-78.
- Foley 1999 \_\_\_\_\_. *Homer's Traditional Art*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Foote 1955-56 Peter Foote. "Sagnaskemtan: Reykjahólar 1119." *Saga-Book*, 14:226-39.

- Frake 1964 Charles O. Frake. "How to ask for a drink in Subanun." In *Ethnography of Communication*. Ed. by John H. Gumperz and Dell H. Hymes. *American Anthropologist*, 66. Menasha, WI: American Anthropological Association. pp. 127-32.
- Frank 1978 Roberta Frank. *Old Norse Court Poetry: The Dróttkvætt Stanza*. Islandica, vol. 42. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Frank 1981 \_\_\_\_\_. "Snorri and the Mead of Poetry." In *Specvlvm Norrænm: Norse Studies in Memory of Gabriel Turville-Petre*. Ed. by Ursula Dronke et al. Odense: Odense University Press. pp. 155-70.
- Frank 1985 \_\_\_\_\_. "Skaldic Poetry." In *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Critical Guide*. Ed. by Carol J. Clover and John Lindow. Islandica, vol. 45. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. pp. 157-96.
- Geertz 1973 Clifford Geertz. "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture." In *Interpretations of Culture*. New York: Basic Books. pp. 3-30.
- Goffman 1959 Erving Goffman. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.
- Gurevitch 1968 A. Ya. Gurevitch. "Wealth and Gift-Bestowal among the Ancient Scandinavians." *Scandinavica*, 7:126-38.
- Hallberg 1962 Peter Hallberg. *Snorri Sturluson och Egils saga Skallagrímssonar: Ett försök till språklig författarbestämning*. Studia Islandica, vol. 20. Reykjavík: Heimspekideild Háskola Íslands: Bókaútgáfa Menningarsjóðs.
- Harb 1990 F. Harb. "Wine Poetry (*khamriyyāt*)." In *Abbasid Belles-Lettres*. Ed. by Julia Ashtiany et al. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp. 219-34.
- Harris 1972 Joseph Harris. "Genre and Narrative Structure in Some *Íslendinga þættir*." *Scandinavian Studies*, 44:1-27.
- Harris 1976 \_\_\_\_\_. "Theme and Genre in Some *Íslendinga þættir*." *Scandinavian Studies*, 48:1-28.

- Harris 1979 \_\_\_\_\_ . "The *senna*: From Description to Literary Theory." *Michigan Germanic Studies*, 5:65-74.
- Harris 1983 \_\_\_\_\_ . "Eddic Poetry as Oral Poetry: The Evidence of Parallel Passages in the Helgi Poems for Questions of Composition and Performance." In *Edda: A Collection of Essays*. Ed. by Robert J. Glendinning and Haraldur Bessason. Manitoba: University of Manitoba Press. pp. 210-42.
- Harris 1985 \_\_\_\_\_ . "Eddic Poetry." In *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Critical Guide*. Ed. by Carol Clover and John Lindow. *Islandica*, vol. 45. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. pp. 68-156.
- Harris 1997 \_\_\_\_\_ . "The Prosimetrum of Icelandic Sagas and Some Relatives." In *Prosimetrum: Crosscultural Perspectives on Narrative in Prose and Verse*. Ed. by Joseph Harris and Karl Reichl. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer. pp. 131-63.
- Harris 1998 \_\_\_\_\_ . "The Icelandic Sagas." In *Teaching Oral Traditions*. Ed. by John Miles Foley. New York: Modern Language Association of America. pp. 382-90.
- Hellqvist 1957 Elof Hellqvist, ed. *Svensk etymologisk ordbok*. 3rd ed. Lund: C. W. K. Gleerup.
- Hofmann 1971 Dietrich Hofmann. "Vers und Prosa in der mündlich gepflegten mittelalterlichen Erzählkunst der germanischen Länder." *Frühmittelalterliche Studien*, 5:135-75.
- Hollander 1945 Lee M. Hollander. *The Skalds: A Selection of their Poems*. Princeton: Princeton University Press for the American-Scandinavian Foundation of New York.
- Hollowell 1978 Ida Masters Hollowell. "Scop and woðbora in OE Poetry." *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 77:317-29.
- Holtsmark 1982 Anne Holtsmark. "Skaldediktning." In *Kulturhistorisk leksikon for nordisk middelalder fra vikingtid til reformasjonstid*. Ed. by Johannes Brøndsted et al. vol. 15. Copenhagen: Rosenkilde og Bagger. cols. 386-90. Original edition, 1956-78.
- Hymes 1962 Dell H. Hymes. "The Ethnography of Speaking." In *Anthropology and Human Behavior*. Washington, D.C.: Anthropological Society of Washington. pp. 13-53.

