

MARGALIT FINKELBERG

Homer and His Peers: Neoanalysis, Oral Theory, and the Status of Homer

Abstract: Both leading trends in contemporary Homeric scholarship, Neoanalysis and Oral Theory, recognize today that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* frequently evoke episodes whose proper place is in the poems of the Epic Cycle. Yet, while in the Neoanalysts' eyes the intertextual relations between Homer and the Cycle mean that Homer enjoyed a special status which was due to the fact that his poems were composed with the help of writing, from the standpoint of oral formulaic theory Homer and the Cycle should nevertheless be placed on the same plane as independent variants of a common tradition. The article's main argument is that, contrary to the oralists' opinion, the position of the Homeric poems in Greek epic tradition was indeed unique. Contrary to the Neoanalysts' opinion, it is of little relevance whether it was in oral or in written form that they attained this position.

Keywords: Homer, Epic Cycle, Neoanalysis, Oral-formulaic theory, Heroic Age

1.

For many years, Homer had been considered a towering figure, a lonely star, as it were, the foundational poet at the beginning of things. All other poetry had been supposed to appear after Homer and therefore to be derivative by definition. This picture of Homer and his position in the history of Greek poetry began to alter toward the middle of the twentieth century, with the emergence of two trends that precipitated what can without hesitation be called a paradigm shift in the Homeric studies: Oral-Formulaic Theory and Neoanalysis.

Although developed independently of each other, the two trends in question have shown, each in its own way, that the Homeric poems were part of a flourishing epic tradition, so that it would be historically and methodologically untenable to take the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* in isolation from their traditional milieu. More specifically, the oralists' work has made clear that Homer's formulaic language, and especially his noun-epithet formulas for gods and heroes, is too rich and ramified to be considered the creation of a single man, whereas the Neoanalysts have demonstrated that in every-

thing concerning the general picture of the Trojan War the Homeric poems presuppose the tradition represented by the poems of the Trojan Cycle rather than vice versa. From then on, it was only a matter of time that these two trends, one predominantly English-speaking, the other predominantly German-speaking, would start cross-fertilizing each other.

In 1984, Wolfgang Kullmann published his “Oral Poetry Theory and Neoanalysis in Homeric Research.” In this landmark article, Kullmann wrote about the Cyclic poems: “Although these poems are thought to be composed after Homer, neoanalytic scholars think that a great part of their contents had been delivered orally long before the Homeric epics. Their record in writing may be post-Homeric.”¹ This recognition of the fact that the sources on which Homer drew were oral rather than written signaled a radical shift in the original Neoanalyst position. At the same time, this was as far as a Neoanalyst would go. Further on in the same article, Kullmann argued as against the oralists that, first, the Homeric poems enjoyed a special status in Greek heroic tradition and, second, this special status can only be accounted for if we assume that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were composed with the help of writing.² This still remains the predominant view of German-speaking scholarship.

Now, from the standpoint of oral formulaic theory, the idea of a traditional text's special status vis-à-vis other texts is clearly indefensible, for the simple reason that all traditional texts are by definition assumed to be variants of the common tradition. This is why, when scholars who had been trained in oral theory conceded to the Neoanalyst argument concerning Homer's awareness of the story of the Trojan War as told in the poems of the Cycle, this did not affect their fundamentally oralist position, namely, that the parallels between Homer and the Cycle, though undeniable, can only be explained as mutually independent traditional variants. To my knowledge, the first to apply this argument was Seth Schein in his *Mortal Hero*, which also appeared in 1984. When addressing the duel of Patroklos and Sarpedon in *Iliad* 16, which, as the Neoanalysts famously argued, evokes the Achilles-Memnon duel as described in the Cyclic *Aithiopsis*, Schein wrote: “While there can be no doubt that some of the scenes and speeches in the *Iliad* must resemble those that occurred in the *Aithiopsis*, it is best to consider these scenes and speeches of the two epics as variants

1 Kullmann (1984) 309.

2 Kullmann (1984) 319: “The assertion that the *Iliad* was composed in writing is not a necessary consequence of the neoanalytic approach. The results obtained by this approach do, however, suggest written composition.”

of the same fluid oral tradition rather than as dependent the one upon the other.”³ This would still be the dominant view of English-speaking scholarship.

