ORALITY, LITERACY AND THE HOMERIC QUESTION: AN OVERVIEW
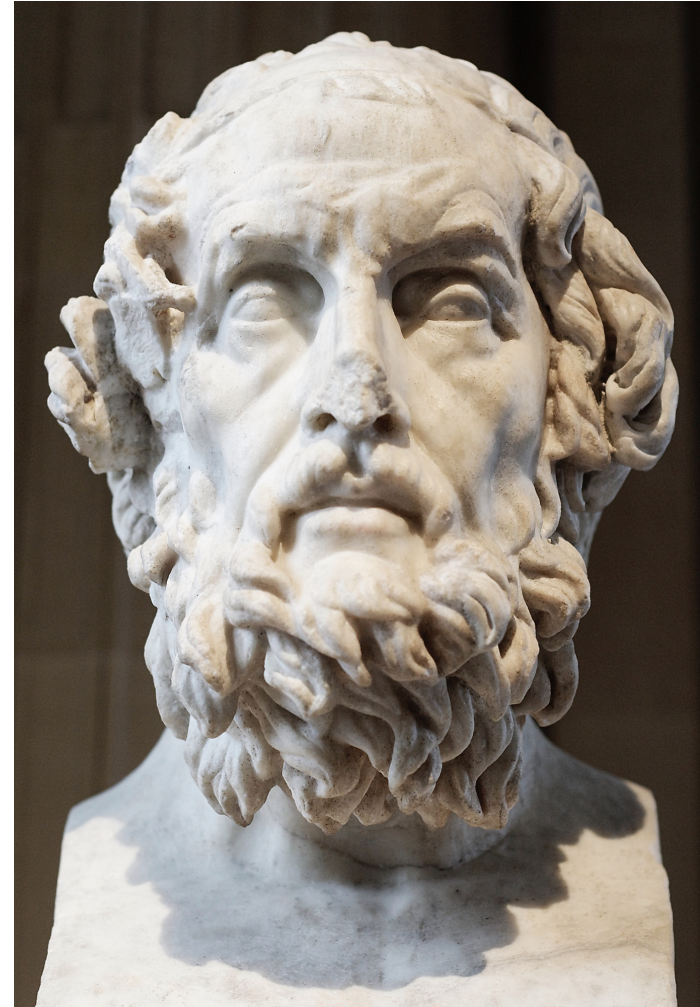
Conference
"Intertextuality in Early-Literary Traditions"
Litteraturhuset Oslo, 08.05.2023
Silvio Bär, Oslo

Homer


Sources: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/c6/Homeros_MFA_Munich_272.jpg
https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/db/Homeros_Caetani_Louvre_Ma440_n2.jpg

The Homeric Epics

- The *Iliad...*
  - is an epic about the wrath of Achilles, its devastating consequences and its appeasement;
  - consists of 15'693 hexameters (in 24 Books);
  - is dated to the 8th/7th century B.C.
- The *Odyssey...*
  - is an epic about the adventurous homecoming of Odysseus after the Trojan War;
  - consists of 12'109 hexameters (in 24 Books);
  - is dated slightly later than the *Iliad.*

The Dactylic Hexameter

—◡◡|—◡◡|—◡◡|—◡◡|—◡◡|—✕
① ② ③ ④ ⑤ ⑥
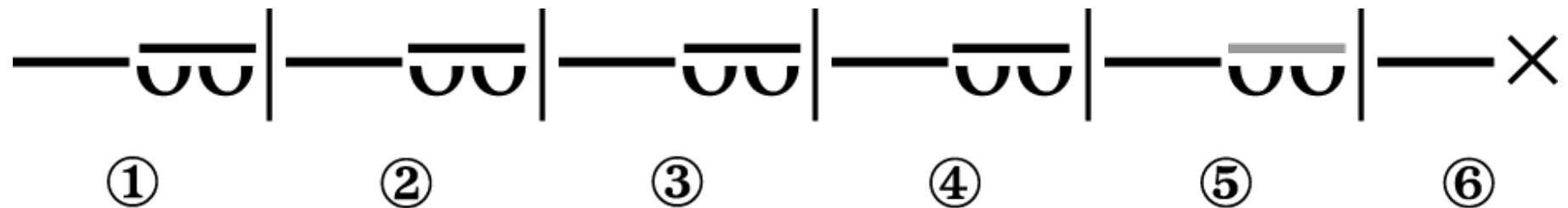
- Μῆνιν ἄειδε, θεά, Πηληιάδεω Ἀχιλῆος
  (Homer, *Iliad* I.1)

- Arma virumque cano, Troiae qui primus ab oris
  (Vergil, *Aeneid* I.1)

- It was the afternoon, and the sports were all but over. (Arthur Hugh Clough, *The Bothie of Toper-na-fuosich* I.1)

The Homeric Question (I)

- Did Homer exist?
- If yes: is Homer responsible for the com-position of the *Iliad* and/or the *Odyssey*?
- If no: who is responsible for the composition of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*?
  - one author for both epics OR
  - a different author for either epic OR
  - different 'layers of authorship' for both epics?

