

HOMER AND TRADITIONAL POETICS

Margalit Finkelberg

Tel Aviv University

In the Homeric *Odyssey* we meet two bards, Phemius and Demodocus, who perform short lays (*oimai*), each of them equivalent to one of the episodes in the Trojan saga. The stories they deliver are characterized as arranged in catalogue-like succession (*kata kosmon, kata moiran*), which seems to be the form in which Homer conceived of a truthful account. That the Southslavic bards interviewed by Parry and Lord refer to their own practice in closely similar terms strongly suggests that what is dealt with is an approach to poetry which is characteristic of oral traditional poetics.

At the same time, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* themselves are far from forming point-by-point narrative successions. Both compositional unity and narrative diversity, the two signal characteristics of the Homeric epics, would make it impossible to account for them along these lines. This is not yet to say that in ancient Greece there were no epic poems for which this kind of poetics would effectively account. The poems of the Epic Cycle are one such example. Judging by the evidence of Proclus' summary, the Cycle poems consisted of a series of self-contained episodes arranged in plain chronological succession. This substantial difference between the narrative strategies of the Homeric epics on the one hand and the Cycle epics on the other was highlighted already by Aristotle, who paid close attention to it in the *Poetics* (1451a23-30; 1459a30-b7).

The fact that, although he repeatedly refers to the practice of oral traditional poetry, Homer is silent on the matter of his own poetic practice, which differs markedly from it, raises the question of whether the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* can be considered traditional poems in the proper sense of the word. In my presentation, I will discuss various implications of this issue.