To sum up, while the representatives of both trends agree that Homer should not be regarded in isolation from the orally-based heroic tradition, they sharply disagree as to his position within it. As far as I can see, the main reasons for this discrepancy are, first, that Neoanalysis makes no provision for an oral Homer, and, second, that oral theory makes no provision for status differences between traditional texts, thus being devoid of clearly defined criteria by which the position of a given text as regards other texts in the same tradition can be assessed. In what follows, I will mainly concentrate on the latter.

2.

The most salient characteristic of a traditional text is the relation of mutual reciprocity that exists between it and all the other texts in a given tradition. Essentially, this is what is meant when we say that two texts are variants of the common tradition. The traditional texts do not presuppose each other and are normally not aware of each other's existence: what they do presuppose is the virtual common prototype of which they are independent manifestations. By the same token, the lack of reciprocity between two texts would take place when one of these texts shows a degree of awareness as to the existence of the other. This awareness can take the form of quotation, of direct or indirect allusion, of parody, or, in stronger cases, of reshaping the other text or texts which treat the same subject and thus challenging their authority. It goes without saying that a text that stands in this kind of relationship to all the other texts treating the same subject can no longer be regarded as just one traditional variant among many: rather, this would be a text which claims a special status within the tradition to which it belongs.

Now there is more than one reason why we should see in the Homeric poems precisely this kind of text. It is a matter of common knowledge ever since Aristotle that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* differ from the other Trojan epics in that, though beginning *in medias res* and featuring just two single episodes in the history of the Trojan War, they at the same time provide a picture of the war as a whole. More specifically, both the *Iliad* and the

3 Schein (1984) 28.

Odyssey evoke, re-enact or retell many Trojan episodes that properly belong with the poems of the Cycle. Owing to this strategy, they manage to create a comprehensive picture of the Trojan War while abstaining, at the same time, from recounting the story of the war from the beginning to the end. This allows the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* not only to distance themselves from the Cycle poems but also to turn these poems into raw material, as it were, for creating something completely new.⁴

In recent decades, some far-reaching results reinforcing this thesis have been achieved by scholars who, seeking to combine Neoanalyst *Quellenforschung* with the principles of oral theory, **have arrived at the conclusion that Homer uses his tradition in a highly idiosyncratic way. Let me take two examples.**

In her path-breaking study *The Power of Thetis: allusion and interpretation in the Iliad* (1991) Laura Slatkin has shown how, owing to its extensive use of allusion, the *Iliad* not only “reverberates” against the background of the broader epic tradition but also reshapes this tradition and thus, eventually, re-interprets it so as to make it suit its own agenda. Thus, when discussing in the concluding chapter Homer’s use of the Myth of Destruction of the Race of Heroes, she writes:

Yet the Homeric poems, as this study began by observing, are interpreters of their mythological resources at every step; and “destruction” as understood by the traditions represented by Hesiod, the Cycle, and Mesopotamian literature has been reinterpreted by the *Iliad* and translated into its own terms. The *Iliad* evokes these traditions, through passages that retrieve the theme of destruction, to place them ultimately in a perspective that, much as it rejects immortality, rejects utter annihilation as well. Components of the mythological complex of the end of the race survive in Iliadic allusions, and reverberate, but are transformed.⁵

In view of this, it strikes one as a paradox that a book that ends with such a powerful statement of Homer’s special status within Greek epic tradition would begin with an aprioristic definition of Homer as just one traditional poet among many. In the opening chapter of the same book we find: “... the Cycle poems inherit traditions contingent to our *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* and preserve story patterns, motifs, and type-scenes that are as archaic as the material in the Homeric poems, to which they are related collaterally, rather than by descent. The Cycle poems and the *Iliad* offer invaluable mutual perspective on the recombination of elements deriving

4 Finkelberg (1998) 131–60; cf. Burgess (2009) 56–71.

5 Slatkin (1991) 121–22.

from a common source in myth.”⁶ The book’s beginning and its end thus tell two different stories.

