

Who Teaches the Homeric Bards?

Remarks on *Od.* 22, 347–8

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ABSTRACT

The text comments on passages from Homer’s *Odyssey* devoted to the role of the bards and to the origin of their inspiration. Phemius, the figure of main importance for this study, has been spared by Odysseus, thanks to his own suppliant and self-representative apology (22, 347–8). According to his assertion, Phemius is both divinely inspired as well as self-educated, and it is precisely this second, less typical, poetical characteristic that needs closer examination. According to our initial conclusions it is to a high degree connected to the always different reception contexts of a single poetical performance, which, in turn, relies on the personal ability of the poet to choose the best, contextually appropriate material.

Key words: Homer’s epics, Odyssey, origin of bardic poetry, divine inspiration, reception context.

The aim of this text is to propose some possible readings of a short passage from Homer’s *Odyssey* on the qualities, position and even the nature of the bard in the epic tradition. These observations are part of a broader project on the role of poetry in the Archaic age. As a starting remark it should be said that the passage in question is self-reflective in a double way, because: 1) all scenes of poetic performances could be regarded as self-reflective for “Homer” (and so contributing to the reconstruction of the original reception of the epics); and 2) here a Homeric character, a bard, reflects about his own position and his reflections could again be understood as hints about epic poetical values in general.

In Book 22 of the *Odyssey* we find the episode (22. 330–377) in which Odysseus, after taking revenge on the suitors, reprieves some of his slaves, among them the bard Phaemius. To this decision Phemius’ self-apology should have contributed as well. The key words of the bard read:

γουνούμαί σ', Ὀδυσσεῦ: σὺ δέ μ' αἶδεο καί μ' ἐλέησον:
αὐτῷ τοι μετόπισθ' ἄχος ἔσσεται, εἴ κεν ἀοιδὸν
πέφνης, ὅς τε θεοῖσι καὶ ἀνθρώποισιν ἀείδω.
αὐτοδίδακτος δ' εἰμί, θεὸς δέ μοι ἐν φρεσὶν οἶμας
παντοίας ἐνέφυσεν:
ἔοικα δέ τοι παραεΐδειν
ὥς τε θεῶ: τῷ με λιλαίεο δειροτομῆσαι.
καὶ κεν Τηλέμαχος τάδε γ' εἶποι, σὸς φίλος υἱός,
ὥς ἐγὼ οὐ τι ἐκὼν ἐς σὸν δόμον οὐδὲ χατίζων
πωλεύμην μνηστήρσιν ἀεισόμενος μετὰ δαΐτας,

ἀλλὰ πολὺ πλέονες καὶ κρείσσονες ἦγον ἀνάγκη (22. 344–53). [1]

The self-apology of Phemius contains two main arguments: as a bard, he is outstanding; as the court-bard from Ithaca he is not-guilty for the suitors' invasion, although he was forced (s. e.g. 22. 331, 353) to sing also for them.

As already noticed, central for our observations is the “definition” of the double origin of the bard's talent; however, it remains somehow isolated in the context of the episode. [2] Also Telemachus, who reacts to Phemius' prayer, does not comment on the poetical aspects but simply declares the bard not guilty (ἀναίτιος):

ἴσχεο μηδέ τι τοῦτον ἀναίτιον οὐταε χαλκῶ (22. 356). [3]

On the other hand, the defence for Phemius is for Telemachus self-defence as well, because occasionally he has also been part of these feasts. Here, in Book 22, he briefly declares Phemius not guilty, because the moment is more stressful. Guiltless is Phemius concerning his participation in the feasts of the suitors, but this has nothing in common with (or is at least not the same as) with the nature of the poetical inspiration. In the already mentioned episode from Book 1, however, there has been more time for “poetological” discussion, too, although the very origin of the poetical aptitude again is not the focus of the remarks of Telemachus against his mother who has just wept, moved by the topic of Phemius' song (the *nostos*-topic):

