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Bards in the Odyssey

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Abstract

This work approaches the significance of oral tradition in Homer's *Odyssey*. Oral tradition– the transference of stories, history, and values through spoken word, song, and performance– was a prominent method of communication in preliterate societies. Bards, as respected artists of various mediums, were believed to channel divine inspiration from the Muses. In their cultural role they were elevated as conveyors of history, reinforcing their authority and legitimacy. Immediate diegetic mode is discussed in its utilization to create emotional engagement and immediacy. Exploring the descriptions of bards Phemius and Demodocus provides insight into the perception of the Muses, from a symbolic figure representing artistic mastery to literal divine inspiration.

Keywords

Bards, Odyssey, Muses, Oral tradition, Communication, Diegetic mode

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Introduction

Oral tradition is defined as, “the cultural knowledge, art, ideas, and practices transmitted verbally across generations” (Nugraha & Nugraha, 2025, p.1). This process has been used to pass stories down through these generations since before any written language was contrived and put into practice. Despite the implementation of written interchange and the continual evolution of dialects, the process of oral tradition or storytelling has persisted as a primary means of communication and entertainment. This could mean anything from song and dance, to poetry, to spoken word, leading to the emergence of bards, known as *rhapsodes*. The term *rahpsodes* derives from the coalescence of Greek words *ῥάπτειν*, meaning to stitch together, and *ᾠδός*, meaning a singer or performer. This directly translates to a ‘stitcher of songs’ (Ross, 2015, p.1). In an ancient Greece, bards often performed extensive sections of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* entirely from memory at festivals, banquets, and competitions. These performances required not only practice and skills but also divine inspiration. This raises the central question of this paper: how were bards viewed in a preliterate society, and what status did they hold within the narrative and cultural structure of *The Odyssey*?

Research Methodology

This literary research follows a close reading of texts, utilizing thorough text analysis as the primary method of study. The analysis draws mainly on *The Odyssey* and related Homeric texts, alongside scholarly sources that explore themes such as narration, oral tradition and the function of bards in preliterate societies.

The First Appearance of the Bard

Bards were regarded with authority and reverence in ancient Greek society. Scodel (1998) explains that “epic performers are informed by the Muse, and do not depend on ordinary sources...this divine source for bardic knowledge results in only one significant practical difference between bardic narratives and those of less authoritative characters: the bard’s freedom to report the doings of the gods” (p.172).

The first bard to appear in *The Odyssey* is Phemius, a renowned bard with a powerful voice, who performs for Penelope and her suitors. His song recounts “the Achaeans’ Journey Home from Troy/all the blows Athena doomed them to endure” (Homer, 1996, Book I, pp. 375-377). This scene not only begins to outline what it meant to be a bard, but it also introduces Penelope to the reader and provides background into her situation. The bard’s tale only refreshes her mind of the image of her missing husband. Penelope, distressed by the subject, asks him to stop. However, Telemachus interrupts: “Why deny/our devoted bard the chance to entertain us/any way the spirit stirs him on?/ Bards are not to blame,” (Homer, 1996, Book 1, pp. 397- 400). In this context, the bard is viewed as a type of messenger, who cannot control events, but instead conveys them through entertainment by song. Telemachus refers to him as “our devoted bard” which suggests feelings of admiration; not only is he defending his position and encouraging him to continue, but the use of “our” indicates intimacy, in the sense that this is not just some travelling bard they lack acquaintance with, but someone close enough to use the possessive form of the word. The part of Telemachus’s response: “...any way the spirit stirs him on...” demonstrates not only the belief these people had in the spirit, but in their openness and willingness to accept that the bard may have communication with this higher power, a type of relationship not fueled by evidence, but by faith.

The Second Appearance: Demodocus

The second bard in *the Odyssey* is Demodocus who appears in Book 8, where “the Muse inspired the bard/ to sing the famous deeds of fighting heroes/ the song whose fame had reached the skies those days/ The strife Between Odysseus and Achilles” (Homer, 1996, Book 8, pp. 86-89). Once again, the bard’s knowledge is attributed to divine inspiration. He does not sing from his own inspiration but that of the muse, derived from the nine goddesses who embodied the arts and sciences. His performance is so powerful that it brings Odysseus to tears, prompting Alcinous to believe that this character is much more complicated than a lost wanderer who somehow washed up on the beach. The bard continues to convey the events in Odysseus’s life, giving background and a more thorough understanding of his history.

Demodocus then begins his second song, “The Love of Ares and Aphrodite Crowned with Flowers/ how the two had first made love in Hephaestus’ mansion/ all in secret” (Homer, 1996, Book 8, pp. 302-304). He tells the tale of a secret love affair between Aphrodite, the archetypical unfaithful wife, and her lover, Ares. This tale contrasts with Odysseus’ situation, as he is trying to return home to his loyal wife, while she is avoiding unwanted suitors. The difference

between Aphrodite's betrayal and Penelope's faithfulness highlights Penelope's strength and honor. Due to Penelope's unwavering loyalty, Odysseus values and loves her even more.

Demodocus concludes his song with the tale of Hephaestus trapping the unfaithful pair in his bed Aphrodite and Ares. The gods and goddesses of Olympus shouted out, "Look how limping Hephaestus conquers War/ The quickest of all the gods who rule Olympus!/ The cripple wins by craft" (Homer, 1996, Book 8, 371-373). 'The cripple wins by craft' is a captivating phrase of foreshadowing; just as Hephaestus uses his intelligence and sheer wit to defy the odds against him, Odysseus also relies on strategy and wit to outsmart Penelope's suitors. Like Hephaestus, he defies all odds, not through strength, but through cleverness. The gods' story ends here, on a note of success for the protagonist, just as it does in *The Odyssey*.

