

Neoanalysis and Oral Tradition in Homeric Studies

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By oral tradition I understand the transmission from one generation to another of verbal messages of any kind carried out without recourse to writing, whether because this medium is unavailable or by deliberate choice. The messages can be transmitted verbatim or re-created anew at the time of delivery. Oral tradition embraces a wide range of cultural phenomena, among them epic poetry extemporized at the time of performance as addressed in the Parry-Lord theory of oral composition. It is still uncertain whether or not the theory of oral composition can fully account for the poems of Homer as we have them.

As far as the study of Greek heroic tradition is concerned, the most interesting recent development as I see it is the combination of the methods of Neoanalysis with those of the theory of oral composition as it comes to light in some recent work.¹ In my opinion, this approach will eventually revolutionize our understanding of the character of relationship between Homer and Greek epic tradition, first and foremost the tradition represented by the poems of the Epic Cycle. Namely, by showing (a) that in everything concerning the general picture of the Trojan War the Homeric poems presuppose the tradition represented in the poems of the Cycle rather than vice versa and (b) that more often than not Homer worked by consciously reshaping the tradition he inherited and adapting it to his own agenda, the approach in question leads to the conclusion that, rather than being just two traditional poems among many, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* possessed a special status within the tradition to which they belonged.

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¹ See especially Slatkin 1991, Ballabriga 1998, Danek 1998, Malkin 1998, and Burgess 2001; cf. my reviews of Malkin 1998 and Burgess 2001 (Finkelberg 2002a and 2002b).

References

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