

## Towards Popular Culture in Homeric Poems

Martin Ciesko

Can we hope to recover – to any meaningful extent – a picture of popular entertainments, and even folk culture in general, at around the time of our earliest Greek texts? For such an exercise, as becomes immediately obvious, the Homeric epics are full of difficulties. Despite aspirations to comprise a wide experience of life, there is in them a fundamental preoccupation with celebrating the heroic culture of the remote past in the language that deliberately creates and sustains the prestige of the subject matter (and thus of the genre that renarrates it). Where popular elements do penetrate into the poems, they do so in a necessarily stylized form. Within this brief essay, I can do no more than raise just some preliminary questions concerning our evidence.

### I. From epic contexts to assembly places and thresholds of the rich

Neither contacts between gods and men nor the deeds of past heroes were reserved exclusively for epic poets. However, in epic poetry ἔργ' ἀνδρῶν τε θεῶν τε<sup>1</sup> became something of a trademark. The phrase does not describe merely the subject matter of the genre, but also the prestige of the context of the performance. Because of their divine gifts of inspiration and memory, the bards were called to perform in front of men and gods at secular and religious gatherings: θεοῖσι καὶ ἀνθρώποισιν [ἀείδω] (*Od.* 22.346). The poets or singers had to impart prestige to the occasion for which they were hired, both by the choice of the material and the style of their poetic language. There was certainly an ambiguity in their social status<sup>2</sup> and so – unlike other popular entertainers –

---

<sup>1</sup> *Od.* 1.338, cf. also Hes. *Theog.* 33

<sup>2</sup> Often they were taken as just one group of *δημιοεργοί* (cf. *Od.* 17.383), Hesiod himself tells us of his humble life (*Theogony* 22ff.). Elements of *Vitae Homeri*, as they may go back to the *Homeridae*, are also full of interesting details about poets' lives. Even in China where poetry was held in such high regard, 'the professional poet who was not a high official had, at any rate during his lifetime, a low social position. At Court he was classed with other professional men, such as doctors, soothsayers, magicians. He was a

an epic poet always felt that he had to (re)assert his value and the prestige of his art. More so, if the renown was achieved through competitions between more poets, such as, for instance Hesiod took part in at Chalcis.<sup>3</sup>

The acclaim of a particular aristocratic house is in Zeus' hands. It is up to him to choose what men become ἄφατοι or φατοί, ἔητοί or ἄρρητοι.<sup>4</sup> In the end, however, it is the poets who spread the κλέος of a noble house. Just as a nobleman's fame finds expression in a singer's performance, so in turn the singer derives his prestige from the renown of his patrons and formal occasions on which he performs.<sup>5</sup>

In the fantasy world of the Phaeacians where arts enjoyed a privileged place, Demodocus need not compete for his position. His status, as described in the *Odyssey*, perhaps hints at what any poet's ambitions were. The singer is λαοῖσι τετιμμένος (*Od.* 8.472, 13.28) and the contexts for which he is invited to perform are important social events. We hear that a herald invites him to sit down for his performance on a silver-studded stool,<sup>6</sup> and a clear-voiced lyre is brought for him from Alcinous' house (8.255) as a sign of the permanence of his status.

Folk art is different from formal, aristocratic, 'palace' culture: it belongs to common people and is frequently of an improvised nature not restricted by a social context, conventions of propriety, or a competition for prestige. Often it

---

'plain clothes person,' without status or insignia.' Waley (1950) 22-3.

<sup>3</sup> Hes. *Works* 650ff.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Hes. *Works* 3-4.

<sup>5</sup> The singer is frequently called περικλυτός (*Il.* 1.325, *Od.* 8.83, 367, 521). Where a poet cannot let his characters talk about poetic artistry, he himself openly draws attention to his expertise, as in the *Hymn to Apollo* 166ff. Something about the real-life status of court singers may be gleaned from the story about Agamemnon who entrusted his wife to the care of his singer (*Od.* 3.267, cf. Pausanias, 1.2.3).

<sup>6</sup> Θρόνος ἀργυρόηλος (*Od.* 8.65). In the *Iliad* it is typical for a sword to be called 'silver studded' (nine times out of ten, with a fixed final position in the line), only Thetis is invited to sit down on a silver-studded chair (18.389 at Hephaestus' house). The *Odyssey* uses the epithet more freely although it keeps the heroic connotations of the 'silver-studded sword' (Odysseus receives it from the Phaeacians). On top of that, however, Circe offers Odysseus a silver-studded chair (10.314 and 366), and he is seated on one among the hospitable Phaeacians (7.162-3). Both Demodocus and Phemius are shown using such a chair (8.65 and 22.341). The epithet helps to show the bard's prestige among the Phaeacians (Phemius' example need not concern us here).

is rather associated with the village life or a market-square, that is, spaces that allow freedom of artistic expression impossible within an aristocratic courtyard. There must have been a clear dividing line between socially sanctioned arts and those outside the canon. We have evidence for China that it was common to designate all non-official popular entertainment falling outside the recognized state canon together under one term *san-yüe*. 'The Chinese character *san* was widely used in several instances to designate anything unofficial, non-ritualized, and belonging to the villages rather than to the capital and/or court.'<sup>7</sup>

Homeric poems do not wander off to an *agora*, of course.<sup>8</sup> We are only informed about what went on in aristocratic households or, at best, close nearby at their 'polished' thresholds that marked a boundary with the outside world. It was there that beggars flocked and competed for the favours and protection of the masters of the household.<sup>9</sup> The brawl between two beggars, Odysseus and Irus (*Od.* 18.1ff.), is a good example. Irus tries remarkably hard to ingratiate himself with the suitors. His quarrel with Odysseus is almost like an enactment of an interesting show prepared for their amusement – full of extravagant threats and reviling.<sup>10</sup> This must have been a common sight since much later

---

<sup>7</sup> The combined term *san-yüe* 散樂 (*yüe* standing for 'entertainment,' 'music,' or 'performance') comprised of many elements. Firstly, acrobatics, juggling, wrestling, games with balls, and racing. Secondly, magic shows, miracle cures, imitations of shamanistic possessions. Thirdly, folk dances and songs outside the approved canon. Fourthly, comical performances based on pantomime, disguise, farcical exaggeration, short dialogues, etc. Cf. Ortolani (1995) 56.

