

**Phemius' Last Stand:
The Impact of Occasion on
Tradition in the *Odyssey***

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When Odysseus and Telemachus finally take their stand against the suitors in Book XXII of the *Odyssey*, Phemius, the poet who has been entertaining the suitors in Ithaca during Odysseus' absence, makes a single attempt to save his own life. He begs Odysseus not to kill him because he is a poet (344-49):

γουνουμαί σ', Ὀδυσσεύ· σὺ δέ μ' αἶδεο καί μ' ἐλέησον·
αὐτῷ τοι μετόπισθ' ἄχρ' ἔσσεται, εἴ κεν ἀοιδὸν
πέφνης, ὅς τε θεοῖσι καὶ ἀνθρώποισιν ἀείδω.
αὐτοδίδακτος δ' εἰμί, θεὸς δέ μοι ἐν φρεσὶν οἶμας
παντοίας ἐνέφυσεν· ἔοικα δέ τοι παραεῖδειν
ὡς τε θεῶ· τῷ μὴ με λιλαίεο δειροτομήσαι.

I beg you, Odysseus, respect me and have pity on me. For you will have trouble in the future if you slay a poet, I who sing for both the gods and men. I am self-taught and the god has inspired me with all kinds of songs. It is fitting for me to sing for you as for a god. For these reasons, do not be eager to kill me.

We immediately notice the poet's reference to both the divine and human spheres: Phemius sings for gods and men; he is both self-taught and inspired by the gods. In this passage, as in others, Homer uses the motif of divine intervention to emphasize the extraordinary aspect of Phemius' expertise as well as the general manifestation of the gods in all things mortal.¹ Often a divine teacher is introduced to explain a mortal's excellence at a particular skill or craft. Nestor, for example, in the *Iliad*

¹ For discussion of this passage within the context of the dual motivation that Homer so often attributes to human activities, see Lesky 1961:30-32 and, more recently, Edwards 1987:19, 134-35.

encourages Antilochus before the chariot race held in Book XXIII; he reminds him that he owes his skill to the gods (306-9):²

Ἄντιλοχ', ἦτοι μὲν σε νέον περ ἑόντα φίλησαν
 Ζεὺς τε Ποσειδάων τε, καὶ ἵπποσύνας ἐδίδαξαν
 παντοίας· τῷ καὶ σε διδασκόμεν οὐ τι μάλα χρεώ·
 οἴσθα γὰρ εὖ περὶ τέρμαθ' ἐλίσσόμεν·

Antilochus, indeed Zeus and Poseidon have loved you although you are young, and they have taught you all kinds of horsemanship. And so there is no great need to teach you, for you know well how to round the turning-posts.

Divine inspiration or teaching, however, does not completely rule out the human component. The gods have provided Antilochus with the skill of horsemanship, but in order to be truly successful, Antilochus himself must know how to apply that skill to the needs and circumstances of each individual race. Neither Nestor nor anyone else can teach him that. This same distinction applies to Phemius' description of poetic skill. The poet does more than merely acknowledge the combined forces of divine inspiration and human intellectual capacity. In addition, he calls our attention to the two key elements of oral poetics. He contrasts the traditional element of oral poetry, that which the god inspires, with the demands of the individual occasion, which the "self-taught" poet himself controls.³ Albert Lord, drawing upon the research that he and Milman Parry conducted on the South Slavic oral tradition, describes the oral poet in these same terms (1962:184):

He is the carrier of the tradition; he composes the songs. He must be sensible of both occasion and audience, but it is ultimately his skill or lack of it which will please, instruct, move to tears or laughter, or incite to action. The fate of the songs is in his hands. He may corrupt a good story, or he may enhance and set right a story which he received from the tradition in a corrupt state. He is no mere mouthpiece who repeats slavishly what he has learned. He is a creative artist.

Wilhelm Radloff, in his preface to the fifth volume of the *Proben der Volksliteratur der türkischen Stämme* (1990:83-84), characterizes the Kara-Kirgiz oral poet similarly; he describes the singer of epic songs as an improvising piano player who

² Cf. *Iliad* 5.51-52; 5.59-61; *Odyssey* 1.384-85; 7.109-111.

³ Martin (1989:xiii) addresses this issue of the "interplay between traditional narrative material and the poet's spontaneous composition."

creates a mood by putting together various courses, transitions, and motifs with which he is familiar, and he thus creates the new from the old he knows. The singer of epic songs proceeds in the same way. Through extensive practice in reciting, he has a series of themes [*Vortragsteile*] available, if I may so put it, which he assembles in a manner suitable to the development. These themes are the descriptions of certain incidents and situations, such as a hero's birth, the growing up of a hero, the praising of the weapons, . . . and many other things. The singer's art is to order all these ready-made themes [*Bildteilchen*] and to link them by means of newly composed verses.