The latter quotation from Slatkin’s book is adduced in full by Irad Malkin in his *Returns of Odysseus. Colonization and Ethnicity* (1998). Proceeding from the fact that some of the so-called “lying stories” about Odysseus that are being told in the poem refer to Epirus, Malkin links together shreds of evidence relating to the relevance of Odysseus’ legend to Epirus and other parts of north-western Greece and builds a powerful case for what he calls “the *Odyssey’s* alternatives” – the alternatives, it must be added, of which the *Odyssey* itself was fully aware. Especially noteworthy is the story that the disguised Odysseus twice tells in Ithaca: according to this story, before going back home Odysseus left his treasure in Epirus with the Thesprotian king Pheidon and went to Dodona, to ask the oracle whether he should return home openly or in secret.⁷ “Thus Thesprotia,” Malkin writes, “... fulfills the function of the cave of the nymphs in the ‘real’ story.”⁸ Now Epirus played a prominent part in the lost Cycle epics *Thesprotis* and *Telegony*, traditional poems that dealt with the continuation of the Odysseus story. In other words, although “the *Odyssey’s* alternatives” are presented in the Homeric poem as lies, they are in all probability nothing else as authentic representatives of a pre-Odyssean tradition about Odysseus’ return, a tradition from which the *Odyssey* as we know it is a deviation.⁹

This strongly suggests that, contrary to Malkin’s own contention, the *Odyssey* and “the *Odyssey’s* alternatives” cannot be simply placed on one plane as if they were variations on the same theme. Moreover, in that they do not presuppose at all Odysseus’ eventual homecoming, “the *Odyssey’s* alternatives” sharply disagree with the Homeric *Odyssey*, for which the protagonist’s return to Ithaca is a *sine qua non*.¹⁰ By the very fact of turning the alternative versions of the Return of Odysseus into “lying stories”

6 Slatkin (1991) 11–12.

7 *Od.* 14.314–35; 19.285–302.

8 Malkin (1998) 129. Significantly, it was with Corcyra rather than with the *Odyssey* never-never land in the far west that Scheria, the land of the Phaeacians, is usually associated in later sources. See Hellanic. fr. 77 Jacoby; Thuc.1.25; Callim. Fr.12 Pfeiffer; Ap. Rhod. 4.566–71; 1209–19; Apollod. 1. 9. 25.

9 See also Reece (1994).

10 Even the prophecy of Tiresias, according to which upon his return to Ithaca Odysseus should leave it again for the country of men who “know not the sea, neither eat meat savoured with salt,” makes provision for his eventual homecoming: *Od.* 11.119–37; 23.266–84.

the *Odyssey* poet signalizes their subordinate status in his poem and privileges the version that he offers. In other words, the relationship between the Homeric *Odyssey* and the Odysseus tradition is anything but reciprocal. As in the case of the *Iliad's* treatment of the Myth of Destruction, the poet of the *Odyssey* both reshapes the tradition he inherited and adapts it to his own agenda, which obviously do not concur with those of his sources: this is how a myth of leaving home for foreign lands is transformed in our *Odyssey* into a myth of homecoming.

The question as to the nature of the agenda pursued by Homer in his deviations from his tradition is irrelevant to the present discussion. The important thing is that, here as elsewhere, rather than offering just another variant of the common tradition, Homer not just transforms the earlier traditions about the Trojan war and the Returns but also suppresses them. As a result, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* act as symbolic compendia of the entire history of the Trojan War and the Returns. While literary merits of this compositional technique were commended as early as Aristotle,¹¹ it has rarely been taken into account that what is being dealt with is far from purely a matter of composition. By the very fact of reinterpreting the other versions of the Trojan saga, Homer signalizes their subordinate status as regards his own poems and privileges the version that he offers. That he is nevertheless anxious to show his awareness of these other versions indicates that he meant his poems not only to reshape the other traditions but also to absorb and, eventually, to supersede them, thus claiming for the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* the privileged status of metaepics.¹² It goes without saying that such an attitude creates a lack of reciprocity between Homer on the one hand and the other traditional epics on the other. When approached from the standpoint of oral theory, this lack of reciprocity would indicate that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* cannot be regarded as just two traditional poems among many.