- Hymes 1964 \_\_\_\_\_ . "Introduction: Toward Ethnographies of Communication." In *Ethnography of Communication*. Ed. by John H. Gumperz and Dell H. Hymes. *American Anthropologist*, 66. Menasha, WI: American Anthropological Association. pp. 1-34.
- Jónsson 1912-15 Finnur Jónsson, ed. *Den norsk-islandske Skjaldedigtning*. Kommissionen for Det arnamagnæanske Legat. Copenhagen and Oslo: Gyldendal & Nordisk forlag.
- Jónsson 1932 \_\_\_\_\_, ed. *Morkinskinna*. Samfund til Udgivelse af gammel nordisk Litteratur, vol. 53. Copenhagen: J. Jørgensen and Co.
- Jónsson 1948 Guðni Jónsson, ed. *Sturlunga saga*. Reykjavík: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan.
- Jónsson 1954 \_\_\_\_\_, ed. *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*. Akureyri: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan.
- Jónsson 1964 \_\_\_\_\_, ed. *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar; Bandmanna saga; Odds þátr Ófeigssonar*. Íslenzk fornrit, vol. 7. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag. Original edition, 1936.
- Kålund 1906-11 Kristian Kålund, ed. *Sturlunga saga efter membranen Króksfjarðarbók udfyldt efter Reykjarfjarðarbók*. Copenhagen: Det kongelige nordiske Oldskrift-Selskab.
- Keyser and Munch 1846-95 R. Keyser and P. A. Munch, eds. *Norges gamle Love indtil 1387*. Oslo: Chr. Grøndahl.
- Lie 1982 Hallvard Lie. "Lausavísur." In *Kulturhistorisk leksikon for nordisk middelalder fra vikingtid til reformasjonstid*. Ed. by Johannes Brøndsted et al. Copenhagen: Rosenkilde og Bagger. Original edition, 1956-78.
- Liestøl 1945 Knut Liestøl. "Til spørsmålet om dei eldste islenske danskvæde." *Arv*, 1:70-75.
- Lönnroth 1976 Lars Lönnroth. *Njáls saga: A Critical Introduction*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Lönnroth 1978 \_\_\_\_\_ . *Den dubbla scenen: Muntlig diktning fran Eddan till ABBA*. Stockholm: Prisma.

- Martin 1989 Richard P. Martin. *The Language of Heroes: Speech and Performance in the "Iliad"*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- McGrew and Thomas 1970-74 Julia H. McGrew and R. George Thomas, eds. *Sturlunga saga*. The Library of Scandinavian Literature, vols. 9-10. New York: Twayne Publishers & The American-Scandinavian Foundation.
- Meletinskij 1973 Eleazar M. Meletinskij. "Scandinavian Mythology as a System." *Journal of Symbolic Anthropology*, 1-2:43-57, 57-78.
- Meletinskij 1977 \_\_\_\_\_. "Scandinavian Mythology as a System of Oppositions." In *Patterns in Oral Literature*. The Hague: Mouton. pp. 251-60.
- Mitchell 1983 Stephen A. Mitchell. "För Scírnis as Mythological Model: frið at kaupá." *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, 98:108-22.
- Mitchell 1987 \_\_\_\_\_. "The Sagaman and Oral Literature: The Icelandic Traditions of Hjörleifr inn kvensami and Geirmundr heljarskinn." In *Comparative Research on Oral Traditions: A Memorial for Milman Parry*. Ed. by John Miles Foley. Columbus, OH: Slavica Publishers. pp. 395-423.
- Mitchell 1991 \_\_\_\_\_. *Heroic Sagas and Ballads*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Mitchell 1997 \_\_\_\_\_. "Courts, Consorts, and the Transformation of Medieval Scandinavian Literature." In *Germanic Studies in Honor of Anatoly Liberman*. Ed. by Marvin Taylor. North-Western European Language Evolution, vol. 31/32. Odense: Odense University Press. pp. 229-41.
- Mitchell 1998 \_\_\_\_\_. "Anaphrodisiac Charms in the Nordic Middle Ages: Impotence, Infertility, and Magic." *Norveg*, 38:19-42.
- Mitchell and Nagy 2000 \_\_\_\_\_ and Gregory Nagy. "Introduction to the Second Edition." In Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales*. Harvard Studies in Comparative Literature, vol. 24. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. pp. vii-xxix.

