WRITING AND THE ORIGINS OF GREEK LITERATURE

BARRY B. POWELL

Halls-Bascom Professor of Classics, University of Wisconsin–Madison

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: building models like a wigwam

By now we might hope for some kind of consensus on the genesis of the Homeric poems, the central question in the history of Greek letters, but the plot seems as muddled as ever. Everyone has a good idea and there is scarcely consensus. In the history of Homeric studies comes our truest exemplum of cultural myopia. We are not sure what to do with Homer because we think he is like us. As we change, he changes.

Until the early twentieth century, classical scholars did not well imagine a difference between how they themselves made a text and how the ancients made a text, who made them, why they made them, and to what use they put them. The study of ancient Greek literature is complex, but always begins with the Homeric Question, *quaestio Homerica*, interrogations about Homer, and there we should begin. The Homeric Question is always about origins. We possess the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, but whence do they come? In modern times Robert Wood (1717?–1771), in his *Essay on the Original Genius and Writings of Homer* (printed privately 1767, published posthumously in 1775) and François Hédelin, abbé d'Aubignac (1604–1676), associate to Richelieu, in his *Conjectures académiques ou dissertation sur l'Iliade* (1715), saw that the problem of origins was inseparable from the relationship between the technology of writing and a spoken form of the poem. Even in the ancient world the historian of the Jewish War Josephus raised the question explicitly (*contra Apionem*, 1.11–12).

What, however, is meant by *spoken form* is hard to clarify, and nineteenth-century Homeric scholars therefore saw no reason to question the primacy of the written text. Analyst and Unitarian alike applied their experience with modern written texts to ancient texts, which they read silently, to themselves, in cubicles and cold rooms, in northern climes, or aloud before a *Philolog*. Such conditions cannot have pertained in "the days of Homer." If we could only be sure when that was, or what were the conditions of those days.

Milman Parry's demonstration in the 1930s that the Homeric poems were orally composed refocused Greek literary studies in a dramatic way by suggesting a different manner of composition for Homeric verse. Although neither Parry nor his follower A. B. Lord attempted to explain why, and scarcely how, such oral poems came to be texts, or what happened next, scholars nonetheless began to reinterpret early Greek civilization as an "oral culture" where writing played an important but auxiliary role, essentially different from that in our own society, where writing controls everything. If Homer was an oral poet, and oral poetry is always shifting, then the *Iliad* existed in many, even innumerable versions, some say, so that variations in our text may reflect different oral versions. Such other poets as Sappho or Archilochus were influenced by "Homer," but not necessarily by our own *Iliad* or *Odyssey*, our own Homer, which represent single examples from a plurality. Being oral, Homer's verse, and even certain formulas, may reach back into early times, the argument goes, as do Homer's stories, his myths, so great is the power of orality. Lyric poetry – Archilochus, Sappho, Solon – was oral in origin too, and maybe oral in nature, and existed in similar metrical forms long before our first written evidence. Even the songs of Pindar and the tragedians, who undoubtedly created their verse in writing, were sung, hence part of oral culture. Scarcely a book appears today on Greek literature in which the word "oral" or "orality" does not appear, opposed to "written" and "literate," as if everyone agreed on what was being said and what the issues were. Even Roman literary criticism accepts such distinctions, as, for example, in a recent book on Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (Wheeler, 1999, 272) that finds an "inherent tension between the implicit orality and explicit literacy" as a key to understanding Ovid's poem.

Such theories about "orality" and conclusions drawn therefrom may not survive rigorous criticism, however, because they do not depend on clear descriptions of how ancient texts came into being and how they were used. They make erroneous assumptions about the nature and function of writing itself, the technology that separates "orality" from "literacy." Above all, commentators ignore the highly idiosyncratic nature of Greek alphabetic writing, which has distorted our ability to perceive speech directly. Alphabetic writing is not a mirror held up to speech, it appears, but a special technology with functions unprecedented in earlier writing traditions. Nor do commentators take sufficient account of the importance of A. B. Lord's elaboration of Milman Parry's theory of the dictated Homeric text and the need rigorously to distinguish such dictated texts from free creations in writing. Nor do they recognize the

novelty of some of the best-known Greek myths, the subject of Greek literature. We seek conclusions about the origins of Greek literature, whose mysterious quality and influence continue to earn admiration, but are hampered by methods that follow out single lines of inquiry and do not see the problem whole, in all its complexity.

To understand the past, we build models from pieces scattered and fragmented, but hardly seek proof through mathematical calculation; when we do measure quantities, we are not sure what to do with them, or whether we have selected criteria with hidden conclusions in mind. Because of the difficulty and diffuseness of the topic – the relation between writing and the origins of Greek literature – we will need to build our model rather like a wigwam, placing pole beside pole, spread out at the bottom but touching in a bunch at the top and supporting an overall design. But there will be no mathematical rigor. Our poles will consist of a series of special studies that support a general description. Because our present myopia is bound up with a set of terms that mean many or different things, we will want to discuss such terms, beginning with the distinction "oral/literate," growing from the work of Parry/Lord and their theories about tradition in Homeric poetry. I do not hope to present a universal description of every concept, or an exhaustive description of how such terms as "text," "orality," "literacy," "writing," and "myth" have been used, but to show how these and related terms are mixed up with each other in a befuddling way to create illusions of understanding (Powell, 2000b). We will want also to look closely at important issues in the history and theory of writing, the technology that makes literacy and literature possible. Finally, we will want to face difficult evidence from the history of art, which emphasizes innovative elements against traditional ones in the study of "traditional" Greek myth.

When we think about literature, we think theoretically and historically. In this book I try to do both. Each yields a conclusion in and of itself, which forms the basis for the next chapter, which builds, I hope, to a coherent understanding about the nature and origins of archaic Greek literature.