The Homeric Question (II)

The term Homeric Question can be simply phrased in the following way: Who is the author of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*? Depending on the answer we give to this elementary question, we may have a number of different formulations:

a. Is Homer the poet of both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*?

b. Is Homer the poet of the *Iliad* or of the *Odyssey*?

c. Is the *Iliad* the work of various poets of whom Homer is one?

d. Is the *Odyssey* the work of various poets of whom Homer is one?

e. Is the discussion concerning a poet Homer or multiple poets of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* irrelevant given the oral nature of Homeric poetry?

Source: Tsagalis (2020: 122)

Friedrich August Wolf (1759–1824)

- *Prolegomena ad Homerum* (1795).

- Main theory: *Iliad* and *Odyssey* = an amalgamation of independent songs, put together in the 6th century B.C.

- Kick-off for the debate between **Analysis** and **Unitarianism** in the 19th and early 20th century.

Source: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/
3/34/Friedrich_August_Wolf_-_Imagines_philologorum.jpg

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Milman Parry (1902–1935)

- *L'Épithète traditionnelle dans Homère* (1928).

- Main theory: *Iliad* and *Odyssey* = the product of oral performances, consisting of constant repetition and formulaic language: **Oral Formulaic Hypothesis**.

- Made the Homeric Question obsolete.

Homer's Formulaic System

TABLE I—NOUN–EPITHET FORMULAE OF GODS AND HEROES IN THE NOMINATIVE CASE; PRINCIPAL TYPES

(An asterisk * indicates that the metre of a name makes a noun–epithet formula impossible in the metre in question)

	Between the bucolic diaeresis and the end of the line −∪∪−−	Between the hepthemimeral caesura and the end of the line ∪∪−∪∪−−	Between the feminine caesura and the end of the line ∪−∪∪−∪∪−∪	Between the beginning of the line and the penthemimeral caesura −∪∪−∪∪−	Noun–epithet formulae of different types	Different types of formulae
Ὀδυσσεύς	δῖος Ὀδυσσεύς 60 ἐσθλὸς Ὀδυσσεύς 3	πολύμητις Ὀδυσσεύς 81 πτολίπορθος Ὀδυσσεύς 4	πολύτλας δῖος Ὀδυσσεύς 38	διογενὴς Ὀδυσσεύς 4	12	8
Ἀθήνη	Παλλὰς Ἀθήνη 39 [ὀβριμοπάτρη] 2	γλαυκῶπις Ἀθήνη 26	θεὰ γλαυκῶπις Ἀθήνη 51 Ἀλαλκομενηὶς Ἀθήνη 2	Παλλὰς Ἀθηναίη 8	11	6
Ἀπόλλων	Φοῖβος Ἀπόλλων 33	Διὸς υἱὸς Ἀπόλλων 2 ἑκάεργος Ἀπόλλων 6 κλυτότοξος Ἀπόλλων 1	ἄναξ Διὸς υἱὸς Ἀπόλλων 5 ἄναξ ἑκάεργος Ἀπόλλων 3	[Φοῖβος ἀκερσεκόμης] 1	15	5
Ἀχιλλεύς	δῖος Ἀχιλλεύς 34 ὠκὺς Ἀχιλλεύς 5	πόδας ὠκὺς Ἀχιλλεύς 31 μεγάθυμος Ἀχιλλεύς 1	ποδάρκης δῖος Ἀχιλλεύς 21		10	7
Ζεύς	μητίετα Ζεύς 18 εὐρύοπα Ζεύς 14	νεφεληγερέτα Ζεύς 30 Ζεὺς τερπικέραυνος 4 στεροπηγερέτα Ζεύς 1	[πατὴρ ἀνδρῶν τε θεῶν τε] 15 Ὀλύμπιος εὐρύοπα Ζεύς 1	Ζεὺς ὑψιβρεμέτης 5	39	24
Ἥρη	πότνια Ἥρη 11	λευκώλενος Ἥρη 3	βοῶπις πότνια Ἥρη 11 θεὰ λευκώλενος Ἥρη 19		3	3
Ἕκτωρ	Φαίδιμος Ἕκτωρ 29 ὄβριμος Ἕκτωρ 4	κορυθαίολος Ἕκτωρ 25	μέγας κορυθαίολος Ἕκτωρ 12	Ἕκτωρ Πριαμίδης 6	11	7
Νέστωρ	ἱππότα Νέστωρ 1		Γερήνιος ἱππότα Νέστωρ 31		7	4
Ἄρης	χάλκεος Ἄρης 5 ὄβριμος Ἄρης 5	χρυσήνιος Ἄρης 1	βριήπυος ὄβριμος Ἄρης 1 Ἄρης ἆτος πολέμοιο 3		12	10
Διομήδης	[Τυδέος υἱός] 8	κρατερὸς Διομήδης 12 ἀγαθὸς Διομήδης 1	βοὴν ἀγαθὸς Διομήδης 21		7	5
Ἀγαμέμνων	*	κρείων Ἀγαμέμνων 26	ἄναξ ἀνδρῶν Ἀγαμέμνων 37	[ἥρως Ἀτρείδης] 3	15	6