μητερ ἐμή, τί τ' ἄρα φθονέεις ἐρίηρον ἀοιδὸν
τέρπειν ὅππη οἱ νόος ὄρνυται; οὐ νύ τ' ἀοιδοὶ
αἴτιοι, ἀλλὰ ποθι Ζεὺς αἴτιος, ὅς τε δίδωσιν
ἀνδράσιν ἀλφηστῆσιν, ὅπως ἐθέλησιν, ἐκάστω.
τούτω δ' οὐ νέμεσις Δαναῶν κακὸν οἶτον ἀεΐδειν:
τὴν γὰρ ἀοιδὴν μᾶλλον ἐπικλείουσ' ἄνθρωποι,
ἢ τις ἀκούοντεςσι νεωτάτη ἀμφιπέληται (1. 346–352). [4]

The bard is not yet explicitly called “self-educated”, but he is again described as a relatively independent performer in another aspect: he himself reshapes the contents of the songs, so they sound always new, and he always proposes something innovative (νεωτάτη in 1. 352 has to be understood in that way). This innovation consists in reordering material chosen from the various subject matter already provided by the gods (cf. οἶμας παντοίας in 22. 348; and also the epithet πολύφημος ἀοιδός, “the minstrel of many songs”, in 22. 376, used by Odysseus after Phemius' plea). The bard decides what to choose according to the specifics of every context and every audience. And he is capable of making such choices himself not in spite of his godly inspired nature but rather because of it, and his inspiration does not lead to unconsciousness but the opposite – to more responsible [5] decisions. Exactly this capacity of the minstrel he should have developed, cultivated and taught himself alone, as he himself asserts in 22. 347 with αὐτοδίδακτος δ' εἰμί.

The observed episode from Book 22 has for Phemius (as well as for the herald Medon) a happy end, announced briefly by Odysseus – the king speaks to the herald and Phemius is simply mentioned:

θάρσει, ἐπεὶ δὴ σ' οὔτος ἐρύσσατο καὶ ἐσάωσεν,
ὄφρα γνῶς κατὰ θυμόν, ἀτὰρ εἵπησθα καὶ ἄλλω,

ὡς κακοεργίης εὐεργεσίη μέγ' ἀμείνων.
ἀλλ' ἔξελθόντες μεγάρων ἔζεσθε θύραζε
ἐκ φόνου εἰς ἀυλήν, σὺ τε καὶ πολύφημος ἀοιδός (22. 372–
6). [6]

Actually, these words of Odysseus are again connected with the problem of gaining experience and knowledge in the case of the singers (and other public speakers) – here, concretely, Odysseus, the mortal hero, will teach them to be grateful to him, and they will be grateful through the song; this would seem to be another form of self-education, since it derives from the personal experience of the bard and of the herald.

Who is Phemius? This question is also closely related to the problem of his education. At the beginning of the episode he is presented as Τερπιάδης ἀοιδός Φήμιος by the narrator (22. 330). Both his personal and his father's names are etymologically connected with poetical activity and mostly with its results: [7] Phemius is the one who sings much and so ensures his fame, and his father – the one giving pleasure (from τέρπω). [8] On that account, the fatherhood of a certain Terpias is sometimes used in support of the argument that Phemius could not be literally self-educated, because he should come from a bardic family. [9] The human educative perspective is preserved in other comments as well, although sometimes “self-educated” is understood precisely as the absence of additional and organized education in a form of school (and the presence only of personal efforts and implicit divine assistance). [10] Such remarks lead to the hypothetical typological difference between the two sources of poetical potential: the deities do not teach in the usual way, they simply suggest and inspire.

Some of the translations of the lines reaffirm such an interpretation, as the French one by Bérard: “Je n'ai pas eu de maître! en toutes poésies, c'est un dieu qui m'inspire!” (Bérard 1924, 143), as well as the newer German one by Ebener: “Niemand erteilte mir Unterricht; mancherlei Lieder zu singen, / hat mir die Gottheit vergönnt...” (Ebener 1971, 366). But such denial of having had any teachers, except divine ones, also does not conform fully with the context of the passage.

Thus we move to our main suggestion: the bard is self-educated mostly in the following aspect: he knows, and this is due to his personal experience (arising, of course, from divine inspiration), how to choose, in a flexible way, the most appropriate plots and songs for each performance from a rich inherited song-treasury (cf. Book 1 – Telemachus insists upon Phemius' right to choose the material for his singing). Besides, in Book 22 Phemius is described as deeply rethinking how to save his life: this should be the same mental peculiarity – self-taught and self-experienced to rethink the situation and to understand the context.