In the *Odyssey*, Phemius describes his own craft just this way. His reference to his divine source designates the vast poetic tradition in which he works—his familiarity with many types of scenes and formulaic building blocks. But as an oral poet, he innovates within that tradition, and this is a skill which goes beyond what the gods give a poet—this he teaches himself over time as he gradually learns to adapt each new song to its specific occasion and audience. In other words, the god inspires Phemius with the poetic tradition, but he is self-taught when it comes to making each song suit its occasion.

Phemius acknowledges his place in the tradition of Greek heroic poetry by explaining that the god has inspired him with all kinds of songs (θεός δέ μοι ἐν φρεσὶν οὔμας / παντοίας ἐνέφυσεν). By “god,” Phemius surely means a Muse or Apollo, the deities specifically associated with the poetic tradition.⁴ In Greek poetry, the divine persona of the Muse typically represents the oral poetic tradition in its broadest sense.⁵ The Muses provide the poet with his material; they help him capture part of the traditional past within his particular song. As the daughters of Mnemosyne, the Muses reflect the important function of memory among oral societies, for not only does oral poetry “memorialize” famous deeds, but a creative memory is an integral part of the process of oral

⁴ The scholiast on this line (22.347) equates θεός with ἡ μουσα (Dindorf 1855). Within Greek literature, poets are flexible in acknowledging their connection to the divine aspect of poetry. The “givers” or “teachers” of poetry to poets are alternately referred to as Apollo, one or more Muses, or simply θεός. These are not substantive alternatives but simply represent metrical or stylistic variation within a fluid tradition. See, for example, the opening of the *Odyssey*, where the poet first appeals to the Muse (μουσα) and then nine lines later addresses her as “goddess, daughter of Zeus” (θεά, θυγάτηρ Διός).

⁵ See Sperdutti 1950 on the nature of the relationship between Greek poetry and the divine.

composition.⁶ In addition, the Muses are the oral poet's source of inspiration and talent; they teach poets to sing.⁷ Finally, they provide the bard and his song with authority and credibility.⁸

The divine Muse personifies the essence of the oral poetic tradition, and in this capacity, she teaches the poet his craft. Both Homer and Hesiod use the verb "teach" (διδάσκω) to describe the professional training of a poet or orator. In the *Theogony*, the Muses teach Hesiod their fine song as he tends his flock on Mount Helicon (22-23):⁹

αἶ νύ ποθ' Ἡσίοδον καλήν ἐδίδαξαν ἀοιδήν,
ἄρνας ποιμαίνονθ' Ἑλικῶνος ὑπο ζαθέοιο.

They once *taught* Hesiod their fine song while he was tending his flocks beneath divine Helicon.

In Book VIII of the *Odyssey*, Odysseus conveys the highest praise on Demodocus, the poet who entertains the Phaeacians, by exclaiming that either a Muse or Apollo taught him (487-88):¹⁰

Δημόδοκ', ἔξοχα δὴ σε βροτῶν αἰνίζομ' ἀπάντων·
ἦ σέ γε Μοῦσ' ἐδίδαξε, Διὸς πάις, ἦ σέ γ' Ἀπόλλων.

Demodocus, I praise you above all mortals. Either the Muse, child of Zeus, has taught you, or Apollo.

In the first book of the *Odyssey*, when Telemachus calls an assembly in Odysseus' absence, Antinous taunts him about his new-found oratorical

⁶ Cf. Notopoulos (1938), who stresses the importance of memory in any oral poetic tradition, but tries to tie memory too specifically to the use of formulae. When composing/performing, the poet draws on a broader concept of "memory" in connection with its associations with the traditional origins of song.

⁷ Cf. Murray (1981:89), who argues that the Muses "symbolize the poet's feeling of dependence on the external: they are the personification of his inspiration."

⁸ Cf. Allen 1949:49; he argues that the power of the Muses is not only inspiration; they are the possessors of all knowledge. Taking a slightly different approach, Svenbro 1976: 16-45, esp. 32, suggests that we interpret the Muses as a religious representation of social control. The Muses help the poet tell the kind of story which his audience will approve and appreciate.

⁹ Cf. *Works and Days* 662: Μοῦσαι γὰρ μ' ἐδίδαξαν ἀθέσφατον ὕμνον αἰεῖδειν (For the Muses taught me to sing their song of great beauty).