<sup>8</sup> Everyday life leaks into the poems in similes. They throw much interesting light on the world in which Homer lived. Thus when Achilles cuts short his conversation with Aeneas because it reminds him of two angry women taking their quarrel into the middle of the street (*Il.* 20.252ff.), the force of the simile is not lost on his audience. Achilles' contempt is directed at the unruly women whose vulgarity, quarrels full of both true and false arguments, are there for all to see in the middle of the town. It is not impossible that at some time such a quarrel could have been performed for the amused passers-by. Assembly places, especially market places always need to attract crowds and so are perhaps the best spots for staging also similar faked quarrel scene. I find attractive Kolb's (1981) thesis that argues for early theatrical performances in such places as the (old) *agora* of Athens.

<sup>9</sup> Compare also the situation in the *Hymn to Demeter*, 96ff. The goddess arrives in front of the house of the ruler of Eleusis, Celeus, and seats herself near the Maiden Well, an intermediary place between the outside world and the house.

<sup>10</sup> For an interesting discussion of such gate-crashers' 'self-performance', see Fehr (1990). I do not find his interpretation of padded dancers as *akletoi* very convincing though. His *akletoi* do not seem to me to be a rigid concept operating within an adequately

Plato could still mention disparagingly the practice of begging priests and prophets who come to the doors of the rich, and persuade them of their god-granted powers.<sup>11</sup> Very possibly, itinerary performers could have started performing in front of such houses, drawing interested crowds, and hoping that masters of the house would feed, hire, or protect them.

## II. War, laughter, and the young

Both Homeric poems show very little of popular entertainments. The *Iliad*, moreover, has a very limited possibility of showing *any* entertainment at all.<sup>12</sup> The action is set in and around a besieged Troy, and Ares would not join in the dancing or *cithara*; he brings tears, not joy.<sup>13</sup>

There is, however, a roundabout way of describing life in blissful peace. Some of the most sophisticated evocations of peaceful life in a war narrative are masterfully wrought into the army shields (!) which thus become polished mirrors, so to speak, of urban and rural life. A harvest scene inserted by Hephaestus on Achilles' shield (*Il.* 18.561ff.) shows merry boys and girls carrying baskets with the vintage of grapes, their work is accompanied with laughter and music. One boy among them strikes the *phorminx*, and sings in a sweet voice:

... μία δ' οἴη ἀταρπιτὸς ἦεν ἐπ' αὐτήν,  
τῆ νίσουντο φορῆες ὅτε τρυγόμεν ἀλωήν.  
παρθενικαὶ δὲ καὶ ἡῖθεοὶ ἀταλὰ φρονέοντες  
πλεκτοῖς ἐν ταλάροισι φέρον μελιηδέα καρπὸν.

---

recognizable or well-defined context.

<sup>11</sup> *Pl. Rep.* 364b.

<sup>12</sup> Little will be said about the much discussed Thersites, the γελωτοποιός of the army and a voice of the common soldier. He may represent the social institution of a military jester (cf. Halliwell (1988) on *Pl. Rep.* 10, 606c7-9 and 620c3) but the poet makes him hateful to heroes such as Odysseus and Achilles for abundantly criticising both with unruly speech. His subversive rhetoric against Agamemnon echoes Achilles arguments (a very important point for the poem) but the poet makes sure that he is laughable for his unheroic qualities and his suffering at Odysseus' hands resembles Irus' in the *Odyssey*.

<sup>13</sup> He is called ἄχρρος, ἀκίδαρις, δακρυογόνος (*Aesch. Suppl.* 681-2).

τοῖσιν δ' ἐν μέσσοισι πάϊς φόρμιγγι λιγείῃ  
 ἰμερόεν κιθάριζε, λίνον δ' ὑπὸ καλὸν ἄειδε  
 λεπταλέῃ φωνῇ· τοὶ δὲ ῥήσσοντες ἀμαρτῆ  
 μολπῆ τ' ἰυγμῶ τε ποσὶ σκαίροντες ἔποντο. (Il. 18.565-72)<sup>14</sup>

Phorminx could be associated with Apollo<sup>15</sup> but as it decreased in popularity it became more and more associated with Dionysus and his cult. Demodocus, Phemius, and the singer hired for the wedding at Menelaus' house use it,<sup>16</sup> and so it may be a hint that the boy was attached to a 'professional' group. It is noticeable that the boy is not alone: a group of young men accompany him with dancing and 'shouting' (18.571-2). All in all, the scene seems to me to be subtly hinting at Dionysus' cult, (cf. a hint at jesting: ἀταλὰ φρονέοντες, 18.567) and at a procession (μία δ' οἴῃ ἀταρπιτὸς ἦεν ἐπ' αὐτήν, τῇ νίσοντο φορῆες, 18.565-6). Vintage time was a perfect occasion for celebrating Dionysus, of course. Below, I will mention the god Dionysus again in connection with the Return of Hephaestus and the *Hymn to Dionysus* narrating the bounding of Hera.

The image of merry youths dancing, singing, and laughing is a Greek *topos*. Aristotle calls the young fond of laughing and wit: φιλογέλωτες and εὐτράπελοι<sup>17</sup> and to Plato's mind, Achilles' attitude in Book 1 of the *Iliad* is best explained as just νεανιεύματα, 'headstrong and immature behaviour'.<sup>18</sup> The philosopher believes that it is the hero's *youth* that makes him vituperate Agamemnon so exuberantly. In fact, however, Homer is at pains not to let his heroes behave like youths: they are depicted as mature men not given to puerile

<sup>14</sup> Compare also Hes. *Shield* 270ff. Laughter and merriment of the young are there described as staple elements of wedding ceremonies and other festivities. The scene pays homage to peace spreading through the whole community in contrast with other cities ravaged by war.

<sup>15</sup> Il. 1.603, 24.63, *Hymn to Apollo* 182ff., Hes. *Shield* 203, etc.

