

## Ancient Greek Oral Genres

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The study of ancient Greek oral epic traditions today revolves around a complex and hotly debated assemblage of interconnected genres, speech acts, and performative practices and rituals. Ultimately, however, such studies go back to the pathfinding comparative research of Milman Parry and Albert Lord into oral epic song-making. It wasn't until the 1930's, when Milman Parry and his assistant Albert Lord went to Yugoslavia to study the oral epic tradition that still flourished there, that the Homeric poems were understood to be not only traditional, but *oral*. In two trips to the former Yugoslavia in 1933-35, Parry and Lord collected 12,544 songs, stories, and conversations from 169 singers of the South Slavic epic song tradition. Their unparalleled fieldwork has been matched only by the work of Albert Lord himself, who took additional trips in the 1950s and 1960s. No two of the songs collected are exactly alike, nor do any two of the singers have exactly the same repertoire. The singers whom Parry and Lord recorded composed extremely long epic poems *in performance*. In order to do this, they drew on a vast storehouse of traditional themes and phrases that worked within the meter or rhythm of the poetry. They used these formulaic phrases, instead of what we know as words, to build each verse as they went along. Each song was a new composition, and no two songs that they recorded were ever exactly the same. The fieldwork of Parry and Lord and their application of that fieldwork to the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* revolutionized our understanding of Homer, and their work continues to drive Homeric studies today.

A groundbreaking new book by Aida Vidan, *Embroidered with Gold, Strung with Pearls: The Traditional Ballads of Bosnian Women* (2003), publishes and analyzes for the first time women's songs of the South Slavic tradition that were collected by Milman Parry and Albert Lord and which are now housed in the Milman Parry Collection of Oral Literature. With few exceptions, to date only the men's heroic songs collected by Parry and Lord have been published and discussed. (Important exceptions are Bartók and Lord 1951 and Coote 1977 and 1992.) In fact, the vast majority of the songs in the Parry Collection are women's songs—of the 12,544 texts contained in the collection, approximately 11,250 are women's songs. Vidan's book

continues the work of Parry and Lord by introducing and publishing several of the women's songs collected in the very same areas in the former Yugoslavia in which Parry and Lord recorded the heroic songs that they compared to Homeric poetry.

Vidan's book sheds important light on the dynamics of the process by which women's song-making becomes incorporated into heroic narratives, and encourages us to explore the Homeric poems once again in light of comparative evidence. Are the voices of women in men's poetry representative of women's independent song traditions? What role, if any, did women's song traditions play in the shaping of ancient Greek epic traditions (and later, tragedy)? In recent years scholars have in fact begun to suggest that women's lament traditions may have played a crucial role in the development of Greek epic and tragedy, which was traditionally performed by men (see Dué 2002). Richard Martin (1989) has studied the many genres of stylized speech that have been incorporated into the genre of epic poetry, and he has shown that the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* include within the overall epic frame the conventions and allusive power of a number of other pre-existing verbal art forms, including prayer, supplication, boasting, and insulting, as well as lament. (See also Foley 2002:188-218 for a discussion of the "ecology" of genres within Serbian oral poetry, which, like ancient Greek epic, includes magical charms, lyric songs, and funeral laments, among others.) Sheila Murnaghan (1999) has noted that the majority of women's speech in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* is closely related to lament in both language and theme. Vidan's work gives further support to the thesis that women's lament traditions have not only been incorporated into Greek epic; they are in fact the very backbone of it. It is very likely that the laments of Greek epic, although performed by a male *aoidos*, would have evoked for ancient audiences the songs of their mothers and grandmothers, performed at funerals upon the death of family members and extended relatives. In this way epic subsumes a distinctly feminine mode of singing within its own mode of expression, the dactylic hexameter, no doubt transforming it but also maintaining many of its essential features.

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