¹⁰ Cf. *Odyssey* 8.480-81 for a similar formulation. The significance, if any, of this alternative (Muse or Apollo) is unclear. See Murray 1981:91, n.25.

proWess (384-85):¹¹

Τηλέμαχ', ἦ μάλα δὴ σε διδάσκουσιν θεοὶ αὐτοὶ
ὑψαγόρην τ' ἔμεναι καὶ θαρσαλέως ἀγορεύειν.

Telemachus, surely the gods themselves teach you to be arrogant and to speak boldly.

Homer and Hesiod use the verb διδάσκω to represent poetic or oratorical teaching, and ordinarily within the Greek tradition, we expect the teacher to be divine. Phemius, however, while he does mention that the god “programmed” him with all kinds of songs, appropriates the teaching verb for himself. He is “self-taught” (αὐτοδίδακτος). To be self-taught, however, does not mean, as has been suggested: “I have no teacher.”¹² This misleading translation can perhaps be traced to the often cited parallel from a Kirgiz singer of Central Asia who describes his art in a manner very much like that of Phemius and which has been similarly interpreted (Radloff 1990:84):¹³

I can sing any song there is because god has planted this gift for singing in my heart. He supplies my tongue with the word without my having to search for it. I have not learned to sing any of my songs; everything gushes out of my insides, out of myself.

The two formulations are undeniably similar; each poet designates the two

¹¹ In the *Iliad* (9.442-43), Phoenix, although mortal, explains to Achilles that his father, Peleus, asked him to be Achilles’ teacher in word and deed: τοῦνεκά με προέηκε διδασκέμεναι τάδε πάντα, / μύθων τε ῥητῆρ’ ἔμεναι πρηκτῆρά τε ἔργων (For this reason he sent me to teach you these things: to be a speaker of words and doer of deeds).

¹² Most scholars have taken αὐτοδίδακτος to mean that Phemius has no teacher and/or that he has not copied the songs of another poet. See, for example, Thalmann 1984:127; Murray 1981:97; Schadewaldt 1959:78-79; Kirk 1985:51. The concept of copying another poet’s song, however, belongs to a literate society and is not relevant to a discussion of oral poetic composition. See, instead, Svenbro 1976:11-16 on the “multiformité du chant,” and later (45), where he contrasts the fluid improvisational technique of the true oral poets who must continually respond to the demands of their audience with the rigid memorization and recitation of the later rhapsodes once the epic texts have been fixed by writing: “Ils [the rhapsodes] n’étaient plus *autodidaktoi* comme Phémios.”

¹³ Dodds (1951:10) cites this parallel in his discussion of the Phemius passage as does Finkelberg (1990:303). Both scholars understand the two components of these passages as a reiteration of one aspect of oral poetry: Dodds thinks that αὐτοδίδακτος reinforces the poet’s reference to the divine source of poetry, and Finkelberg believes that inspiration reflects the poet’s individual creativity within a tradition.

necessary and complementary components of his art. The god represents his inspiration, his unending source of song material, but in addition to this divine inspiration, each poet mentions his own innate ability to innovate within his inherited tradition. The Kirgiz poet has no teacher; Phemius is self-taught (*αὐτοδίδακτος*). But neither poet is boasting that he does not sing the songs of other poets, because, as Radloff argues in his discussion of this question (86):¹⁴

Songs do not exist at all during the period of the authentic epic. There are only subject areas that are sung about, as the Muse, that is the singer's inner singing power, inspires him. He never sings other people's poetry; he always composes himself as I described in a detailed manner above.

Instead, both Phemius and the Kirgiz poet refer to their ability as poets to work within the existing tradition in order to create new songs in the manner of the improvisational pianist. Phemius does not say that he has not learned any of his songs. Instead he claims to have taught himself—and there is a critical difference. Translating *αὐτοδίδακτος* to mean that Phemius has no teacher misses the force of *αὐτός* in the compound, which emphasizes the role of the self in the action.¹⁵

While every oral poet must be fluent in the tradition, the true test of an oral poet's skill is his ability to sing the right song at the right time. Like the charioteer who, drawing upon his god-given skill, must run each race as the conditions dictate, the poet must be able to manipulate the vast tradition to fit any given poetic occasion, and for this skill the poet depends only upon himself. Most important, he must tailor his song to each particular audience.¹⁶ To take just one contemporary parallel, we can see

¹⁴ For his earlier discussion of composition, see 85-86.