<sup>16</sup> Demodocus: *Od.* 8.254, Phemius: *Od.* 17.262 (though *citharis* is mentioned as well: 1.153), phorminx at the wedding: *Od.* 4.18 (as also Hes. *Shield* 280). Achilles (*Il.* 9.186) possesses and plays a fine specimen of a *phorminx* taken from the spoil when he conquered the city of Eetion – did it belong to a wealthy household or a professional singer?

<sup>17</sup> Pl. *Rhet.* 1389b10ff. Cf. also the use of 'νεανικῶς' at Ar. *Wasps* 1362.

<sup>18</sup> Halliwell (1988) on Pl. *Rep.* 606c7-9.

amusements let alone subversive mockery. The image of the young as innocent but prone to love, fun, youthful merriment or riots, cannot be worked into the poems and so the youthful presence that accompanied and/or disrupted some of the formal social events recorded at later times does not gain any prominence in the poems.

There is an exception, though. *Μουσική* pervades Greek culture to such a significant extent that it is understandable if both poems allude to it.<sup>19</sup> Dancing suits the young, it is an expression of their finding pleasure in life and love. Yet, where Aphrodite and her gifts of love are mentioned, Ares lurks close by. One example that shows a play with a juxtaposition of the two mighty gods will suffice. Here Aeschylus' chorus of suppliant maidens express their wish that Argive youths may never have anything to do with Ares:

ἦβας δ' ἄνθος ἄδρεπτον  
 ἔστω, μηδ' Ἀφροδίτας  
 εὐνάτωρ βροτολογιγός Ἄ-  
 ρης κέρσειεν ἄωτον. (Suppl. 663ff.)

*[May pestilence never destroy the men of this city,] but may the flower of its youth be unplucked, and may Ares, the partner of Aphrodite's bed, he who makes havoc of men, not shear off their bloom.'*

The god of war is mentioned in a significantly close connection with Aphrodite, reminding us of a *topos* that makes both divinities claim the bloom of youth – Aphrodite offering sweet love, Ares harsh toils or even death on the battlefield.

Dance in the *Iliad* is no more than a distant memory of peace, Aphrodite's gifts, and lack of toils of war.<sup>20</sup> How different is its atmosphere from Alcinous'

---

<sup>19</sup> Carefree suitors often turn to dance and song in Odysseus' house: e.g. *Od.* 1.421, 17.605, 18.304, 23.133-35 (Odysseus' preparations for the slaying of suitors include a dancing scheme so that the passers-by may think a wedding goes on inside). Phaeacians and cases in the *Iliad* are hinted at below.

<sup>20</sup> Only the gods are allowed such peaceful bliss: we hear of Apollo playing his lyre and leading the Muses whose lovely voices entertain the banqueting gods (*Il.* 1.602f.).

court where Demodocus performs during a banquet and around him stand the boys of the island, *in the first bloom of their youth*, well skilled in the dance:

ἀμφὶ δὲ κοῦροι

πρωθῆβαι ἴσταντο, δαήμονες ὄρχηθμοῖο (*Od.* 8.262-3).

By comparison with the *Iliad*, the image makes us strongly aware that this is an ideal country without war. Here the young can give themselves with abandon to the pleasures of peaceful life. They do not know fear of war that would deprive them of their youth. For them, Ares is insignificant, heard of only in a light-hearted song about adultery.

Against these youths, the heroes of the *Iliad* are busy fighting. The war at the centre of the epic is all toil and sweat, sometimes directly – and in a deeply evocative way – contrasted to the *malakia* of dancing.<sup>21</sup> Aphrodite (who else!) brings up the image of soft dance. Having snatched Paris from the battlefield, she attempts to inject passion into Helen's heart while directly opposing the images of war and dance:

οὐδέ κε φαίης

ἀνδρὶ μαχεσσάμενον τόν γ' ἔλθεῖν, ἀλλὰ χορὸν δὲ  
ἔρχεσθ', ἥ ἐ χοροῖο νέον λήγοντα καδίξειν. (3.392-4)

Such a contrast resembles the above-mentioned technique of bringing, worked into a shield, a peaceful scene into the middle of the battlefield. Amidst heavy fighting, one jarring tune brings up the theme of peace and thereby enhances the pathos of the war. The contrast is employed frequently: Hector sarcastically describes a close fight as 'dancing for fierce Ares'.<sup>22</sup> Later, this man of Ares rages and shouts after Paris that his good looks, lyre and amatory skills, in short his soft devotion to Aphrodite, will do him no good when he comes near Menelaus (3.39-57). Similarly, Priam contrasts his lost sons, famous

---

<sup>21</sup> οὐ μὰν ἔς γε χορὸν κέλετ' ἔλθεμεν, ἀλλὰ μάχεσθαι (*Il.* 15.508).

<sup>22</sup> οἶδα δ' ἐνὶ σταδίῃ δηῖον μέλπεσθαι "Αρηϊ, *Il.* 7.241; cf. also the ironic 16.617.

for their martial prowess with the degenerate and unworthy sons left to him:

ψεῦσταί τ' ὄρχησταιί τε χοροῖτυπήσιν ἄριστοι  
ἀρνῶν ἦδ' ἐρίφων ἐπιδήμιοι ἀρπακτῆρες. (24.261-1)

Such evidence shows us the limitations of the *Iliad* as neutral evidence and the most obvious problem connected with identifying popular culture in the poem. Popular entertainments are solid *semata* of untroubled peace evoked only as a background against which stand out all the more clearly the disorder of war (in the *Iliad*) and the collapse of social values (in the *Odyssey*).

The *Odyssey*, in fact, displays much exuberant – negative – entertainment: the suitors are dancing, singing, and feasting at a perpetual banquet at the missing Odysseus' expense. They take up the role of unruly youths against sober Telemachus. For their pleasure, they even usurp Odysseus' singer who can no longer perpetuate his master's heroic *kleos* and Trojan achievements. Even the singer becomes a vivid symbol of the ruin of Odysseus' prestige.