3.

Especially significant are the cases in which the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* can be shown to disagree both with Homer's own tradition as represented by the Trojan Cycle and with that of Hesiod. Thus, for example, the myth of the End of the Race of Heroes discussed above appears both in the Cyclic

11 *Poet.* 1451a 23–30; 1459a 30–b7.

12 Finkelberg (1998) 155; “metacyclic” in Burgess (2009) 66.

Cypria and in the Hesiodic corpus.¹³ At the same time, the pictures of this momentous event that these traditional sources present are far from being identical. To take only one example, while in Hesiod the end of the Race of Heroes is part of a larger sequence, in which in the course of time each generation of men is destroyed to be replaced by a new one, in the *Cypria* it directly results from Zeus' decision to relieve the Earth from the burden of mankind.¹⁴ This strongly suggests that the *Cypria* and Hesiod treat the theme of the end of the Race of Heroes independently of each other. That is to say, they relate to each other just as variants of common tradition would. Not so in the case of Homer. Although the Homeric poems certainly belonged to the same branch of heroic tradition as the *Cypria*, they either emphatically ignore the theme of the end of the Race of Heroes or reshape and reinterpret it, employing these two mutually complementary strategies in order to serve their own agenda.¹⁵ Again, this is not how a variant of a common tradition would behave.

Let us dwell at some length on another example that, as far as I know, has not yet drawn scholarly attention. I mean the case of Kalchas. The diviner of the Achaean fleet and personally of Agamemnon, Kalchas son of Thestor is introduced in the *Iliad* as "the best of the augurs" (*oiónopoloí Il.* 1.69; cf. 13.70), who knows the past, the present and the future and whose gift of prophecy (*mantosunê*), granted by Apollo, enabled him to lead the Achaean ships to Troy (1.70–72). In Homer, Kalchas appears only in Books 1 and 2 of the *Iliad*. Nevertheless, his role is essential for the development of the plot line of the poem, for he is the one who discloses before the assembly the cause of Apollo's wrath that had brought the plague on the Achaean camp and thus triggers the quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon (1.73–110). In Book 2, Odysseus reminds the rest of the Achaeans of how the portent of the snake and the sparrows that they witnessed at Aulis at the very beginning of the Trojan expedition led Kalchas to predict that the war will last for ten years (299–330). The last time Kalchas is mentioned in the poem is Book 13, where Poseidon, having taken the form and the voice of Kalchas, admonishes the two Aiantes to withstand Hector's attack on the ships (45–58).

Kalchas is much more prominent in other epic poetry, such as the poems of the Trojan Cycle and the Hesiodic corpus. According to Proclus' summary, the *Cypria* (arg. 6–8 West) included three episodes in which

13 And probably also in the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite*, see Clay (1989) 166.

14 Hes. *Op.* 159–73; *Cypria* fr. 1 West.

15 See further Finkelberg (2004).

Kalchas was actively involved: the portent of the snake and the sparrows, evoked also in *Iliad* 2 (above); the story of Telephos; and the sacrifice of Iphigeneia, which is not mentioned in Homer. Especially interesting, however, is the extra-Homeric tradition as regards what happened to Kalchas after the Trojan War.

Both the Cyclic *Returns* (*Nostoi*) (arg. 2 West) and a Hesiodic poem (probably, *Melampodia*: [Hes.] fr. 278 M-W) tell us that after the Trojan War Kalchas, together with other Achaeans – the Lapiths Leonteus and Polypoites in the *Returns* and Amphilochos son of Amphiaraios in the *Melampodia*, traveled on foot to Colophon in Asia Minor; according to the *Melampodia*, Kalchas died there of a broken heart after having been defeated in a competition of divination by young Mopsos, the son of Manto daughter of Tiresias ([Hes.] fr. 278 M-W. cf. fr. 279). This account, which was also known to Callinus and Sophocles and, in a slightly different version, to Pherecydes (Callin. fr. [8] W; Soph. fr. 181 Nauck; Pherecyd. fr. 142 Fowler; cf. Apollod. *Epit.* 6.2–4), is apparently part of the foundation story of the oracle of Apollo at Clarus. An additional and probably competing version, which involves Mopsos' mother Manto but does not mention Kalchas, is found in a fragment from the Theban Cycle epic that told the story of the Epigoni (fr. 4 West). According to yet another version, preserved by Herodotus, Kalchas did not die at Colophon but traveled farther east, eventually to become, together with Amphilochos, the ancestor of the Pamphylians (Hdt. 7.91; quoted in Strab. 14.4.3; also Sophocles *apud* Strab. 14. 5. 16). He was also credited with founding Selge in Pisidia (Strab. 12.7.3)