¹⁵ Cf. Liddell-Scott-Jones s.v. *αὐτός*: "In Compos.: 1. of or by oneself, self- . . . , as in *αὐτοδίδακτος*. . . ." Chantraine (1968:143-44) explains that the first term of *αὐτός* compounds expresses essentially the idea of something by or for oneself: "par soi-même, à soi seul, de soi-même." Cf. Frisk 1960:191-92. Other Homeric compounds with *αὐτός* include *αὐτόματος*, "self-acting," and *αὐτάγρετος*, "chosen by oneself." The adjective *αὐτοδίδακτος* is rare in early and classical Greek; the only other occurrence is in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* (991), where it is used to refer to a spontaneous utterance, one deriving from the self.

¹⁶ Cf. Radloff 1990:85; see also Scott (1989), who discusses the different kinds of storytellers in the *Odyssey* and develops a profile of the Homeric bard or storyteller. Among other characteristics, he argues (384) that Homer's storytellers are presented as improvisors rather than reciters of memorized texts. See also Martin (1989:5-10), who persuasively argues that Homerists must learn to appreciate the important role that the audience plays during any oral performance; he cites evidence from Cretan, Romanian,

from performances of Xhosa praise poetry of South Africa how critical it is for an oral poet to be able to react to the needs of each occasion. An *imbongi* is a tribal poet who composes spontaneous eulogistic poetry for the tribal chief. His job requires fluency, knowledge of tribal history, and an ability to express the truth as he and the tribe see it. But the distinctive feature of the *imbongi* is that he can recite poems without having prepared them beforehand. *Imbongi* means “the poet who praises, an improviser” (Opland 1983:58). S. M. Burns-Ncamashe, a Rharhabe *imbongi*, when asked whether a poet repeats verbatim poems that he has memorized, explains (*ibid.*:61):¹⁷

Well, in some cases they repeat more or less the same phrases, but with new phrases each time, because usually izibongo [poems] do include a description of the appearance of a person or thing, and naturally, since the appearance doesn't change, you'd always refer to a man with that long nose or thin legs and so forth—he'd still have them, you know, a big tummy and so forth. So, in addition to the appearance, then there would be the events that may have taken place which would be included naturally in the subject of the izibongo.

The poet's ability to respond on the spot to the demands of a particular occasion, his skill at adapting the poetic tradition to please a specific audience is, I contend, what Phemius means by the phrase, “I am self-taught” (αὐτοδίδακτος δ' εἰμί). Within the specific context of Phemius' speech of self-defense, Homer has isolated two separate elements within the poetic tradition—“self” and “poetic teaching”—and combined them to form an adjective, αὐτοδίδακτος, that signifies a poet's ability to respond on his own to the needs of a given occasion.¹⁸ On this occasion, fighting for his life, Phemius reminds Odysseus of his status as a singer and of his potential long-term value to Odysseus as a court poet. He is self-taught and the god has inspired him with all kinds of songs. For this reason, alive, Phemius will always be able to sing the praises of god-like Odysseus (ἔοικα δέ τοι παραείδειν / ὥς τε θεῶ). The god has granted him access to the poetic tradition (θεὸς δέ μοι ἐν φρεσὶν οὔμας / παντοίας ἐνέφυσεν), but more important, since Phemius is

Philippine, and Kirgiz traditions.

¹⁷ Another Xhosa poet, when asked if he makes up what he is singing replied (72-73): “It comes just of its own. As a matter of fact, with me it's the occasion that inspires itself in me. Then the words automatically come.”

¹⁸ It is interesting to note that αὐτοδίδακτος is a *hapax legomenon* in the Homeric corpus, and although the evidence is far from conclusive, it is tempting to conjecture that the term was “invented” for this particular occasion, and thereby, by its very invention, reflects the adaptive skill that it is intended to designate.

αὐτοδίδακτος, he has the ability to reinterpret the past tradition on each and every occasion in order to keep up with the song-worthy events of the present and future. Phemius will never become obsolete; his poetry will never be out of date.

At the court of Phaeacians, Odysseus remarks that a god must have instructed Demodocus because he has sung the story of the destruction of the Greeks at Troy so convincingly (8.489). At Ithaca, Phemius, however, downplays his debt to the tradition and instead foregrounds his own poetic contribution. Phemius emphasizes his own participation in the art of poetic composition, not the lack of help from another. In so doing he acknowledges the impact of occasion on tradition.¹⁹ The profiles of the two poets complement each other; all good poets must have both talents, and we can apply this profile of the Homeric bard to the central poet of the poem, Odysseus, as well. It is clear from the lying tales in Books XIII to XIX that Odysseus knows how to work within the tradition to tailor any one particular tale to the needs of its specific occasion and audience. He tells four different stories upon arriving in Ithaca; each incorporates material from his adventures as told in Books IX to XII, and each varies in detail depending upon whether he is addressing Eumaius, the suitors, or Penelope.²⁰