Dancing as we learn of it in the *Odyssey* was accompanied with feats that resemble acrobatics and juggling.<sup>23</sup> Alcinous praises his dancers as the best performers.<sup>24</sup> The difficult and stylized dance that Halius and Laodamas are asked to perform for Odysseus (*Od.* 8.370ff.) requires great skill and verges on acrobatics. Odysseus is impressed by the whole variety show on display for him and compliments Alcinous: 'You boasted that your dancers were the best, and

---

<sup>23</sup> Virtuoso 'leapers' (κυβιστητήρες): *Od.* 4.17-19, 8.37ff., *Il.* 18.604-6. I use the term 'leapers' rather than 'tumblers' (cf. Hainsworth ad *Od.* 8.370). Geometric vases show dancers or acrobats performing to the lyre, see Wegner (1968) 65-67. Acrobats soon took part in symposia, it is interesting therefore to read Dearden (1995) who notices a link in later representations between acrobats and comic actors. Incidentally, I notice that in other cultures acrobats and jugglers often appear alongside magic shows and primitive performances such as sketches and mimes in a kind of variety show. Cf. the development of *dengaku* 田楽 ('field-music') in Japan: 'Originally it was an elaboration in the dance of rice-planting festivities and harvest ceremonies. In due course, acrobatics, jugglery, and a semblance of story-content were added.' Bowers (1974) 11; cf. Ortolani (1995) 73-74.

<sup>24</sup> Their status is problematic simply because it is stressed too much. Among artists similar to Halius and Laodamas, some may have been granted court patronage, but the epic language seems to stylize them into a position larger and more dignified than real life. Do we find the epic poet here trying to establish the prestige of a folk element, a troupe that in



how right you were!':

“ Ἀλκίνοε κρεῖον, πάντων ἀριδείκετε λαῶν,  
ἡμὲν ἀπειλήσας βητάρμονας εἶναι ἀρίστους,  
ἦδ' ἄρ' ἐτοῖμα τέτυκτο σέβας μ' ἔχει εἰσορόωντα.” (8.382ff.)

Eighth century saw of course the growth in economic prosperity and awakening of the pride in ancestors (the growth of hero cults can be followed to some extent) that brought with it more opportunities for ostentatious celebrations and festivities, and for the reawakening of the memories of the past. Pride of the aristocratic families may have acted as a driving force for the establishment of spectacles (in the vaguest sense) as just one part of an effort to spread their *kleos*, renown for hospitality and so on. The wealthy may have chosen to become patrons of local art forms, even adapting them for their courts. Such an atmosphere must have favoured the spread of art as a means of self-presentation and 'self-advertisement'.

### III. Renaissance and recurrent motifs

At a time of cultural growth artists eagerly seize upon new stimuli and we do observe at around the period under scrutiny heavy borrowing of (mostly Eastern) motifs both in representational arts and literature. Such borrowing must have helped enrich both cult and popular culture. Because much was taken over with an intention to entertain, material deemed too offensive was often modified or expurgated. Eastern relish in horrific or cruel details was either ignored or given a humorous twist.<sup>25</sup>

I shall give two examples that not only prove a trend of heavy borrowing

---

real life was of a humble status?

<sup>25</sup> This has been noticed by Burkert (1992) in connection with the Greek reuse of the horrifying figures of Lamashtu, Lamia and Mesopotamian demons. In the process, the images lost their demonic quality 'they do not carry the association of some *mysterium tremendum*' the magical figurines of the East are transformed, 'not awe-inspiring but simply a source of wonder.' Burkert (1992) 82ff., the quotations on p. 87. Halm-Tisserant (1989) remarks on the motif of the capture of the Lamia as a possible comic theme.

from the East (in itself a sign of a flourishing cultural period) but also a longevity of material that, once adopted, could re-emerge at various stages of Greek culture. Often, importantly for my argument, in dramatic arts. It is possible that every time the same motif reappeared it was taken afresh by accident from the pool of available cultural trends. However, it is equally possible, I suggest, to suspect that there was a steady current of unwritten folk culture giving life to such motifs and preserving them.

Let us start with Pausanias who narrates how young Hephaestus fashioned invisible fetters to punish Hera:

λέγεται δὲ καὶ τάδε ὑπὸ Ἑλλήνων, ὡς Ἥρα ῥίψαι γενόμενον Ἥφαιστον, ὁ δὲ οἱ μνησικακῶν πέμψαι δῶρον χρυσοῦν θρόνον ἀφανεῖς δεσμούς ἔχοντα, καὶ τὴν μὲν ἐπεὶ τε ἐκαδέζετο δεδέσθαι, θεῶν δὲ τῶν μὲν ἄλλων οὐδενὶ τὸν Ἥφαιστον ἐθέλειν πείθεσθαι, Διόνυσος δὲ— μάλιστα γὰρ ἐς τοῦτον πιστὰ ἦν Ἥφαιστῳ — μεθύσας αὐτὸν ἐς οὐρανὸν ἤγαγε· ταῦτά τε δὴ γεγραμμένα (1.20.3)

‘One of the Greek legends is that Hephaestus, when he was born, was thrown down by Hera. In revenge he sent as a gift a golden chair with invisible fetters. When Hera sat down she was held fast, and Hephaestus refused to listen to any other of the gods save Dionysus--in him he reposed the fullest trust--and after making him drunk Dionysus brought him to heaven.’

The story has everything a comic sketch or mime needs. A surprised Hera suddenly becomes restricted in movement by invisible fetters and Dionysus must do all he can to entice Hephaestus to drink. The adamantly refusing god finally gives in and accepts the offered wine. Inebriation changes him, he releases Hera and they all return to heaven in a drunken state. One may argue that Pausanias is too late an authority for the period that we are interested in. Yet what reads like an aetiological explanation of the relationship between Hephaestus, Hera, and Dionysus was indeed elaborated much earlier in a ‘Homeric’ *Hymn to Dionysus*.<sup>26</sup> Dionysiac ritual may easily have represented

---

<sup>26</sup> Merkelbach (1975) on P.Oxy. 670 with further references. The story of Hera bound by Hephaestus is mentioned by Pindar fr. 282 Sn-M, Pl. *Rep.* 378d, Libanius *Narr.* 30.1 (Foerster I 38).

the scene because it is stageable.<sup>27</sup> There is an obvious connection with binding magic<sup>28</sup> and the motif of fettered gods itself appears in the East.<sup>29</sup> When transferred to Dionysus, however, the eastern motifs lose their seriousness.<sup>30</sup>

Just as in the story of a bound Hera, when one comes to Homer and Demodocus' song, the story of Ares and Aphrodite bound by crafty Hephaestus is plain humour. The scene is sheer theatre and the gods laugh at what they see as if they were watching an adultery mime.