- Mogk 1887 Eugen Mogk. "Bragi als Gott und Dichter." *Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur*, 12:383-92.
- Müller 1839 P. E. Müller, ed. *Saxonis Gesta Danorum*. Copenhagen: "Sumtibus Librariae Gyldendaliansae."
- Nagy 1990 Gregory Nagy. *Pindar's Homer: The Lyric Possession of an Epic Past*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Nagy 1996a \_\_\_\_\_. *Homeric Questions*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Nagy 1996b \_\_\_\_\_. *Poetry as Performance: Homer and Beyond*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nordal 1979 Sigurður Nordal, ed. *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*. Íslenzk fornrit, vol. 2. Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag. Original edition, 1933.
- Olsen 1911 Magnus Olsen. "Hvad betyder oprindeligt ordet skald?" In *Festskrift til H. F. Feilberg fra nordiske sprog- og folkemindesforskere på 80 års dagen den 6. august 1911*. Publ. as *Svenska landmål* 1911; *Maal og minne* 1911; & *Danske Studier* 1911. Stockholm, Copenhagen, and Oslo: Norstedt; Gyldendal; Bymaals-laget. pp. 221-25.
- Olsen 1936 \_\_\_\_\_. "Commentarii scaldici, I: 1, Sonatorrek." *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, 52:209-55.
- Pálsson 1962 Hermann Pálsson. *Sagnaskemmtun Íslendinga*. Reykjavík: Mál og Menning.
- Pálsson and Edwards 1980 \_\_\_\_\_ and Paul Edwards. *Egil's Saga*. Harmondsworth: Penguin. Original edition, 1976.
- Scheindlin 1984 Raymond P. Scheindlin. "A Miniature Anthology of Medieval Hebrew Wine Songs." *Prooftexts: A Journal of Jewish Literary History*, 4:269-300.
- Schlyter 1822-77 D. C. J. Schlyter, ed. *Samling af Sweriges Gamla Lagar / Corpus iuris Sueco-Gotorum antiqui*. [vols. 1-2 ed. with D. H. S. Colin.] vol. 1, Stockholm: Z. Haeggström; vols. 2-3, Stockholm: Norstedt & Söner; vols. 4-13, Lund: Gleerups.

- See 1964 Klaus von See. "Skop und Skald: Zur Auffassung des Dichters bei den Germanen." *Germanisch-Romanisch Monatsschrift*, 45:1-14.
- See 1981 \_\_\_\_\_. "Das Problem der mündlichen Erzählprosa im Altnordischen. Der Prolog der *Piðreks saga* und der Bericht von der Hochzeit in Reykjahólar." *Skandinavistik*, 11:90-95.
- Steblyn-Kamenskij 1969 M. I. Steblin-Kamenskij. "On the Etymology of the Word Skald." In *Afmælisrit Jóns Helgasonar 30. juni 1969*. Ed. by Jakob Benediktsson et al. Reykjavík: Heimskringla. pp. 421-30.
- Stephens 1972 John Stephens. "The Mead of Poetry: Myth and Metaphor." *Neophilologus*, 56:259-68.
- Storm 1880 Gustav Storm, ed. *Historia de antiquitate regum Norwagiensum*. Monumenta Historica Norvegiae. Latinske Kildeskrifter til Norges Historie i Middelalderen, vol. 14. Oslo: Norske historiske Kildeskritfond.
- Stübe 1924 R. Stübe. "Kvasir und der magische Gebrauch des Speichels." In *Festschrift Eugen Mogk zum 70. Geburtstag 19. Juli 1924*. Halle an der Saale: M. Niemeyer. pp. 500-09.
- Sturluson 1973 Snorri Sturluson. *The Prose Edda of Snorri Sturluson. Tales from Norse Mythology*. Trans. by Jean I. Young Berkeley: University of California Press. Original edition, 1954.
- Sturluson 1987 \_\_\_\_\_. *Edda*. Trans. by Anthony Faulkes. Everyman's Library. London: Dent.
- Swenson 1991 Karen Swenson. *Performing Definitions: Two Genres of Insult in Old Norse Literature*. Studies in Scandinavian Literature and Culture, vol. 3. Columbia, SC: Camden House.
- Toswell 1993 M. Jane Toswell. "Of Dogs, Cawdels, and Contrition: A Penitential Motif in *Piers Plowman*." *The Yearbook of Langland Studies*, 7:115-21.
- Turner 1971 Victor Turner. "An Anthropological Approach to the Icelandic Saga." In *The Translation of Culture*. Ed. by T. O. Beidelman. London: Tavistock. pp. 349-74.