We thus have a cluster of variants that directly or indirectly relate to what happened to Kalchas after the Trojan War:

Version 1 (the *Returns*): Kalchas, in the company of Leonteus and Polypoites, made his way on foot to Colophon, where he probably died.¹⁶

Version 2 (the *Melampodia*, Callinus, Sophocles, Pherecydes): Kalchas traveled to Colophon in the company of Amphilochos and died there, being defeated by Tiresias' grandson Mopsos.

Version 3 (the *Epigoni*): Manto daughter of Tiresias led the Theban fugitives to Colophon, where she founded the oracle and gave birth to Mopsos.

16 “Tiresias” of the text looks like a mistake for “Kalchas,” cf. Apollod. *Epit.* 6.2 with West n. 59 on *Returns* arg. 2)

Version 4 (Herodotus and Sophocles *apud* Strabo): Kalchas did not die at Colophon but proceeded to Pamphylia being accompanied, as in the *Melampodia*, by Amphilochos.

It is not difficult to discern that in the final analysis all the versions adduced tell us one and the same story. It is the story of the migration of the Achaeans to Asia Minor after the wars of Thebes and Troy – the two great wars that, according to Hesiod's *Works and Days*, brought the end to the Race of Heroes – with three of them making a special emphasis on the foundation of Colophon. Amphilochos and Mopsos appear in two versions, Tiresias in two or three, and Kalchas in three. The version according to which Kalchas dies at Colophon seems to have been the dominant one; nevertheless, there is also one, followed by Herodotus and probably also by Sophocles in one of his plays, according to which he proceeds to Pamphylia. These discrepancies show that the four versions under discussion develop the same traditional theme independently of each other, behaving exactly as variants of the common tradition would. Those involving Kalchas are however united by one common feature: they are sharply at variance with what Homer tells us about the man.

In Homer, Kalchas is a humble and obedient servant of Agamemnon. He is so afraid of his lord and master that he does not even dare to reveal before the assembly the cause of the plague until Achilles has guaranteed him his protection. In view of Kalchas' dependent position in the *Iliad*, it is somehow taken for granted that after the war he would become part of Agamemnon's *nostos*, traveling back to Mycenae and probably being killed there together with the other attendants of the king. We have seen, however, that this is not what actually happens in the tradition treating the aftermath of the Trojan War. The details may vary, but one thing remains invariable: in both the Trojan Cycle and the Hesiodic corpus Kalchas is represented as an independent agent who leads survivors of the Trojan War to new places of settlement in Asia Minor.¹⁷

As far as I can see, the fact that the Trojan and the Hesiodic tradition coincide in their treatment of Kalchas above the head of Homer indicates that what is being dealt with is the common tradition from which Homer

17 The Trojan Cycle variant as found in the *Nostoi* is still the closest to Homer in that, as distinct from Amphilochos of the *Melampodia*, the Lapiths Leonteus and Polypoites, who accompany Kalchas in this version, are two acknowledged Iliadic figures: they are present in the Catalogue of Ships and play a prominent part in the defense of the Achaean Wall and the Funeral Games for Patroklos (*Il.* 2.738–747, 12.128–194, 23.836–849).

deviates. Again, the reason for this deviation is irrelevant here. Much more important is the fact that the tradition of Kalchas' migration as undertaken separately from Agamemnon's return suggests that initially Kalchas was a much more prominent figure than the one we encounter in the *Iliad*.¹⁸ In view of this, the puzzling Iliadic lines "and he led the ships of the Achaeans to Ilios in virtue of the skill of prophecy that Phoebus Apollo granted to him" (1.71–72), implying as they do Kalchas' leading role in the Trojan expedition, may well indicate Homer's awareness of this fact.

