Odysseus as bard in the *Odyssey*

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We know virtually nothing about Homer, and attempts to recover information about him have often focused on the presentation of the working bards in the *Odyssey*. But could Odysseus himself offer a better model? And what effect would thinking about Odysseus as a bard have on our appreciation of the poem, its poet, and its wandering hero?

The *Odyssey*: a poem for all ages

After nearly three thousand years Homer's *Odyssey* shows no sign of losing its grip on the popular consciousness. The BBC recently aired a radio series of scenes from the poem reworked into contemporary, West Midlands settings; there is a new theatre adaptation with Odysseus as parliamentary politician by Simon Armitage; and there are currently two major Hollywood adaptations of the poem in production. This longevity and adaptability is down to effective engagement with human experience through a diverse range of characters, and its sensitivity toward them and their situations. The poem connects with universal themes: power, family, community, adventure, love, and the inventiveness of the poet in dealing with these themes gives the poem its enduring allure.

Its universality is in some ways enhanced by its elusive composer – we know almost nothing reliable about Homer, indeed we know little about the class of bards (*aoidoi*), from which he is likely to have come. The complexity, sophis-tication and power of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* testify to a long tradition of oral poetry, but we know almost nothing about the situation in which these poems were performed, who the audience were, how such long poems were broken into manageable- length parcels, or how the bards worked.

Tracking down the figure of the bard

In many respects, the best evidence comes from the *Odyssey* itself. We see two bards performing: Phemius, retained at Odysseus' palace in Ithaca, and Demodocus, at Alcinous' palace in Scheria. Both are asked to perform upon specific themes at major gatherings of the elite of the communities. Both are in respected positions in their community, relied upon to provide essential accompaniment to grand communal events, and seemingly ever present in and around the palaces. But their position is at the same time perilous, and Phemius is particularly vulnerable to the caprices of the suitors, a reluctant singer lacking a protector in Odysseus' absence. A third bard, left by Agamemnon to guard his wife Clytemnestra and subsequently marooned on an island by Aegisthus, further demonstrates this unusual combination of high status and relative powerlessness.

The bards are presented not as performers ready to perform rehearsed works like most popular musicians today, but instead as possessing the skill of being able to improvise, either as 'the spirits move him' (1.347), or on a theme given to them by their audience such as Odysseus' challenge to Demodocus to tell the story of the wooden horse at Troy (8.493). The telling of this story about our protagonist makes us aware of another element of the bardic art: knowledge of the latest stories. Telemachus upbraids Penelope for asking Phemius to stop singing about the Trojan War 'for it is always the latest song that an audience applauds the most' (1.352). Improvisation and novelty are paramount, but at the peak of their art, the bards seem able to stun their audience into a stupor, such as Phemius achieves after his story of the Achaeans' homecoming. Stunning into silence an audience under the influence of the excesses of food and drink described in the *Odyssey* would undoubtedly be an impressive feat.

Odysseus and the bard

Odysseus is not a singer, but he is sympathetic to bards throughout the poem. He appreciates Demodocus' art, particularly his ability to tell a story about the participants in the Trojan War 'almost as though you had been with them yourself' (8.491), and he is deeply affected by the stories, being moved to tears on two occasions. This appreciation is not surprising given the similarities between Odysseus and the bards suggested in the poem. Odysseus doesn't sit down with a lyre to play, but on his return to his palace in Ithaca he strings his bow 'as a minstrel skilled at the lyre and in song easily stretches a string round a new leather strap' (21.406–7). He speaks rather than sings his stories, but he cannot resist the near-fatal temptation of hearing the song of the Sirens. He also embodies some of the other key attributes of the bard such as inventive creation of stories on a theme likely to enchant and persuade his audience (as when he manipulates Eumaeus, Telemachus, and Penelope on his return to Ithaca). He knows all the latest stories (because all the good ones are about him!) and he also has the ability to make others cry with his storytelling, particularly the tragicomi-cal pressing of his father Laertes in the final book of the poem.