- Turville-Petre 1975            Gabriel Turville-Petre. *Myth and Religion of the North: The Religion of Ancient Scandinavia*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press. Original edition, 1964.
- Unger 1867                      C. R. Unger, ed. *Morkinskinna. Pergamentsbog fra første Halvdel af det trettende Aarhundrede*. Christiania: B. M. Bentzen's Bogtrykkeri.
- Vigfússon and Unger  
1860-68                        Guðbrandur Vigfússon and C. R. Unger, eds. *Flateyjarbok: En Samling af norske Konge-sagaer med inskudte mindre Fortællinger om Begivenheder i og udenfor Norge samt Annaler*. Norske historiske Kildeskriftfonds Skrifter, vol. 4. Oslo: P. T. Malling.
- Werlich 1964                    Egon Werlich. *Der westgermanische Skop: Der Aufbau seiner Dichtung und sein Vortrag*. Ph.D. Diss. Münster: [M. Kramer].
- Werlich 1967                    \_\_\_\_\_. "Der westgermanische Skop: Der Ursprung des Sängerstandes in semasiologischer und etymologischer Sicht." *Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie*, 86:352-75.

## About the Authors

*Guillemette Bolens* is on the faculty of the University of Geneva, where she teaches medieval English literature and comparative literature. She is the author of a recent book, *La Logique du corps articulaire: Les articulations du corps humain dans la littérature occidentale (L'Iliade, Beowulf, Lancelot de Chrétien de Troyes)*, and of articles on Chaucer and Plato.

Assistant Professor of Greek and Latin at the University of Michigan, *Derek Collins* has published a book on Homeric epic, *Immortal Armor: The Concept of Alkê in Archaic Greek Poetry*, and several articles on archaic Greek poetry, divination, and magic. He is presently completing a book on competition in Greek poetry and performance, and his article in *Oral Tradition* reflects some preliminary findings of that research.

*John F. García* teaches classics at the University of Iowa, where his research interests include early Greek poetry and the historical and anthropological linguistics of ancient Greek. He is presently finishing a book on religious aspects of Homeric and hymnic performance, on which he has published two articles and given numerous lectures.

*Stephen Mitchell* is Professor of Scandinavian and Folklore and Curator of the Milman Parry Collection at Harvard University. He is the author of *Heroic Sagas and Ballads* and co-editor of the second edition of Albert Lord's *The Singer of Tales*. Among his recent publications are "Blåkulla and Its Antecedents: Transvection and Conventicles in Nordic Witchcraft," "Nordic Witchcraft in Transition: Impotence, Heresy, and Diabolism in 14th-century Bergen," and "Gender and Nordic Witchcraft in the Later Middle Ages."

*Anatole Mori* is Assistant Professor of Classical Studies at the University of Missouri-Columbia, where she specializes in the literary culture and society of the early Hellenistic period. Her research and teaching interests include Homeric epic, classical Greek poetry and prose, Aristotelian philosophy, and ancient attitudes toward gender and ethnicity. She is currently working on a study of the influence of Aristotle's *Politics* on New Comedy, as well as a book-length project on the *Argonautica* of Apollonius Rhodius.

A member of the Society for Basque Studies in America's Basque Hall of Fame, *Linda White* teaches Basque language and literature at the Center for Basque Studies at the University of Nevada-Reno. She is the co-author of two dictionaries and has recently contributed articles to the *Journal of Basque Studies in America* and *Breve Historia Feminista de la Literatura Española*. She has also translated several works, including Mariasun Landa's *Txan Fantasma* and *Errusika*.