... δίχα δὲ φρεσὶ μερμήριζεν,
ἢ ἐκδὺς μέγαροιο Διὸς μεγάλου ποτὶ βωμὸν
ἐρκείου ἴζοιτο τετυγμένον, ἔνθ' ἄρα πολλὰ
Λαέρτης Ὀδυσσεύς τε βοῶν ἐπὶ μηρί' ἔκηαν,
ἢ γούνων λίσσοιτο προσαΐξας Ὀδυσῆα.
ᾧδε δέ οἱ φρονέοντι δοάσσατο κέρδιον εἶναι,

γούνων ἄψασθαι Λαερτιάδεω Ὀδυσῆος (22. 333–9). [11]

So Phemius has chosen – although the decision was not easy at all – to supplicate before the “human authority”, so to speak, and maybe also therefore he has included in his plea the “self-teaching” argument as well. On the other hand, however, Phemius should speak before Odysseus – the hero, who has never been taught by anyone – so the position of being “self-taught” is not so extraordinary for him and could not impress him to such a degree as to save the bard’s life only because of it (cf. Galiano 1992, 280).

Let us return to the text of the “self-teaching” argument. The scholiasts surprisingly (since *αὐτοδίδακτος* is a Homeric *hapax*) have not commented these verses. [12] Here should be added some notes on the Homeric concept of inspiration, which, *per se*, is actually more rationalistic than the later Greek idea. According to Plato, for example, inspiration is a kind of madness: inspired poets are in an ecstatic mood and cannot at the same time use the power of inspiration as well as knowledge and skills acquired from other “teachers” because inspiration is so influential that the poet, while inspired, is attracted as by a magnet and does not express his own thoughts through the verses. [13] In Homer the role of divine inspiration is respected, too, but also the individual capacities of bards are emphasized (and, although not explicitly discussed elsewhere, this is true not only of Phemius but of Demodocus and Odysseus, playing the role of a bard himself as well). A similar line of interpretation proposes Tigerstedt (1970) too – for according to him the singer is at no moment just a passive speaker of the inspiring deity, despite the different possible relations between the two of them. Thus Tigerstedt concludes that the passage in question from Book 22 is not contradictory, since in the Homeric tradition the two (types of) activities, divine and human, are complementary: „*Αὐτοδίδακτος* here means the same as *θεοδίδακτος*” (Tigerstedt 1970, 168).

In our view, however, the two qualities are complementary, though not synonymous. Furthermore, Phemius is in an extraordinary, extreme situation in Book 22, exposed to the danger of the death penalty, and this is why all possible features of his extraordinary talent should be enumerated. Such an accumulative understanding could be attested also on a lexical level through the particle *δέ* and its repetition, used here with copulative (and exactly enumerative), rather than adversative meaning: in the Homeric poetical concept both skills are necessary for the bard to be successful – glorious and glorifying at the same time – in performing.

On the other hand, Halliwell, for example, proposes a more radical and different interpretation, speaking of the later “clash between ‘technical’ and ‘intuitionist’ conceptions of poetic talent,” which is, according to him, “already implicit in Phemius’ self-image at Hom. *Od.* 22. 347–8” (Halliwell 2011, 111, n. 31). [14] In our view, however, Phemius needs and profits by the unity of the two conceptions, at least in the narrow context of this episode.

In our key passage from Book 22 there is no naming [15] of the gods responsible for poetical inspiration. The Muses are, however, often mentioned on behalf of Demodocus, the bard at the Phaeacian court. Thus, here should be discussed some lines from Book 8, because they involve the educative perspective and, on the other hand, speak generally of the bardic family as a whole. Firstly, quite important for our observations is the episode, where in a similar context is used a form of *διδάσκω*,

“teach” (from where the key notion “self-taught” derives). In his praise for Demodocus, Odysseus, despite his own weeping, caused twice [16] by the bard, acknowledges the respect which the bards deserve since they are taught by the Muses and are favoured by them:

πᾶσι γὰρ ἀνθρώποισιν ἐπιχθονίοισιν ἀοιδοὶ
τιμῆς ἔμμοροί εἰσι καὶ αἰδοῦς, οὐνεκ’ ἄρα σφέας
οἶμας μοῦσ’ ἐδίδαξε, φίλησε δὲ φύλον ἀοιδῶν (8. 479–81). [17]

This educative activity, realized by the Muses upon the poets, is more typical than the self-teaching of Phemius, and more general, because it is valid for all singers. So, Phemius, in his turn, is also a student of the Muses, but, besides, has personally taught himself too. In his commentary on 8, 479–81, Hainsworth accentuates upon the general divine character of bardic activity and the divine teachers needed for the singers, and notes that it bears always “something inexplicable, and therefore numinous” (Hainsworth 1988, 377). In our reading, let us reiterate, the personal element in Phemius teaching is not something different, but rather a part of this inexplicability.

Earlier in Book 8 the relations between the Muse and Demodocus concretely are presented as a (two-sided) gift:

κῆρυξ δ’ ἐγγύθεν ἦλθεν ἄγων ἐρίηρον ἀοιδόν [18],
τὸν πέρι μοῦσ’ ἐφίλησε, δίδου δ’ ἀγαθόν τε κακόν τε:
ὀφθαλμῶν μὲν ἄμερσε, δίδου δ’ ἠδειᾶν ἀοιδήν (8. 62–4). [19]

Demodocus is loved by the Muse and from her he has received both gifts: the negative one, being blinded, and the positive, the gift of pleasing song. In Demodocus’ case the inspiration again does not operate unaided. Phemius, apart from being inspired, is self-taught; Demodocus, in his turn, is poetically gifted but blind – a weakness which – this time not exactly as supplement, rather as compensation [20] – reinforces his talent too.

The presentation of Demodocus in Book 8 actually starts about 20 lines earlier with these (not unexpected) words of king Alcinous:

...καλέσασθε δὲ θεῖον ἀοιδόν
Δημόδοκον: τῷ γὰρ ῥα θεὸς πέρι δῶκεν ἀοιδήν
τέρπειν, ὄππῃ θυμὸς ἐποτρύνῃσιν ἀεΐδειν (8. 43–5). [21]

In this last of the passages discussed here we read again the typical formulae of the bardic nature and role: the bard enters in specific relations with the gods; they have gifted him with the role of bringing joy to mortals, and to this activity his personal feelings (and knowledge) contribute as well. But here again the explicit naming of a certain process of self-teaching (either terminated in the past, or life-long) is absent.

Thus the self-definition of Phemius as “self-taught” remains unique and – at least to a degree – striking, and since it lacks further explanation in the epic text, we will repeat again the probable connection between the personal lessons and the capacity of the singer to sing contextualized, and to remain, that way, an integral part, of the epic plot and its characters.