Source: Parry (1971 [1928] 39)

Avdo Međedović (1875–1955)

- A guslar who performed songs running over 10'000 lines for more than five days.

- Illiterate like most other guslari.

- Confirmed Parry's Oral Formulaic Hypothesis.

- Albert Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (1960).

Source: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/b/b2/
Avdo_Me%C4%91edovi%C4%87.jpg

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Developments after Parry (I)

- **Dictation theory**:
  - Hypothesis: Homer composed his epics orally, but thereafter dictated them to one or more scribes.
  - Extreme view: the Greek alphabet was invented by one man exclusively to this end.
- **Neoanalysis**:
  - Unitarians who analyse the Homeric epics.
  - Goal: to trace motives and themes from earlier (lost) epics and thus to find the 'sources' of the Homeric epics.

Developments after Parry (II)

- **Oral Neoanalysis** ('neo-oralists'):
  – Attempts at reconciling the Oral Formulaic Hypo-thesis with Neoanalysis.

  – Main tenet: intra- and intertextual relations do not necessarily presuppose writing / are possible in an oral culture.

  – New terminology: "oral palimpsest" (Tsagalis 2008), "intertextuality without text" (Burgess 2012), "interformularity" (Bakker 2013).
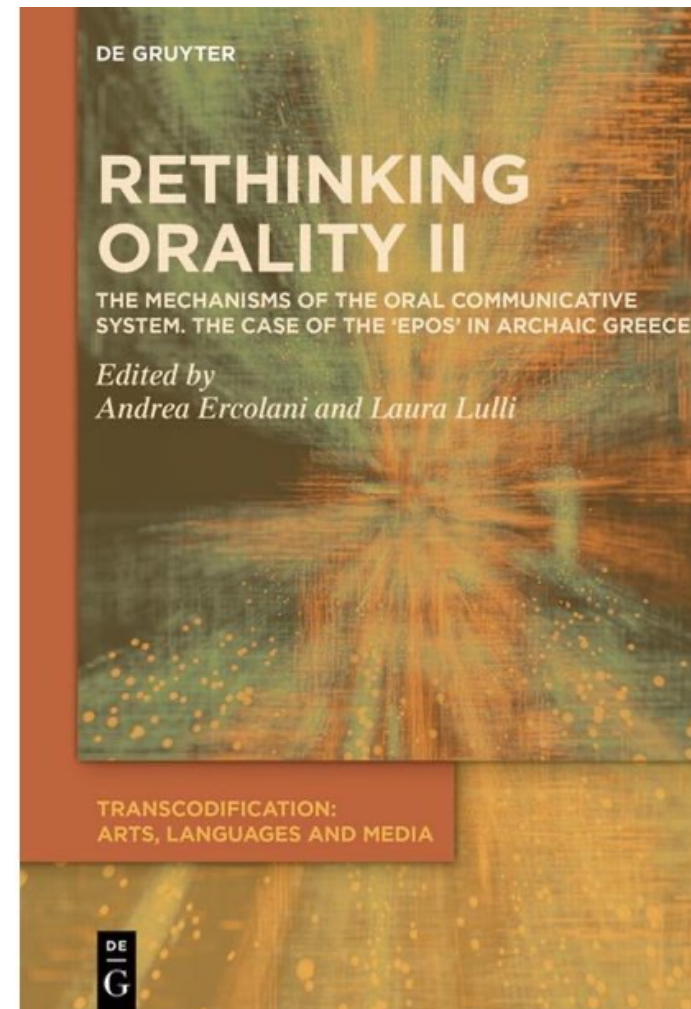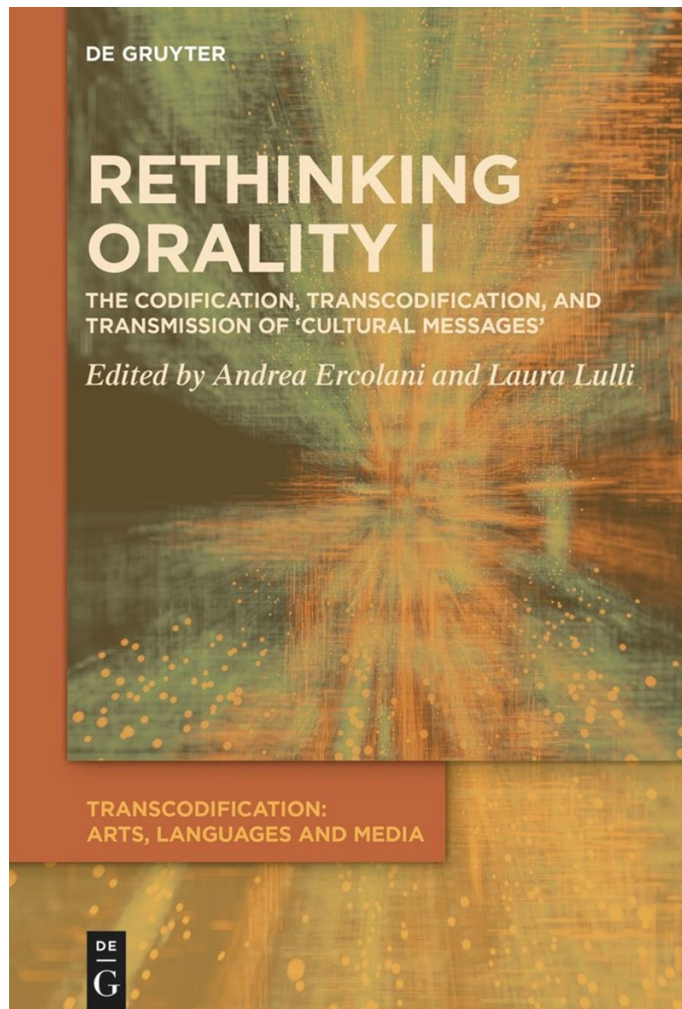
Interformularity (I)

In the conception of Milman Parry and Albert Lord, formulas are ready-made phrases that are (i) *traditional*, in the sense that they are not the personal creation of the poet of the *Iliad* or *Odyssey*; and (ii) *oral*, in the sense that they enable the singer to compose his verses rapidly in performance, without having to make the conscious stylistic choices that characterize written, literary poetry. In this conception, repetition is not