This light-heartedness shows interest in anything wonderful, fascinating, and funny as a pure artistic narrative. The times must have been conducive to self-conscious literary production. Details of preservation of such themes are naturally difficult to trace. May we assume that the more interesting, stageable, and humorous stories made it into the repertoire of wandering troupes that may have performed, danced, or mimed them? Were there Eastern magicians who performed magic shows (à la Hephaestus?) to amuse spectators and draw them near?

I find it hard to believe that no one saw the potential for performance in the hymns such as the one to Dionysus. Somewhat later we do find mentions of

---

<sup>27</sup> Epicharmus, for one, saw the comic potential of this: cf. his *Κωμασταὶ ἢ Ἄφαιστος* PCG vol. I, K-A. If Simon (1978) is right, a Würzburg calyx-krater may represent a satyr play with the motif of the so-called Return of Hephaestus. The motif of the Return of god brought back riding on a mule in the company of Dionysus and satyrs is well represented in art, e.g. on a Corinthian mastos, Paris, Musée Rodin 503; on a Corinthian crater in the British Museum, London, 67.8-5.860 (old no. B42) from around 500/475 BC; or on a Corinthian amphoriskos in Athens, N.M.664. See LIMC III, s.v. Dionysus, no. 565, with plate and further refs. Seeberg (1965), very briefly Amyx (1988) 621-2.

<sup>28</sup> On Hephaestus' role as a magician, Delcourt (1957) is fundamental. See also Faraone (1987).

<sup>29</sup> If 'fettered gods' and not 'vanquished gods' is the meaning of *ilani kamûti* in the Mesopotamian myth, cf. Burkert (1992) 203 n.24.

<sup>30</sup> I suggest there are some similarities with a not so light-hearted Phoenician myth about the craftsman god Kothar-u-Khasis ('skillful and clever'). Did eastern craftsmen noted for their migration take with them the Phoenician story about their patron god? He is made by El to build a throne for Yam (god of sea who quarrels with Baal), he reproaches Yam for disobedience against Baal and threatens to use a magical weapon against him. Baal strikes Yam in chest and in the forehead, knocking him out. I do not say that the characteristics of Yam were taken by the quarrelsome Hera (whom Zeus once with unusual – Eastern? –cruelty hung up in mid-heaven). Still, a craftsman god building a throne and using magic (not fetters, however) – do these parallels point to an eastern source?

fettered Titans in Old Comedy,<sup>31</sup> and *katadesis* was almost certainly put on comic stage: we have an Apulian kalyx-krater from around 400 B.C. that most probably represents a comic effect of a binding spell.<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, we can only guess what the route from Homeric times to classical comedy was, and whether at all popular folk performances featured such sketches and helped in any way to preserve them. If we look at primitive dramatic forms in other cultures, we find that there is interaction between more serious, perhaps mostly narrative, genres and the popular entertainments.<sup>33</sup> Of course, we know nothing about such performances and so we are left to mere conjectures and guesswork.

Let me adduce another motif that shows how motifs may be preserved for a very long period of time and finally make it into mainstream dramatic genres. If we trust Athenaeus, in Sophocles' satyr drama *Krisis* Aphrodite was brought on stage fully beautified and looking into her mirror – all prepared for the famous beauty contest.<sup>34</sup> The theme of the Judgement of Paris, and even this part of it, the beautification of Aphrodite, shows a good comic potential and we do find representations of the theme both in comedy and vase painting.<sup>35</sup> We know of a Goddess with a mirror from Mycenaean monuments<sup>36</sup> and this shows that at some stage comedy (satyr drama, in this case) appropriated symbols that had (and lost?) their obvious value in religious representations.

<sup>31</sup> E.g. Cratinus, Πλοῦτοι fr. 171.18ff. K-A

<sup>32</sup> New York Metropolitan Museum of Art, 24.97.104. For a recent discussion of the vase, see Taplin (1993) 30ff.

<sup>33</sup> For example some of the primitive dramatic 'plots' are more like short stories modelled on literary stories, fables, legends, and so on, leading up to an effective punch-line. Thus motifs of the Japanese comic theatre *kyogen* 狂言 may be at times traceable to humorous stories found in book collections of such material that were in wide circulation. We also know of dramatic genres (e.g. Japanese *bunraku* 文楽) directly indebted to and influenced by narrative genres such as ballads and chronicles.

<sup>34</sup> Athen. 15, 687c: Σοφοκλῆς δ' ὁ ποιητῆς ἐν Κρίσει τῷ δράματι τὴν μὲν Ἀφροδίτην ἠδονὴν τινα οὔσαν δαίμονα μύρω τε ἀλειφομένην παράγει καὶ κατοπτριζομένην... Fr. \*361 Radt.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. LIMC, s.v. Aphrodite, no. 1423. Comedy: Cratinus' *Dionysusalexandros*, PCG 4, 140 K-A. Aphrodite's beautification goes back to *Cypria* fr. 4-5; later e.g. in Eur. *Andr.* 284-86, *Hel.* 676-78 and frequently in visual art.

<sup>36</sup> A ring: MMR, 354; an ivory mirror-handle, Wace (1949) 36 and figs. 55-56; and on a wooden mirror handle from Dendra: Persson, (1942) 43-46 with figs. 7-9. Webster (1958) 34, though ready to accept a Syro-Hittite origin for them (postulated by Persson), does not believe they should be laden with the oriental magic symbolism.

Links between western Semitic Ashtorith (identical with Ishtar) and Aphrodite have been noticed.<sup>37</sup> It is unclear of course how the image of a goddess with the mirror, once a potent magico-religious symbol, changed into a light-hearted image of an accessory for a wanton goddess and later, under different conditions, even for a New Comedy courtesan.<sup>38</sup> Whatever the stages of the evolution – and we cannot *a priori* rule out that the image is independent of the Mycenaean and oriental iconography – it shows that images may be easily recycled given their intrinsic interest. This aesthetic distancing from cult is not, I believe, in itself a symptom of irreverence and rationalism but I will not analyze here its implications for the religious life of the period.

