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The Homeric Question: An Issue for the Ancients?

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What is oral tradition in ancient Greece?

In ancient Greece, the question of oral tradition is closely related to the famous Homeric Question. Even if many problems remain without answer, it is today a well recognized fact that the Homeric poems, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, derive from an oral tradition. However, it remains very remarkable how long it took to discover and prove that derivation. How can we explain this difficulty in recognizing an oral dimension in the Homeric poems? We could still argue that Occidental civilization is what Derrida calls a “civilization of the Book” and that for centuries a great poet has had to be a writer. This explanation is, however, insufficient. Greece itself bears major responsibility for the longstanding misapprehension.

Until the fourth century BCE, Greek civilization was *une civilisation de la parole*. In every activity and in every field, people were trained to repeat or reproduce speeches by others. Writers such as Herodotus or Plato exemplified these procedures of transmission, in which one remembered the words of another who himself quoted a speech originally made by someone else. Indeed, the symposium furnished a cultural occasion to perpetuate this activity of transmission and reproduction of speech. Furthermore, Greeks were perfectly conscious of the advantage of versification to aid memory. Aristotle even undertook to show how metrical poetry adapted itself progressively to the different genres of poetry. But in spite of all of this, Greece seemed to pay no attention to the enigma of Homeric poetry. Amazingly enough, they never recognized the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey* as the result of an oral tradition going back to a distant past and transforming previous mythological stories. Homer was for them a composer of fixed poems who lived after the Trojan war (Herodotus proposed to situate him four centuries before himself), and it was clear to everyone that rhapsodes perpetuated his poems with total fidelity. In effect, there was no Homeric Question in ancient Greece. This may not directly help us to answer the question posed above, but it does suggest that our inquiry must also consider how the Greeks themselves conceptualized orality and speech transmission

and examine why they remained indifferent to certain aspects of oral tradition.

What are the most interesting new directions in oral tradition studies?

Homeric studies are today confronted with a paradox. The Homeric poems we read are the result of a double transmission: a mainly oral transmission until the sixth century BCE and then, more and more, a written transmission leading to the modern editions. If documents and materials are lacking to compare different stages and variants of the oral evolution of the poems, we have many textual variants that can teach us a lot about both oral and written transmission. A deeper comprehension of oral composition in ancient Greece requires—somewhat paradoxically—a close examination of these textual variants. Consider an example: Plato quotes Homer many times and his quotations often differ from the Homeric vulgate. How should we interpret these differences? Most interesting are the instances that allow us to understand how Plato memorized Homer (when he was not reading a variant). Did he use the rhythmical structure of the hexameter or not? Let's go further. A fundamental moment in the transmission of traditional poetry is the evolution from an inventive memory to a fixed memory, that is, from an art of composition that reinvents the tradition to a memory that reproduces, with minor variations, a fixed poem. As long as Homeric poems are understood purely as written texts, the many textual variants can be evaluated only from a philological point of view. But it appears today that many of these discrepancies can be understood as rhapsodic variants from the period during which the Homeric poems were already fixed texts; they were orally performed by rhapsodes who reproduced the poem with small variations that did not affect the metrical structure. Any perspective that will help us to compare the fixed memory of the rhapsodes to the inventive memory of composing and performing singers will aid our research.

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