However that may be, we can be sure of one thing: Homer offers a unique version of his own as regards the Kalchas myth, one that suppresses all the other versions. Note that the same has also been observed for the Myth of Destruction and for Odysseus' Return. Now, as distinct from explicit parallels, in which we often cannot be sure as to the motif's priority,¹⁹ such suppressions are one-sided by definition and are therefore heavily marked. Accordingly, they would underscore even more the lack of reciprocity in Homer's relationship with his tradition.

4.

Both the lack of reciprocity between Homer and other epic tradition and Homer's deviations from the points at which the two leading traditions of his time concur strongly suggest that Homeric poetry deliberately positioned itself as possessing of a special status within Greek epic tradition. We should not forget, however, that claiming a special status and attaining it are two different things. Only the combination of the text's claim to a special status and the community's granting it the status it demands would result in its enjoying a privileged position in the community. Let me take one last example.

"This tale is not true," Stesichorus claims in his *Palinode* when introducing a non-traditional version of Helen's story, "nor did you go in the well-benched ships nor reach the citadels of Troy" (fr. 192 Lobel-Page). Stesichorus' claim that the traditional story of Helen's elopement is false reveals the same lack of reciprocity between the version he proposes and the traditional one as that observed above in the case of Homer's idiosyn-

18 A heroon in Apulia (Daunia) dedicated to Kalchas (Strab. 6.3.9) and an Etruscan bronze mirror from Vulci, where he is depicted as examining the liver of a sacrificial victim point in the same direction.

19 As pointed out in Burgess (2009) 61. See also Burgess (2006).

cratic versions, Odysseus' lying stories providing the closest parallel. Like Homer, Stesichorus is well aware of the traditional version that he aspires to supersede, thus claiming a privileged status to the new version that he offers. As we learn from Herodotus (2.112–117), Euripides' *Helen* and Plato's *Phaedrus* (243a), Stesichorus' version of Helen's story was known quite well in the Classical period. Nevertheless, it failed to supersede the traditional one and did not become authoritative. The reason is simple: it was not accepted as such by the community.

As distinct from this, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* not only claimed for themselves the status of metaepics but were also granted it. This would be true even where, as in the case of Kalchas, Homer can be shown to deviate from the common tradition: nevertheless, in this case as in many others, it is Homer's version rather than the traditional one as found in both the Trojan Cycle and the Hesiodic corpus that has become authoritative.

We saw that the main if not the only reason why the oralists are reluctant to admit that traditional texts may enjoy a special status is their contention that this would amount to recognizing, together with the Neoanalysts, that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were composed with the help of writing.²⁰ It is however doubtful whether the distinction between the oral and the written may be considered a reliable guide of a text's elevation to the privileged status. Writing is far from being the only way by which a culture can privilege texts. Public performance is no less powerful a medium, and the example of the Panathenaia, a festival that secured Homer's status as the privileged text of Classical Greece, may well have had its Archaic antecedents (see e.g. *Hymn. Ap.* 146–78).

The reason why Homer succeeded where the others failed is beyond the limits of the present discussion. What is important here is that, in the case of Homer, the internal (the text's claim to a special status) and the external (its recognition as such by the community) criteria coincide to indicate, contrary to the oralists' opinion, that the position of the Homeric poems in Greek epic tradition was indeed unique. Contrary to the Neoanalysts' opinion, it is of little relevance whether it was in oral or in written form that they attained this position. As far as I can see, such recognition of Homer's special status as regards his tradition without at the same time

20 But see now Burgess (2009) 68–69, according to whom the phenomena discussed above, that is, everything that can be subsumed under the Neoanalyst motif transference, may well be regarded as traditional and therefore as not alien to oral poetry. Burgess also admits that even so the phenomena of this kind would be more characteristic of Homer than of other traditional poetry.

making assumptions as to the material form assumed by the text would provide the common ground on which the oralists and the Neoanalysts can meet.²¹

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