If we look at some of the (especially humorous) stories told by Homer, we notice that they show not only signs of, but also an interest in, performability. What should we make of this? Is it a hint that the poet recognizes contemporary mimetic performances, however primitive they might be? Any straightforward answer is difficult for two reasons.

Firstly, Homer knew the value of dramatic representation in a narrative.<sup>39</sup> Just as he was a master of psychological descriptions, strife and physical humour, all important for their dramatic interest. Odysseus and Hera are commonly crafty, strife is the origin and contriver of mischief (*Il.* 9.257) and often of good narratives. Craft, mischief, physical violence are obviously the essence not only of mimetic arts but also of narratives in general.<sup>40</sup>

Secondly, the process of viewing reality and its representations is culturally determined. What for one may be a few imperfect strokes representing a static scene, is for another an evolving scene full of action and

---

<sup>37</sup> Burkert (1985) 152-156; (1992) 96ff. I may repeat that Western Semitic is also the myth of Kothar-u-Khasis I adduced above.

<sup>38</sup> We are not particularly helped by the scarcity of iconographical material. Dietrich (1974) 310 comments on 'the virtual absence, or extreme scarcity of identifiable mythological scenes in art from the Mycenaean to the Geometric Age.' For the motif in New Comedy, cf. *Pl. Most.* 248 *cedo mi speculum*. The words make it clear that the courtesan beautifies herself on stage.

<sup>39</sup> Aristotle's opinion is famous: *Poet.* 1448b34-1449a2.

<sup>40</sup> In the *Hymn to Hermes*, cornered Hermes plays the part of a naïve toddler in order to outwit Apollo. The poet is interested in his 'acting' that includes false speech and deliberate control of facial movements, both described in detail: 278ff.

movements. For such audiences as are ready for it, any song, gesture, or mask may become an act of mimesis. If seen from this perspective, much in everyday life of Homer's times could be seen to various degrees linked with *mimesis*.

It is therefore difficult to claim that Homeric episodes could have developed with an eye on 'performances' in the sense that we understand it: by a group of people with assumed identities for people assembled for that purpose. Still, I believe that we shall find that the language in the Homeric poems depends on seeing and can be put to good effect when staged.

#### IV. The language of stage: Aphrodite's flight, Ares in a jar, Mount Ida on stage

Aphrodite sees her φίλος (*Il.* 5.314) son Aeneas, to her the dearest of all people (5.378), in danger and so hurriedly flies to rescue him. She is a goddess, after all, for whom it should pose no problem to protect her own child. In the *Iliad*, Book 3, this powerful divinity saved from the battlefield another protégé of hers, Paris. From Menelaus' clutches she easily flew with him concealed in a thick mist to the safety of the bedroom.<sup>41</sup> Similarly, at *Il.* 23.184ff., her ointments have the power to keep Hector's body intact – neither do dogs come near to tear the corpse, nor does Achilles injure it as he drags it around. In these episodes the goddess shows her divine might that is enough to scare mortals.

In the *Iliad* Book 5, however, she is a woman, a comically incongruous element on the battlefield, and an easy prey for Diomedes whom Athena endowed with supernatural abilities.

In a beautiful image that stresses her femininity, Aphrodite flew her white arms around her son, and covered him with her bright garment. Diomedes noticed her, and realising that she is a weakling (γιγνώσκων ὃ τ' ἀναλκις ἔην θεός, *Il.* 5.331) without authority on the battlefield (not a second Athene or Enyo, or Ishtar, for that matter<sup>42</sup>), he pressed hard upon her. He even injured her

---

<sup>41</sup> τὸν δ' ἐξήραξ' Ἀφροδίτη  
ῥεῖτα μάλ' ὡς τε θεός, ἐκάλυψε δ' ἄρ' ἠέρι πολλῇ,  
καὶ δ' εἶσ' ἐν θαλάμῳ εὐώδει κηῶεντι. (*Il.* 3.380-2)

<sup>42</sup> It is often noted that the episode resembles Gilgamesh' rejection of Ishtar's advances. Gresseth (1975) 14, cf. Burkert (1992) 96-99. Ishtar, however, is a goddess of both love and war!

wrist with his spear; the goddess cried out loud and dropped her son (ἦ δὲ μέγα ἰάχουσα ἀπὸ ἔο κάββαλεν υἷόν, 5.343) thinking only about her injured hand. Not caring about the dearest of mortals, she left frantic and distraught, ἀλύουσ' ἀπεβήσετο (5.352), taken up by the swift, wind-footed, Iris (5.353: τήν μὲν ἄρ' Ἴρις ἔλοῦσα ποδῆνεμος...).

Parts of this deliciously comic<sup>43</sup> narrative are certainly performable.<sup>44</sup> The motif of frightened flight with an involuntary dropping of a precious object is found elsewhere as well.<sup>45</sup> We know that Spartan *deikelistai* represented scenes of fruit-stealing, or that Laconian dances imitated 'men caught in stealing stale meat' (Pollux 4.104-5).<sup>46</sup> I am tempted to suggest that a stealer, often in shock when discovered, would drop the booty and run away quickly.

We are then faced here with a comic story made up of many elements: it may have factual background in ritual (Cyprus),<sup>47</sup> it is also indebted to Eastern motifs, and moreover, as I believe, some elements of it could have derived from comic dances or sketches, for additional humorous flavour.

In the safety of Olympus, Dione (taken over from the East, of course)

---

<sup>43</sup> As mentioned before, many wonderful stories show behind them an interesting serious facet. And so it is worthwhile to keep in mind a darker aspect of this *Iliadic* narrative as recorded in Porph. *Abst.* 2.54f. It may hint at some Semitic practice remembered on Cyprus where 'it is said that there was human sacrifice for Diomedes and Agraulus, performed in the sanctuary of which Athena had her share, in the month of Aphrodisios; the victim was killed with a spear and burnt.' Burkert (1992) 98.