Notes

- [1] "By thy knees I beseech thee, Odysseus, and do thou respect me and have pity; on thine own self shall sorrow come hereafter, if thou slayest the minstrel, even me, who sings to gods and men. Self-taught am I, and the god has planted in my heart all manner of lays, and worthy am I to sing to thee as to a god; wherefore be not eager to cut my throat. Aye, and Telemachus too will bear witness to this, thy dear son, how that through no will or desire of mine I was wont to resort to thy house to sing to the wooers at their feasts, but they, being far more and stronger, led me hither perforce" (22. 344–53 – this and following translation from the *Odyssey* by Murray).
- [2] And, in our view, to a degree unnoticed by the scholars too, despite the position of Galiano who asserts: "The lines have attracted endless comment, particularly on the word *αὐτοδίδακτος* (Galiano 1992, 279). To the account of Galiano we should refer later on as well, because it bears a summarizing character. Here we do not, however, aim at exposing all possible interpretations, but rather at proposing an approach to a broader understanding of the meaning of oral poetry and its performance.
- [3] "Stay thy hand, and do not wound this guiltless man with the sword" (22. 356).
- [4] "My mother, why dost thou begrudge the good minstrel to give pleasure in whatever way his heart is moved? It is not minstrels that are to blame, but Zeus, I ween, is to blame, who gives to men that live by toil, to each one as he will. With this man no one can be wroth if he sings of the evil doom of the Danaans; for men praise that song the most which comes the newest to their ears" (1, 346–352).
- [5] Despite the possible pure emotional interpretation of *ὄππῃ οἱ νόος ὄρνυται* in 1. 347.
- [6] Be of good cheer, for he has delivered thee and saved thee, that thou mayest know in thy heart and tell also to another, how far better is the doing of good deeds than of evil. But go forth from the halls and sit down outside in the court away from the slaughter, thou and the minstrel of many songs (22. 372–6).
- [7] Cf. also the already discussed attribute *πολύφημος* for the *αἰδός* in 22. 376.
- [8] So also does Phemius himself (and every bard should) according to the words of Telemachus to Penelope, observed above (cf. 1. 346).
- [9] Cf. Galiano 1992, 280.
- [10] Cf. Ameis 1895, 114.
- [11] "...he was divided in mind whether he should slip out from the hall and sit down by the well-built altar of great Zeus, the God of the court, whereon Laertes and Odysseus had burned many things of oxen, or whether he should rush forward and clasp the knees of Odysseus in prayer. And as he pondered this seemed to him the better course, to clasp the knees of Odysseus, son of Laertes" (22. 333–9).
- [12] The only relevant comment is about the supporting deities: those are either the Muses, who sing, or, otherwise, Apollo, playing the flute (Dindorf 1962, ad locum).
- [13] Here we refer only to the mostly Homeric (concerning its contents) dialogue, Ion: cf. 534c: *οὐ γὰρ τέχνη ταῦτα λέγουσιν ἀλλὰ θεία δύναμις* / "For not by art do they utter these things, but by divine influence" (transl. Lamb); for the magneto-analogy cf. 535e–536a.
- [14] For a similar idea, see also Galiano 1992, 279–80, in whose words the passage from Book 22 is often put into the context of the "well-known debate between natural gifts and acquired skills, 'nature' and 'nurture'", but such a dichotomy, remarks Galiano, is not directly applicable to Phemius' case yet.
- [15] Although their names and functions are well-known and not surprising, cf. n. 12 above.
- [16] Once before and once after the episode in question: cf. 8.83–95; 8. 521–30.
- [17] "For among all men that are upon the earth minstrels win honor and reverence, for that the Muse has taught them the paths of song, and loves the tribe of minstrels" (8. 479–81).

- [18] A formulaic epithet again: also Phemius is called by Telemachus „ἐρίηρον ἀοιδόν“ (cf. 1. 346, discussed above).
- [19] “Then the herald drew near, leading the good minstrel, whom the Muse loved above all other men, and gave him both good and evil; of his sight she deprived him, but gave him the gift of sweet song” (8. 62–4).
- [20] Here the pair of particles μὲν... δ’... is used in the more usual adversative sense (cf. the remark it that direction (but proposing copulative reading for the twice used δέ) concerning 22. 347 above).
- [21] “... And summon hither the divine minstrel, Demodocus; for to him above all others has the god granted skill in song, to give delight in whatever way his spirit prompts him to sing” (8. 43–5).

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Wer lehrt die Sänger?

Beobachtungen zur *Odyssee*, 22, 347–8

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

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Schlüsselwörter: Homerische Dichtung, Odyssee, dichterische Schöpfung, göttliche Inspiration, Rezeption von Dichtung.

Der Aufsatz kommentiert einige Stellen aus Homers *Odyssee*, die seinerseits die Natur und die Rolle des Sängers diskutieren. Das Hauptinteresse ist Phemius gewidmet. Er wurde von Odysseus im 22. Gesang verschont, aufgrund seiner eigenen Apologie und Bitte. In 22, 347–8 behauptet Phemius, er sei auch durch sich selbst belehrt, nicht nur göttlich inspiriert. Genau diese ein wenig seltsame Belehrtheit durch sich selbst wird hier näher untersucht. Nach unseren Schlussfolgerungen ist sie meistens mit der Kontextbezogenheit der einzelnen

Ausführungen verbunden – diese Kontextbezogenheit ist den persönlichen Fähigkeiten des Sängers zu verdanken.