We have already seen evidence of Phemius' ability to respond to his audience in Book I of the *Odyssey*. When Penelope complains that she does not want to hear about the recent troubles of the Greek fleet returning from Troy, Telemachus defends Phemius' choice of songs (351-52):

¹⁹ I do not see the portraits of Phemius and Demodocus as competing in any real way, or as foils to Odysseus the poet, but rather as individual glimpses at the figure of the oral poet, glimpses that are meant to be taken as parts of the whole. As Leonard Muellner has pointed out to me, Odysseus alludes to the importance of the poet's self in the Demodocus passage as well. After praising Demodocus and suggesting that he was taught by the Muse, Odysseus says that Demodocus told the story of the destruction of the Greeks at Troy as if he were present himself (αὐτὸς παρεὼν) or had heard it from one who was (8.489-91). In comparing Phemius' speech of self-defense with Odysseus' assessment of Demodocus' poetic expertise, we can see the important similarities, and we can recognize Phemius' account of the oral poetic process as the marked version. Although not strictly relevant to this discussion, it is perhaps worth mentioning that within these two "signature" passages, each poet has his name etymologized. At 8.472, Homer introduces Demodocus as Δημόδοκον λαοῖσι τετιμένον. At 22.376, once Odysseus agrees to spare Phemius, he refers to the poet as πολύφημος αἰιδός.

²⁰ Odysseus' story to Athena: 13.256-86; to Eumaius: 14.192-352; to the suitors: 17.419-44; to Penelope: 19.165-202; 221-48; 262-303. If we take the *Odyssey* as we have it as representative of Odysseus' poetic tradition, then, in the final books, we can see how he manipulates the themes, motifs, and episodes of that tradition as is needed. Cf. Trahman 1952 for a discussion of the various lying tales which Odysseus tells in Books XIII to XIX within the context of oral poetics.

τὴν γὰρ ἀοιδὴν μᾶλλον ἐπικλείουσ' ἄνθρωποι,
ἢ τις ἀκούοντεςσι νεωτάτη ἀμφιπέληται.

For men praise that song more, whichever is newest to those listening.

Phemius, Telemachus explains, knows just what the suitors want to hear; he sings the songs that are newest (νεωτάτη). Within an oral tradition, the force of this adjective does not, however, refer only to the novelty or the “hot-off-the-press” aspect of Phemius’ songs but is perhaps better understood as meaning “most suited to the occasion.” We must be careful not to equate “newness” in an oral tradition with our general notion of innovation as the goal of the modern creative artist, as something never before seen or heard. “Newness” better designates the present occasion to which the poet responds in comparison with the “old songs” of his predecessors. Andrew Miller, in an article (1982) on Pindar’s epinician ode, Nemean Eight, discusses newness (νεαρά) in the context of the jealousy and other intense emotions that incredibly relevant stories and themes can produce in the immediate audience of an epinician song. He mentions this scene in Book I of the *Odyssey* as an example of how Phemius’ material, the return of the Greeks from Troy, is particularly relevant and painful for Penelope whose husband has not yet returned.²¹ Precisely because of its topicality, however, the same song is pleasing to the suitors. Because he is αὐτοδίδακτος, Phemius can cater to the interests and tastes of the majority of his audience and will always sing the right song, the one that men love to hear most. In sparing the poet’s life, Odysseus recognizes that, for this reason, Phemius will never fail to match his own exploits with comparable songs.

In a non-literate society, oral poetry preserves the heritage of its people and their image of the past. But in order to continue and survive, an oral tradition must also be flexible enough to accommodate changes and new ways of life, for poetry preserves only what is valuable for the present needs of the culture.²² The individual poet’s craft reflects this same tension. He draws upon the traditional themes of the songs belonging to his community, yet he adapts each song to a new and different poetic context.

²¹ Miller 1982:113-14: “νεαρά refers, then, neither to originality in mythic narrative nor to ‘new song’ in general but to a specific category of subject matter.” See also Nagy 1990:55, n. 19 and 69, where he argues that in Pindaric diction the concepts of *neo-/nearo-* (in contrast to *palaio-*) refer not to the novelty of the theme but to the *ad hoc* application of the myth to the here and now of those who attend and are the occasion of performance. He also applies this observation to *Odyssey* 1.351-52.

²² On the social function of memory and forgetting in non-literate cultures, see Goody and Watt 1981:27-68, espec. 28-33 and Ong 1982:46-48. For a discussion of these issues with specific reference to Homer, see Morris 1986:86-91.

Phemius' death-averting description—self-taught and divinely inspired —captures exactly this dialogue between tradition and occasion in oral poetic composition.²³

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