<sup>44</sup> A *kyogen* play *Ko nusubito* 子盗人 (as it appears in e.g. a collection of *kyogen* plays *Zoku Kyogenki* 続狂言記, no. 1.7) features a thief who becomes engrossed with a sweet little baby that he finds in the house he has broken into. Threatened by the master of the house with a drawn sword, he drops the baby he was playing with and runs away. The nurse takes up the baby and sees no harm has been done.

<sup>45</sup> E.g. at *Il.* 6.133-4: women nursing Dionysus dropped their wands and fled when Lycurgus started against them. *Hymn to Demeter* 281ff. has a scene somewhat similar to the Homer's: Metaneira is struck with terror at the sight of the goddess before her and she forgets all about her child lying on the ground crying.

<sup>46</sup> Athen. 14.621dff.; Plut. *Vita Lycurg.* 17. They appear on a Corinthian krater, Louvre E 632. Cf. also DTC, 134-6; Webster (1956) 128ff.

<sup>47</sup> A memory of ritual or a performance may be preserved in Eur. *Cyclops* 69ff. Obnoxious and over-sexed satyrs boast that they pursued the goddess:

οὐδ' ἐν Νύσα μετὰ Νυμφᾶν  
ἴαχον ἴαχον ᾠδᾶν  
μέλπω πρὸς τὰν Ἀφροδίταν,  
ἂν θηρέων πετόμαν

consoles Aphrodite by adducing stories of other gods whom men treated harshly. Comedy continues – Ares, Dione says, once found himself in the brazen pot and he would have died were it not for the divine thief Hermes who got him out, emaciated and depressed:

τλῆ μὲν Ἄρης ὅτε μιν ὄπιος κρατερός τ' Ἐφιάλτης  
παῖδες Ἀλωῆος, δῆσαν κρατερῶ ἐνὶ δεσμῶ·  
χαλκίῳ δ' ἐν κεράμῳ δέδετο τρισκαίδεκα μῆνας·  
καὶ νύ κεν ἔνθ' ἀπόλοιτο Ἄρης ἄτος πολέμοιο,  
εἰ μὴ μητρυνὴ περικαλλῆς Ἡερίβοια  
Ἐρμέα ἐξήγγειλεν· ὃ δ' ἐξέκλειψεν Ἄρηα  
ἤδη τειρόμενον, χαλεπὸς δέ ἐ δεσμὸς ἐδάμνα. (Il. 5.385ff.)

Frazer opines that this may hint at some primitive memory of storing a war god in an ark in order to secure a victory in battle (Semitic parallels are obvious).<sup>48</sup> Whatever the serious tradition behind the story may have been, it is obvious that the story is full of comic potential and is written in such a way as to evoke laughter and not reverence for the battered god. He was on the point of dying, says the bard, though he does not explain how a god could die. There is a hint of a scheme (lines 389-90), and a rescue operation. The brief mention of the intrigue may hint at a performance tradition. Much later, we find in Aristophanes (*Peace*) a similar act of liberation of a divinity, only on that occasion it was not Ares, but Peace who needed rescuing!

Can we assume that the little sketch with stealth, intrigue, and a battered captive was ever performed? It could have been a part of a cult song about Ares. After all Homer does not go into any great details here and so probably assumes knowledge of these facts. Just like the binding of Hera mentioned above, the story shows elements that may be easily transferred to stage.

Homer often shows an interest in the staging, so to speak, of his poem and in the reactions of his 'actors'. Hephaestus' expertise in making invisible but

---

Βάκχαις σὺν λευκόποσιν  
<sup>48</sup> Frazer (1888) 222.



tightly fitting fetters has been touched upon. Demodocus mentions that not even the potential audience, i.e. none of the gods, could see the fetters that Hephaestus prepared because they were as fine as spiders' webs (ἡὕτ' ἀράχνια λεπτά· τὰ γ' οὐ κέ τις οὐδὲ ἴδοιτο, οὐδὲ θεῶν μακάρων· περὶ γὰρ δολόεντα τέτυκτο *Od.* 8.280ff.). Hephaestus' *dolos* involves some acting: he pretends to be leaving his house and going to Lemnos (εἶσατ' ἴμεν ἐς Λῆμνον 8.283). When he saw his rival leave (ὡς ἴδεν Ἡφαιστον 8.286), Ares did not hesitate but hurried inside.

In all this, there is craft, wile, pretence of leaving the house, *pithanotes* (in the mention of Lemnos, Hephaestus' favourite spot) and a *mechane* hidden from the eyes of impatient Ares. All the elements of the good adultery mime are present.<sup>49</sup>

Another story (again with strong oriental links and much commented upon) is the famous Deception of Zeus (*Il.* 14.153ff.).<sup>50</sup> The performability of the humour in the story is without question: as soon as Zeus spots beautified Hera, he succumbs to her charm, as if this was the first day when they slept together. Hera pretends to be on her way to Oceanus' house but Zeus convinces her to stay and lie down with him. The goddess is afraid: on Mount Ida the married couple could be seen by everyone (τὰ δὲ προπέφανται ἅπαντα 14.333) and so she suggests going inside (as if from the sight of the spectators, 14.339ff.).

Zeus is impatient, however, and shows no such worry about men or gods catching sight of them:

Ἡρῃ, μήτε θεῶν τό γε δείδιδι μήτέ τιν' ἀνδρῶν  
 ὄψεσθαι τοῖόν τοι ἐγὼ νέφος ἀμφικαλύψω  
 χρύσειον· οὐδ' ἂν νῶϊ διαδράκοι Ἡελίος περ,  
 οὗ τε καὶ ὀξύτατον πέλεται φάος εἰσοράασθαι. (14.342ff.)

Zeus thinks that he has duped and eluded all the gods but it is he who is

<sup>49</sup> For a description of late ancient adultery mimes, cf. Reynolds (1946).

