

Analogy and Orality: What can Rajasthani Epic Teach Us about Homer?

The orality of the Homeric epics has been recognized by scholars from the historian Josephus to the Homerist F. A. Wolf, though it was not until the comparative studies of Milman Parry and Albert Lord that clear parallels for the oral composition and performance of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* could be drawn. Despite this comparative evidence, critics have long emphasized the limitations of the *analogical* argument and the details of South-Slavic Epic poetry. Indeed, recent scholars (e.g., Friedrich 2007) continue to bristle at the identification of the Homeric epics as oral and the subtraction of the ‘pen’ from Homer’s hand.

This paper argues that oralists are partly to blame for the limited acceptance of the poems’ orality outside of (and even within) Homeric studies. A chief issue in the application of oral-studies to Homer has been the *type of orality* chosen for comparison. While the extensive variety of oral literature in the world has been well established by non-Homerists (e.g., Finnegan 1977) and by Homeric scholars (e.g., Foley 1991; Jensen 2008), our view of Homeric orality has largely been shaped by the seminal studies of Albert Lord (1960). Basing our understanding of Homeric orality on one model, however,—which was certainly not Lord’s intention—has limited both the range of possible interpretation for Homeric poetry and sapped the efficacy of the analogical argument.

To address this deficit, this paper seeks another comparative model for Homeric orality in the Rajasthani epic *Dev Narayan*, a sacred narrative performed at an annual religious festival for over four centuries only to be recorded in the past generation. Following the lead of Jensen (2008), who attempts to isolate the essential elements of other oral epics (the identity of the performer, the performance context, the cultural position of the art form), I first summarize the relevant features of this tradition including the conditions of its performance, its sacred nature, and the forces motivating its transcription. Then, I emphasize what this indicates about the various forms of oral poetry available in the world, specifically that each is so bound to its cultural context as to challenge comparative endeavors in general. Finally, I close by suggesting that this tradition calls into question *flexibility* as an *essential* aspect of all oral poetry. While this argument does not undermine claims for the flexibility of Homeric poetry in performance, it does indicate that we need to be more precise in our analogical argumentation and, in particular, that we need to reconsider dichotomies such as fixity/flexibility and even textuality/orality when attempting to clarify the nature of Homeric poetry.

Works Cited

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