

## **Homer and the Oral Tradition**

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(1) What is oral tradition (with specific reference to your special field)?

In the Homeric poems it is possible to identify:

(a) a tradition of epic poetry whose features include: set verbal expressions that fit into specific sections of a Homeric verse and probably developed to simplify non-written and extemporaneous composition; regular structures for composing repeated scenes, allowing the length of a given scene to vary to suit immediate circumstances while enabling singer and audience to keep track of the sequence of essential items included in the scene; and story patterns likewise showing regular structures and occurring repeatedly both in epic and in myth.

(b) numerous instances where the traditional forms of words, scenes, and story have not been employed in the usual ways, but have been adapted by the poet in order to produce some unexpected, special (and sometimes probably new) effect upon his audience. Because of the extensive size of the Homeric corpus one can see with reasonable certainty both the nature of the material made available to a poet by the oral tradition that he inherited, and the modifications an individual poet might make, according both to the immediate circumstances of a given performance and to his skill in introducing changes in this material in order to bring out a particular effect.

(2) What are the most interesting new directions in oral tradition studies (again in your field)?

By now the facts about the nature of the oral features identified above in Homer are well known and (on the whole) not controversial. At the time of this writing, the most controversial question is the relationship between our modern printed texts of Homer (which vary little from each other) and

what singers actually sang (and what was written down) between the time when the poems first took their monumental form (probably the eighth-seventh centuries BCE) and the appearance of the standardized written version (upon which ours is based) in the second century BCE. I have not myself taken a position on this issue.

In my own limited field, the oral techniques (and variations on them) mentioned above, the most interesting new direction is going beyond the accepted facts about the oral features and looking for the reasons for the development of these features and the results of their use both for the art of the performer and the reception by the listener. Work done recently in the fields of linguistics (grammar of speech) and cognitive science (on memorization, etc.) has already been applied to Homeric studies and is producing exciting new understanding.

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