<sup>50</sup> Burkert (1992) 88ff. compares details of the story of Zeus' Deception with Atrahasis.

tricked and overmastered by Sleep and Love. While he sleeps, sweet Sleep runs to suggest to Poseidon that it is time to bring aid to the Danaans because 'Hera has fooled him craftily to go to bed with her' (14.360). The deception of the husband is of an obvious theatrical interest – many things can happen behind his back. While the story as it is narrated in the *Iliad* is too large and covers too much ground, it could have been modelled on a sketch depicting a domestic scene, with a husband falling asleep near his wife. The wife would then be free to act against the will of the master of the household. When eventually a master wakes up and realizes how he was duped, he regains his masterly authority. Similarly, Zeus threatens Hera with lashing, reminds her of her previous punishments, and makes her shudder with fear. She, just like comic slaves, quickly denies that it was her work that the Danaans regained an upper hand in the battle. She passes all the blame on Poseidon who, so she insists, worked of his own volition. Zeus is amused at her fawning and the episode reaches its resolution through this undeniably comic touch.

This is all material that comedies can be made of. It had a clear function in the grand structure of the *Iliad*<sup>51</sup> and it is indeed remarkable with what facility the poet uses even the smallest of the various dramatic patterns. Could he have drawn not only on the epic tradition but also on popular culture going beyond epic poetry? Even though we have no way of fully appreciating the links that Homeric material could have had with any contemporary and later (quasi-) dramatic and mimetic performances, I hope to have at least shown a possibility of a wider cultural context within which Homer may have worked. His episodes are a combination of many elements from various sources. Because the final product is a work of unsurpassed individuality, the value of reconstructing layers of culture in the poems is truly limited. Still, all too often he grants us, I think, a larger vista of the artistic flowering that surrounded him and his audience.

---

<sup>51</sup> The bibliography on comic elements in the *Iliad* is large, see e.g. Meltzer (1990).

## Bibliography and abbreviations

- Ackermann, H. Ch. & Gisler, J.-R. (eds.), *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae* [=LIMC], Zurich, 1981-1999.
- Amyx, D. A., *Corinthian Vase-Painting of the Archaic Period*. 3 Vols., Berkeley, 1988.
- Bowers, F., *Japanese Theatre*, Tokyo, 1974.
- Burkert, W., *Greek Religion, Archaic and Classical*, Oxford and Cambridge, Mass., 1985.
- , *The Orientalizing Revolution, Near Eastern Influence on Greek Culture in the Early Archaic Age*, tr. M. E. Pinder, W. Burkert, Harvard University Press, 1992.
- Dearden, C. W., 'Pots, Tumblers and Phlyax Vases,' in A. Griffiths (ed.), *Stage Directions, Essays in Ancient Drama in Honour of Eric Handley*, BICS Supplement 66, London, 1995, 81-86.
- Delcourt, M., *Héphaïstos ou la légende du magicien*, Paris, 1957, 1982<sup>2</sup>.
- Dietrich, B. C., *The Origins of Greek Religion*, Berlin and New York 1974.
- Faraone, Ch. A., 'Hephaestus the Magician and Near Eastern Parallels for Alcinous' Watchdogs,' *GRBS* 28 (1987) 257-80.
- Fehr, B., 'Entertainers at the *Symposion*: The *Akletei* in the Archaic Period,' in O. Murray (ed.) *Symptica, A Symposium on the Symposion*, Oxford, 1990, 185-195.
- Frazer, J. G., 'Ares in the Brazen Pot,' *CR* 2 (1888) 222.
- Gresseth, G. K., 'The Gilgamesh Epic and Homer,' *CJ* 70.4 (1975) 1-18.
- Halliwell, S., 'The Uses of Laughter in Greek Culture,' *CQ* 41 (1991) 279-96.
- Halliwell, S., *Plato, Republic 10*, Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1988.
- Halm-Tisserant, M., 'Folklore et superstition en Grèce classique: Lamia torturée?' *Kernos* 2 (1989) 67-82.
- Heubeck, A., West, S., Hainsworth, J. B. *A Commentary on Homer's Odyssey*. Oxford. 3 vols., 1988-92.
- Kassel, R., & Austin, C., *Poetae Comici Graeci*. Berlin and New York, 1983-  
[=PCG, K-A]
- Kirk, G. S., et al., *The Iliad: A Commentary*. Cambridge. 6 vols., 1985-93.

- Kolb, F., *Agora und Theater. Volks- und Festversammlung* (Archäologische Forschungen 9), Berlin, 1981.
- Meltzer, G. W., 'The Role of Comic Perspectives in Shaping Homer's Tragic Vision,' *CW* 83 (1990) 265-80.
- Merkelbach, R., 'Ein Fragment des homerischen Dionysus-Hymnus,' *ZPE* 12 (1975) 212-5.
- Nilsson, M. P., *The Minoan-Mycenaean Religion and its Survival in Greek Religion*, Lund, 1950<sup>2</sup>. [=MMR]
- Ortolani, B., *The Japanese Theatre: From Shamanistic Ritual to Contemporary Pluralism*, Princeton (rev. ed.), 1995.
- Persson, A. W., *The Religion of Greece in Prehistoric Times*, Berkeley, 1942.
- Pickard-Cambridge, A., *Dithyramb, Tragedy and Comedy*, Oxford, 2nd ed. rev. by T. B. L. Webster, 1962. [=DTC]
- Radt, S. (with Kannicht, R.), *Tragicorum Graecorum Fragmenta, Vol. 4: Sophocles*, Göttingen, 1997. [=Radt]
- Reynolds, R. W., 'The Adultery Mime,' *CQ* 40 (1946) 77-84.
- Seeberg, A., 'Hephaestus Rides Again,' *JHS* 85 (1965) 102-9.
- Simon, E., 'Dionysos und Hephaistos auf einem Kelchkrater des Talosmalers,' *Pantheon* 36 (1978) 199-206.
- Taplin, O., *Comic Angels and Other Approaches to Greek Drama through Vase-Paintings*, Oxford, 1993.
- Wace, A. J. B., *Mycenae, An Archaeological History and Guide*, Princeton, 1949.
- Waley, A., *The Poetry and Career of LIPO*, London, 1950.
- Webster, T. B. L., *Greek Theatre Production*, London, 1956.
- , *From Mycenae to Homer*, London, 1958.
- Wegner, M., *Musik und Tanz* (Archaeologia Homerica, 3, Kapitel U), Göttingen, 1968.