significant in itself, since it is simply the consequence of a system of versification that is to a certain extent automated. Yet the use of a "formula," that is, a phrase that has been created in order to be uttered repeatedly and routinely, must ultimately depend on the similarity between two contexts, or, to make an important precision, on a poet's judgment as to the (degree of) similarity between two contexts. The utterance of a formula is more than saying something without having to think about it.

Source: Bakker (2013: 158–159)

Interformularity (II)

The degree to which formulaic phrases are restricted determines their place on the interformularity scale. The more restricted an expression, the more specific the context in which it is uttered, and the higher the point at which it can be placed on the scale. (On the other hand, a high frequency of a context to which a given phrase is restricted will lower its position on the scale, since frequency diminishes specificity.) It is also important to observe that the continuum of increasing specificity is quintessentially cognitive: it is based on the judgment of the performer/poet and the audience as to the degree of similarity between two contexts: the more specific a formula and/or the more restricted its distribution, the greater the possible awareness of its recurrence and of its potential for signaling meaningful repetition. In this way, the scale of interformularity does not code what is for the modern reader or scholar […] the likelihood of allusion or quotation, but what is for the epic poet and his audience specificity of the similarity of scenes to each other.

Source: Bakker (2013: 159)

Cognitive Approaches

Source: https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/9783110751987/html

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