Odysseus has undeniable bardic qualities, but the comparison gets really interesting in the middle of the poem. Books 9–12 (often referred to as 'the wanderings') broadly encompass Odysseus' telling of his journey from Troy to Scheria, the final destination before his return to Ithaca. In this long section of the poem, Homer almost entirely cedes the stage to Odysseus. This allows Homer to do several clever things that shed some light on the art of the bard.

From soldier to story-teller

First, it allows Homer to change voice. No longer is the story narrated by a divinely inspired singer invoking the muses, but a weary old warrior trying to get home. Because of this, the audience can no longer clearly see the gods and their schemes, and their intentions and actions can now be misunderstood. This switch from omnipotent poet to one man's interpretation of events makes the most fantastic section of the poem the most intimate (despite all Odysseus' strange adventures and encounters), and through this the audience is repositioned closer to the experi-

ence of this hero, and consequently more involved in his fate.

Second, it allows Odysseus to fuse together the roles of hero and bard, roles that are naturally separated in third person narration. This allows Odysseus to control his own presentation in a way that lets him raise his own position to the very zenith of Greek heroic reputation. By doing this through Odysseus, Homer can push the limits of storytelling without having to vouch for its reliability.

Third, without the invocation to the Muses that usually accompanies the beginning of a bard's song, we are invited to consider Odysseus' storytelling as another aspect of Homer's own range of talents. The Muses can inspire the bard to be able to understand and relate the motivations of gods and mortals, but here Homer demonstrates that, even when restricted to a single perspective, one voice, he can transfix his audience.

Artful Odysseus: guarantor of his own glory

Odysseus' storytelling in the wanderings confirms him as *polymetis*, a man of many talents. He is granted by Homer the post-Trojan journeys to heighten his own renown, his *kleos*, and then given control of the story himself for a sixth of the poem. No greater contrast could be made with the shades of the heroes in Hades, voiceless, without form or agency, than with the extensive treatment of his own achievements Odysseus provides. It is also during his descent into Hades that another insight into the working bard's technique is revealed. Odysseus pauses suddenly, leaving his audience 'held by the spell of his words … silent and still throughout the shadowy hall' (11.333–4). He steps back to let Homer take back the story for a few beats, before being implored to pick up the story again by his Phaeacian hosts, persuaded with a stack of gifts earned through his well-received words. This must have been a standard trick of the performing bard: stop at a climax and wait for further (lucrative) encouragement, a hint perhaps at how such a long poem might have been broken up to the greatest profit for the singer.

Odysseus pauses resonantly just before we are provided with the image of his former comrades' unhappy lot in the underworld. Odysseus is anticipating the shifting and rootless world after the Trojan Wars, where glory is no longer tied to the battlefield, but instead to the control of one's own image, and the ability to persuade others of your status. Achilles could not have earned a higher reputation among men while he lived, but Homer, through Odysseus, demonstrates that controlling only your conduct in war is not enough. Even after success on the battlefield, glory is not guaranteed: Agamemnon left Troy the most powerful of men, but was slaughtered in the bath when he got home. Odysseus as bard is the most powerful, complete, and arguably the most successful hero of all. During his pause Odysseus is said by Alcinous to have equalled the skill of a bard in his storytelling (Eumaeus will later also make the same comparison). He is being employed by Homer to invite us to consider how important the role of the bard is in providing a hero with his glory, and at the same time we see the importance of storytelling in a world changing after the destruction of Troy.

Odysseus survives to regain sovereignty over Ithaca because he is able to echo many of a bard's attri-butes: creativity, adaptability, resourcefulness, pleasing an audience. Like a great bard, Odysseus tells us of his wanderings and those that were involved 'as if he had been with them', but paradoxically the eventual outcome of this is to make, or rather to permit, the audience to question everything they encounter. It also turns the most fantastical and distant part of the poem into the most human and intimate: Homer becomes Odysseus as Odysseus becomes Homer, and we are allowed to understand more of both through this fusion. Our hero-bard transfixes us and it is in the moments when we are made aware of our stupor that Homer winks at us and allows a glimpse at the practical, persuasive, and profitable art of the master-singer.

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