

Homeric Studies

Steve Reece

Homeric studies has from the beginning been at the center of the renaissance of the discipline of comparative oral traditions, contributing such seminal concepts as “oral-formulaic theory,” “extension and economy of the formulaic system,” “type-scene,” and “composition-in-performance,” and giving fresh nuance to such fundamental but already familiar concepts as “parataxis/hypotaxis,” “enjambement,” “ring composition,” “Kunst-sprache,” “allomorph,” “multiform,” “metonymy,” “diachrony/synchrony,” and “oral-dictation.” Homeric Studies continues to exert a powerful influence on the field; I limit my comments to three areas of recent and particular interest:

1) In my view the most productive critical approach being applied to Homer today is what I would call “neoanalysis with an oral twist.” This approach focuses on the relationship between the two “canonical” Homeric epics that have survived, the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and their hypothetical earlier epic counterparts. The details of these earlier epic traditions are allusive, of course, because only their residue survives, embedded in fragments of a later “Epic Cycle,” in even later prose summaries of that Cycle, in the tales of various mythographers, and in more oblique references and allusions in tragedy, lyric, history, Hesiod and “Hesiodica,” other “Homerica,” and in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* themselves. The plastic arts too, especially early vase painting, provide a glimpse into the world of non-Homeric epic. From a strictly literary and analytical perspective, these non-Homeric traces of epic postdate the Homeric epics and are necessarily viewed as derivative of Homer; but from an oral and neoanalytic perspective, these traces of epic can be viewed as the residue of epic traditions that existed previous to or contemporaneous with Homer, allowing us at least a fleeting glimpse of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* valorizing or depreciating, toying with, and variously responding to other versions of the epic tales. In short, we can see Homer working within a living and changing epic tradition. Many recent articles on themes and episodes in Homer have adopted this approach, thereby mediating the viewpoints of the analyst and the oralist, often without

explicitly stating it as such, sometimes, perhaps, without even recognizing it. Recent specimens of this approach, with useful bibliography, are Burgess 1996 and Finkelberg 2000.

2) All at once about ten years ago a great amount of attention began to be paid to the book divisions in the Homeric epics; more specifically, to how the twenty-four book divisions in our inherited texts of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are related to the historical performance units of these songs. The debate remains unresolved. On one end are those who regard the book divisions as reflections of breaks in the historic performance of an eighth- or seventh-century BCE bard. On the other end are those who regard them as Alexandrian—a result of serendipity (the fact that there are 24 letters in the Ionian alphabet) and, to a lesser degree, of the physical features of text-making during the Hellenistic period (the typical length of a papyrus roll). Somewhere in between are those who trace the book divisions to the first writing down of the epics in connection with their performance at one of the Greater Panathenaic Festivals in Athens in the late sixth century. Whenever, and for whatever reason, they occurred, most of the book divisions seem to have been chosen judiciously, coinciding with breaks in the narrative. Yet some clash with scene divisions, cutting right through a narrative segment or even a type-scene (e.g., *Il.* 5-6, 6-7, 18-19, 20-21; *Od.* 2-3, 3-4, 6-7, 8-9, 12-13, 13-14, 20-21). Hence there has developed some consensus among Homeric scholars that in performance a division into three or four major “movements” is to be preferred to the twenty-four book units. As a practical matter, I encourage my students to read through the book divisions of Homer, just as I encourage them, in their reading of other oral narratives, to disregard the artificial divisions imposed by textualization (verse, section, chapter, book divisions)—in the New Testament Gospels, for example. Not only does this practice better replicate the original performance units, but it also allows the modern reader to detect patterns and themes in the epic that are obfuscated by overadherence to book divisions. A recent and excellent summary of the debate on book divisions, with full appreciation of its implications for oral poetics, is Jensen 1999.

3) A related question of intense interest in the past few years likewise has to do with the relationship between our inherited texts of Homer’s epics and the historical, live, oral performances of the epic by a Greek bard: namely, are our inherited texts more or less reliable records—though passed through countless hands over many generations—of what was once an oral-dictated text, that is, a scribal transcription of a performance orally delivered by a historical Homer in the eighth century BCE and thereafter for the most part, except for some surface corruption, fixed in its form? Or are our inherited texts the final product of a long evolution of a fluid oral and textual

transmission, attributable to a mythic figure, a symbol of oral tradition that we can call, for the sake of shorthand, “Homer,” but actually shaped by generations of mouths and hands, slowly crystallized, and not really fixed until the late Classical or even Hellenistic period? Albert Lord’s “oral-dictation” model was challenged early on by Geoffrey Kirk’s “evolutionary” model, and the debate has continued, with refinements and shifting terminology, to this day, its fierceness indicative of its importance in all matters having to do with the reception of these epics. For an up-to-date evaluation and comparison of the two models, see Reece forthcoming.

St. Olaf College

References

- Burgess 1996 Jonathan Burgess. “The Non-Homeric Cypria.” *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, 126:77-99.
- Finkelberg 2000 Margalit Finkelberg. “The Cypria, The *Iliad*, and the Problem of Multiformality in Oral and Written Tradition.” *Classical Philology*, 95:1-11.
- Jensen 1999 Minna Skafte Jensen. “Dividing Homer: When and How Were the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey Divided* into Songs?” *Symbolae Osloenses*, 74:5-91.
- Reece forthcoming Steve Reece. “Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*: From Oral Performance to Written Text.” In *Unbinding Proteus: New Directions in Oral Theory*. Ed. by Mark Amodio. Tempe, AZ: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies.