



# ORAL TRADITION

## Festschrift for John Miles Foley

**This article belongs to a special issue of *Oral Tradition* published in honor of John Miles Foley's 65<sup>th</sup> birthday and 2011 retirement. The surprise Festschrift, guest-edited by Lori and Scott Garner entirely without his knowledge, celebrates John's tremendous impact on studies in oral tradition through a series of essays contributed by his students from the University of Missouri-Columbia (1979-present) and from NEH Summer Seminars that he has directed (1987-1996).**

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## Memory on Canvas: *Commedia dell'Arte* as a Model for Homeric Performance

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When Albert Lord began the introduction to the work in which he would synthesize and analyze the material that he and his teacher, Milman Parry, had collected in the South Slavic world, he stated that “what was needed most in Homeric scholarship was a more exact knowledge of the way in which oral epic poets learn and compose their songs” (1960:3). For Parry and Lord, their knowledge came from the performances of the *guslari*, the traditional singers of heroic material, both Muslim and Christian. In the songs of such *guslari* as Salih Ugljanin, Sulejman Fortić, and especially Avdo Medjedović, the two saw what they believed to be a convincing parallel with what appeared to be the compositional techniques of Homer—the use of basic building blocks of standardized elements such as “the formula” and “the theme.” These, however, were just that: basic blocks. A poor, inexperienced, or mediocre singer could take a traditional story in skeletal form, and, with the aid of the blocks, flesh it out into at least a modest entertainment of a few hundred lines. A talented singer could go far beyond that, making elaborate songs of several thousand lines or more.<sup>1</sup> This was clearly not simply a matter of memorizing and then performing—although a singer in training would indeed tend to learn blocks.<sup>2</sup> Instead, it was a matter of combining such blocks with spontaneous creativity at the moment of performance to make something new that was both traditional and improvised simultaneously.

The application of the South Slavic analogue to Homer was the next step (Lord 1960:141-97) and, for many years, the South Slavic poetic arena has supplied scholars with a working model for better understanding the traditional processes at the core of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. At the same time, although this work has gone a long way toward Lord’s goal of providing “a more exact knowledge of the way in which oral epic poets learn and compose their songs” (1960:3), there is still a great deal to learn about how those who sang these songs actually performed them. What we have of Homer, after all, is something very far from the work of Avdo, coming as it does at the end of an oral tradition that began with the initial creation by *aoidoi*, passed into the later performances by rhapsodes, and ended in the collecting and reworking of

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<sup>1</sup> See Lord 1960:78-79, 103 for a comparison of the same song as sung in succession by Mumin Vlahovljak (2294 lines) and Avdo Medjedović (6313 lines).

<sup>2</sup> For a *guslar*’s apprenticeship, see Lord 1960:13-29.

material by later generations of scholars.<sup>3</sup> But what would an actual performance have been like if Parry and Lord had been able to record it as they had recorded those songs of the *guslari*?

The *aidoi* who appear in Homer, Phemius and Demodocus, are not much help here. Phemius is first seen in the *Odyssey* singing an unspecified song for the suitors (*Od.* 1.155) and then, at a later moment, is reported to have performed something about the homecomings (*Od.* 1.325-27) before also possibly playing the equivalent of dance music at the evening's end (*Od.* 1.421-22). This is useful for understanding repertoire, but not for understanding performance of that repertoire, and the same is true for Demodocus among the Phaeacians (*Od.* 8.73-82, 492-520).<sup>4</sup>

One thing that we can learn from the work of these two *aidoi* is that—as if already aware of Aristotle's dictum (*Poetics*:1456a) about trying to cover too much heroic territory in a tragedy—they focus upon a single topic for their songs. It is not clear which of the many homecomings Phemius chooses, but Demodocus sings about the Trojan Horse in a performance so convincing that Odysseus bursts into tears (*Od.* 8.492-534).<sup>5</sup> This situation accords well with the South Slavic material, which also is a corpus formed primarily of narratively independent songs, though with nothing quite so long and complex as the *Iliad* or *Odyssey*.<sup>6</sup> We have further hints for such discrete narratives in the surviving book titles of the *Iliad*:<sup>7</sup> both in Plato's *Ion*, where Socrates, conversing with Ion the rhapsode, uses episodes from the *Odyssey* to illustrate a point (535b), and in Aristotle's *Poetics* (1459b), where he lists the number of plays derived from the *Little Iliad*,<sup>8</sup> from which we can imagine that each play is the equivalent of an individual song being dramatized.

At some point in the historical process, we have a transition from *aidoi*, such as Phemius and Demodocus, to rhapsodes, like Plato's fictional Ion.<sup>9</sup> These later singers make a nice parallel with the *guslari*, as it would appear that they were not focused on producing original material, but were instead acting primarily to reproduce stories already sung. Suppose then, like Parry and Lord, that we have approached such a singer, whom we name Ion, after Plato. We have asked what songs he knows. He names, among others, the *Aristeia of Diomedes*, which is *Iliad* 5 to us. The longest of the 24 books at 909 lines, *Iliad* 5 is very tangled, perhaps suggesting a lengthy

<sup>3</sup> For a brief but nicely balanced discussion of the problems of oral versus written, see Foley 1999:xiv-xv. See also Foley 1999:37-111 for a deeper exploration into comparing South Slavic epic and its singers and Homer.

<sup>4</sup> In 8.262-65, we have an indication that Demodocus also sings a dance song (8.266-366).

<sup>5</sup> Odysseus has already (8.487-92) praised Demodocus for his vivid telling, saying that he sang it as if he had been there or had heard it from an eyewitness. This narrated praise also provides us with a small clue to Demodocus' performance: it clearly was not a mechanical recitation, but dramatic, and full of convincing detail.

<sup>6</sup> Even Avdo's very long (over 6,000 lines) version of Mumin's "Bećiragić Meho" is still based upon a single story, although very much expanded from within. See Lord 1960:78-79, 223-34.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Sadurska 1964:31, 39, 49-50.

<sup>8</sup> Aristotle also says, using the *Odyssey* for his example, that epics have simple plots but are expanded through the use of these shorter stories, which he calls *epeisodia* (*Poetics* 1455b).

<sup>9</sup> See Nagy 1982:45-49 for an overview of the movement from early singer to later rhapsode.

time between its initial performances and its latest redaction in manuscript form, but, stripped of all the detail, the outline might be as follows:

1. Athena gives Diomedes extra strength and daring.
2. Pandarus wounds Diomedes.
3. Athena heals Diomedes, gives him the ability to see the gods, and encourages him to attack Aphrodite.
4. Aeneas, in company with Pandarus, attacks Diomedes.
5. Diomedes kills Pandarus and wounds Aeneas.
6. Aphrodite rescues Aeneas and is wounded by Diomedes.
7. Ares stirs up the Trojans against Diomedes.
8. Apollo restores Aeneas and puts him back into the battle.
9. With Athena's help, Diomedes wounds Ares.

We know, from Plato's text, that Ion does two things in performance: first, he dramatizes and does it with such flair that he moves himself, as well his audience (535c, 535e). Second, he practices *kosmēsis*, which, if we compare the term with the work of *guslari*, should mean not "embellishment," "ordering," or even simply "adornment," but something like "elaboration," that is, the expanding of a basic episode by means of detailed description and smaller internal narratives. In fact, in the view of Parry and Lord, this ability to elaborate so well was a primary reason for likening Avdo to Homer in the first place (Lord 1960:xxxv).<sup>10</sup> Avdo was not, then, creating anew so much as re-creating while elaborating his narrative beyond his inherited building blocks, and this re-creation is what we might imagine Ion does as well when he is practicing *kosmēsis*.

Unlike Plato, whom we presume to have had real rhapsodes to employ as models for his imaginary singer, we have no real rhapsodes today that can serve as subjects for our own interviews or recordings. For that matter, outside of Ion's self-description and a few other similarly small hints, we have very little information about actual rhapsodic performance. We have *guslari* (and they have been extremely helpful), but there are also other oral and oral-derived traditions with which we might work to try to re-create a Homeric performance.

One such tradition, for which we have a good deal of useful written and pictorial evidence, is the *commedia dell'arte*, especially during its first two centuries—the sixteenth and seventeenth. By the eighteenth century, *commedia dell'arte* appears to have become sclerotic in its practices before being taken over and "reformed" by Italian dramatists such as the Venetian Carlo Goldoni, who had little knowledge of the earlier form of the drama and wished to regularize what they saw. Much has been written about the *commedia*, beginning with contemporaries and involving both performers and critics, but much modern scholarship, as well as popular writing, has seen the form most basically as an improvised skit somehow inflated into

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<sup>10</sup> See note 1 for the reference to Avdo's expansion of Mumin's song.

three acts.<sup>11</sup> More recent work, however, has returned to the primary sources and has given us a modified view, a view that will in turn bring us back to Homer and to *guslari* like Avdo.<sup>12</sup>

In *commedia* we see very professional actors who begin with a framework, a scenario. These scenarios, of which about 800 survive,<sup>13</sup> include acts divided into scenes and can be either brief or elaborate. They are like skeletons for plays, just the sort of thing that *guslari*—and (we can assume) *aoidoi* and rhapsodes—carried with them and used as the basis of their performances. For itinerant public performers like the actors of *commedia*, having frameworks rather than complete pieces would have been useful for many reasons. They are simplified and thus very portable, as well as easier to remember, and can provide for a much wider repertoire—which can then draw greater crowds. For performers trained to combine standardized features through improvisation, as we now understand *commedia* actors to have been, such flexible scenarios would have also provided intellectual stimulation, helping the actors to stay fresh each time they performed what could otherwise be the same work, time after time, pleasing neither the actors nor, perhaps, the audience. Also, for individuals living within an increasingly literate world, such as that of the *commedia* players, there was also the question of theft: a printed text could easily be pirated by another company, but who could steal something as fugitive as the improvised performance itself?<sup>14</sup>

When there were more than two actors on stage at any one time, simple traffic control would require at least some sort of rudimentary map of the action, so we can think of the scenarios, among other things, as a useful chart for rehearsals—something a single singer would never need. Tacked to the cloth hangings around their temporary stages,<sup>15</sup> the scenarios would also have acted as prompts, to be checked upon entry and exit as a way of understanding what should happen in a scene as well as which actors should do what and when. If we pick a scenario at random, such as that of *Il Cavadente* (“The Tooth-Puller”), we can see that, within its three acts, there are a total of 60 events we could call scenes,<sup>16</sup> smaller actions that create (or better, re-

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<sup>11</sup> For a brief survey of changing ideas about *commedia*, see Fitzpatrick 1995:7-9. Although one might ask how a dramatic form might be applied to the work of a single performer, I would propose that, at base, the two share many similarities, an issue that will be explored in detail below.

<sup>12</sup> For an entertaining and still useful traditional view of *commedia*, see Nicoll 1963. For a survey of literature on the subject up to about 1990, see Heck 2000. For an account that stretches across the entire period of *commedia* up to its fading, see Richards and Richards 1990. Because this article is meant to encourage further study of this material among non-specialists, only English sources are listed here, but Italian sources will be found in the notes and bibliographies of both Heck 2000 and Richards and Richards 1990.

<sup>13</sup> See Richards and Richards 1990:141; for the number of scenarios, as well as for a useful description of them, see 141-44. They also provide a brief survey (4-6) of the surviving materials, both documentary and visual. For a list of the major collections of scenarios, see Heck 2000:14-17.

<sup>14</sup> In 1611, the well-known *commedia* figure, Flaminio Scala, published a collection of scenarios, *Il Teatro delle Favole Rappresentative*. See Andrews 2008:xiv-xvi for a discussion as to his possible reasons and the consequences.

<sup>15</sup> Hence, another name for these scenarios was “canovacci,” from “canova” (canvas).

<sup>16</sup> Using the scenario as printed in Andrews 2008:62-68. For a discussion of what defines a scene within an act and how such scenes are employed, see Fitzpatrick 1985:177-98.

create) the plot, keeping the action moving and the spectators interested. These scenes can be described in some detail, such as in the following case (Andrews 2008:63):

Pantalone tells Pedrolino of the love he feels for the widow Isabella, and how he fears that his son Orazio is his rival, so because of this fear he has resolved to send him to the university. Pedrolino disapproves, taking Orazio's part. They quarrel and come to blows: Pantalone attacks Pedrolino and bites him on the arm, making it seem a good hard bite. Pantalone leaves, threatening him, and telling him to talk to Franceschina on his behalf. He exits. Pedrolino: that he will get his own back for the bite he got from Pantalone.

Or they can be extremely brief (*ibid.*):

Arlecchino [is] Isabella's servant. They do a silly scene together, and Arlecchino goes in to fetch Isabella. Capitano waits.

In this second scene, we can see a clear example of the particular combination of events that makes up the *commedia* method. First, we have two stock characters, Arlecchino and Capitano Spavento.<sup>17</sup> Second, we are given only the words "silly scene" before the action ends with the exit of one character and the promise of another character to come. To create the actual scene, the actors would rely upon a combination of the traditional skill—the behavior and language expected of such stock characters as well as the comic "business" standard in such "silly scenes," or *lazzi*<sup>18</sup>—and the improvisatory skill needed to keep this scene moving and to blend it into the structure and rhythm of the act.

These *lazzi*, along with the traditional speech and behavior of characters, formed only part of what an actor needed to be able to perform in this theatre. As Andrews points out (2008:xi):

The chief preoccupation of most arte performers was to soak their brains and their tongues in words which were suitable for their roles, so that speaking in the relevant idiom would become second nature. Training in such verbal skills was even more central than developing characteristic gestures and body language, important though these would also have been. Each actor would accumulate a personal repertoire of recyclable speeches and extracts in a commonplace book (*zibaldone*, or *libro generico*—sadly no example has survived, but their use is well confirmed by other documents). Their material was constructed with constant (though certainly not exclusive) reference to literary models and styles, including the most high-flown and aristocratic examples.

Thus, we might see and hear, in any one scene, a combination of passed-down physical comedy, flowery or dramatic passages from other texts, and the expected behavior and language of stock figures—all flowing on the current of the actors' ability to make these combinations appear as believable, coherent behavior (at least within the dramatic moment). And that ability

<sup>17</sup> For a working description of stock characters and their uses, see Andrews 2008:xix-xxxii, xxxix-xliii.

<sup>18</sup> For examples of *lazzi*, see Richards and Richards 1990:175-78. See also Gordon 1983.

was what made individuals distinct and memorable as actors—just as Avdo’s ability to take the skeleton of a text, add the blocks, and expand the whole into an hour or two of heroic entertainment made him what Lord called him: “our present-day Balkan Singer of Tales” (1960:xxxv).

Imagine, then, as we return to the *Aristeia of Diomedes*, that a rhapsode, although he worked alone, used the same methods as the *commedia* actors with their canvas-pinned scenarios. As a whole, the *Aristeia* is too long for detailed analysis here, but we might take one scene from the larger scenario, the fifth point in my outline above, where Diomedes kills Pandarus and wounds Aeneas.

To determine what might be our rhapsode’s method, we have, besides our *commedia* knowledge, the parallels to be found in the work of Parry and Lord. We can see from their collections how someone like Avdo can elaborate upon a given story within his own tradition. First, we can read enough songs to gain a basic understanding of what kinds of blocks—“formulas” and “themes” in Lord’s terminology—a singer must have begun with. Second, we can examine other versions of the same story by other singers. From this evidence, we can then extrapolate: Avdo uses the same blocks as other *guslari*, but he expands far beyond other singers, making his songs richer than those of his contemporaries both in look and in character. Third, we can comparatively employ both formulas and themes, as well as parallel scenes from other episodes in the *Iliad*, to better imagine Ion at work practicing *kosmēsis*, elaboration.<sup>19</sup>

In its present form, the scene runs from *Iliad* 5.166-310, from the moment when Aeneas looks for Pandarus to the moment when Aeneas faints from the blow of the boulder thrown at him by Diomedes. Broken down into its suggestive essentials like one of the comparable scenes from *commedia*, the narrative might look like this—a skeleton within a skeleton:

Aeneas invites Pandarus to attack Diomedes. Pandarus at first declines. Aeneas invites him again. Pandarus agrees. Sthenelos warns Diomedes that Aeneas and Pandarus are approaching. Pandarus throws a spear at Diomedes and misses. Diomedes kills Pandarus. Aeneas tries to protect Pandarus’ body and is nearly killed by a boulder thrown by Diomedes. Aeneas faints.

Our rhapsode begins with Aeneas’ invitation. This request could, in fact, have been just that: “Come help me to kill Diomedes.” Instead, Aeneas uses a tone reminiscent of Agamemnon’s abusive language to various Greek heroes in *Iliad* 4, suggesting that he does not really believe that Pandarus will accept.<sup>20</sup> Pandarus responds through what we might call the “identifying a warrior from afar” motif (5.179-85), familiar from a number of other examples in the *Iliad*, most notably that of Helen on the wall (3.178-242), saying that the warrior who appears to be the target is Diomedes. Pandarus then declines Aeneas’ invitation, and here we can clearly see *kosmēsis* at work: his refusal is in double form. First, he says that he has tried to kill Diomedes before, but that the enemy seems to be protected by a god (5.185-91). He then adds a

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<sup>19</sup> To help in better understanding the standard structure of battle scenes like this, see Edwards 1992:299-303.

<sup>20</sup> This tone is perhaps even ironic on the part of a singer, since a major portion of this abuse (4.370-400) is directed towards Diomedes himself.

second, elaborately-told excuse: he has no chariot and team, having left them at home against his father's advice (5.192-205). Aeneas then tries again, now offering the use of his own chariot, thus varying the scene and amplifying it as well.<sup>21</sup> Aeneas and Pandarus then approach Diomedes, but, in a mirror repetition of the earlier "identifying a warrior from afar" motif, it is Sthenelus who now warns Diomedes of the impending attack. Diomedes proposes to defend himself, instructing Sthenelus to see if he can take Aeneas' horses, with their important pedigree (5.260-73) (an important feature in general within the *Iliad* for animals, objects, and men),<sup>22</sup> but also offering another opportunity for *kosmēsis*, as the story is extended through additional historical details that explain why Aeneas' horses are so worth the capture. Next, Pandarus throws a spear at Diomedes and boasts that he has hit him (5.280-85),<sup>23</sup> but he is then himself formulaically struck down by Diomedes, receiving his death-wound through the mouth and then falling with a clattering of armor (5.290-96). Aeneas' ensuing struggle to protect the body (5.297-302) reminds us of, among other scenes, the long fight over the body of Patroclus throughout the latter part of Book 17. The scene then ends with Diomedes, like Aeneas in his later attack on Achilles (20.285-87), felling Aeneas with a rock requiring strength beyond that of the average mortal to wield (5.302-10).

As we have seen above, the *commedia* actor, beginning with his simple and flexible scenario, could create full-scale entertainments, employing both *lazzi* and memorized verbal material, but, through the power of talented recombination, still producing it as fresh and highly entertaining. The same is true within the Greek poetic sphere, where a scene that, in skeletal form, can be telegraphed in nine short English sentences is expanded through *kosmēsis* so that it appears in *Iliad* 5 as 150 lines of vivid Greek. Beginning with a mere outline, the singer combines basic narrative blocks with a large amount of extra detail, from Pandarus' second reason for not immediately accepting Aeneas' invitation to the pedigree of Aeneas' team. Within these lines, then, the audience is taken beyond the simple narrative outline to see Pandarus as a man who feels that he has made a bad decision. He attempts a second time to accomplish what he failed to do the first time and dies for it. Additionally, the expansions present Diomedes not only as a strong warrior made even stronger by the favor of a goddess, but also as a man knowledgeable in horses and history.

Parry and Lord's original fieldwork provided us with a far greater understanding of how Homeric verse was constructed, but their methodology also pointed the way toward using other oral and oral-derived traditions and performance cultures to broaden our knowledge even further. Plato's rhapsode Ion is a winner in his oral poetic arena (*Ion* 530b) just as *commedia* actors were successful entertainers within their own performance environment. Accordingly, if we apply *commedia*'s characteristics to interpreting Homeric texts, perhaps we may come to a better understanding of rhapsodic performance itself, and thus come a little closer toward satisfying

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<sup>21</sup> We can see here another parallel, this time with Book 17, where Automedon joins forces with the chariotless Alkimedon in an attempt to avenge Patroclus (17.465-506).

<sup>22</sup> Pedigrees are so important, in fact, that even a speaker's staff can have its own lineage (2.100-08).

<sup>23</sup> In a similar boast, Alexander/Paris claims at 11.380-83 that he has hit Diomedes with an arrow.

Lord's wish for "a more exact knowledge of the way in which oral epic poets learn and compose their songs" (1960:3).

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