The bard Demodocus then performs another song on Greeks and Trojans, highlighting themes of war, heroism, fame, glory, and masculine energy- recurring motifs throughout the epic. This eminence is likely resonated deeply with Homeric spectators, as depicted in Book 8:

"Stirred now by the Muse, the bard launched out
in a fine blaze of song, starting at just the point
where the main Achaean force, setting their camps afire,
had boarded the oarswept ships and sailed for home
but famed Odysseus' men already crouched in hiding-
In the heart of Troy's assembly-dark in that horse" (Homer, 1996, Book 8, pp. 559-564).

This passage marks the first time a bard in *The Odyssey* sings about Odysseus directly, acknowledging the significance of his own story. This is also the last time that the tale of the Trojan War is told by a bard in this work. Throughout *The Odyssey*, the line between historical facts and poetic fiction is often blurred. The bard's tales present Odysseus's adventures as entirely true, without signs of exaggeration or fabrication. For the audience, this is the primary source of information, forming their understanding of history. In accepting and sharing these accounts, the listeners become active participants in preserving and shaping collective memory.

Status of the Bard

The fact that much of *The Odyssey* has underlying themes so similar to the outside world is no coincidence; *The Odyssey* was based on real events, and uses names of real places and real people, which allows the audience to understand as well as to relate (Homer, 1996, Book I, pp. 17-18). However, this also makes it more difficult to distinguish the textual truth from historically accurate events. The bard's tale is so powerful it once again overwhelms Odysseus with emotion, resulting in Alcinous encouraging Odysseus to tell his story (Homer, 1996, Book 8, p. 886). Odysseus then shifts from character to narrator, assuming the role of bard to recount his experiences. Despite this role being a hard one to fill, Odysseus takes it on for many books to come. Indirectly, this heightens Odysseus's status, aligning him with those believed to be divinely inspired.

For the majority of *The Odyssey*, bards may only sway the narrative through spoken words or songs based on others, their actions and consequences alike. However, this pattern is disrupted when Phemius the bard speaks of himself, for himself. This drastic shift marks a transformation in the bard's role- from a passive interpreter of events to an active subject. This allows the plot to advance in a less constricted form as there is no outline he must follow for himself. Phemius' alteration of structure is stemmed from desperation for his defense, as he begs Odysseus for his salvation in Book 22:

"I hug your knees, Odysseus-mercy! spare my life!
What a grief it will be to you for all the years to come
if you kill the singer now, who sings for gods and men.
I taught myself the craft, but a god has planted
deep in my spirit all the paths of song-
songs I'm fit to sing for you as for a god" (Homer, 1996, Book 22, pp. 362-367).

Artistic Operation

This speech recapitulates the role of bards in the society of the ancient Greeks, reinforcing the recurring theme of divine inspiration. The influence of the muse or spirit has been referenced throughout this text, *The Odyssey* (Homer, 1996, Book 1, pp. 86-89, pp. 397- 400; Book 8, pp. 559-564), yet this moment offers the most direct and personal insight into the bard's artistic operation. This speech illustrates the correspondence between the bard's honed, skilled art and the influence of the divine, as it is delivered by a bard directly referring to himself rather than through another character. This merging of speaker and subject echoes Odysseus's earlier shift from protagonist to narrator, marking a transformation from character to storyteller. For Phemius, this self-referential act simply elucidates and accentuates his place within the realm of bardic lore. The examination of the craft through Phemius' speech does not solely prevail within the confines of the text; bardic tradition was practiced throughout time and space (Ross, 2015, p. 12). This self-explained practice not only defines art precisely within the text, but also allows for a certain degree of comprehension outside written work.

Immediate Diegetic Mode

Frequently, bards use the immediate diegetic mode, narrating in the historical present tense to create a sense of urgency and presence (de Jong, 2004, p.3). This technique minimizes the gap between speaker and audience, drawing listeners into the moment rather than placing them outside the narrative frame. By doing so, the bard is positioned within the story, as if he was there and lived to tell the tale, instead of an outsider looking in, breaking down events and relaying them to the people. This immersive effect is enhanced by the multi-sensory nature of bardic performance, which further engages the audience's senses and emotions (Gupta, 2021). A comparable use of immediate diegetic mode appears in Thucydides, who portrays himself as an eyewitness, deliberately propelling the narratee into the dramatized narrative.

Despite the apparent and consistent referencing to divine inspiration– particularly the muse, some scholars view bardic storytelling primarily as no more than “a popular art” (Scobie, 1979, p. 230). This shifts the focus away from spiritual influence and solely on the entertainment aspect of the performance. Others still give some credit to the Muse, not as the stem of creative flow, but merely as “the symbol of the bard's command of professional secrets” (Wheeler, 2002, p.33). Here, the muse is referred to more in terms of the prominence of association with the bard. This acts as more of a descriptor of self in relation to the divine. The description acknowledges the potential power of the muse, without indicating a direct correlation between bardic storytelling and the substantial influence of a higher power. Suggesting the muse is merely an image used in association with the bard, while not entirely discrediting the potential inspiration is quite a balance. This less emphatic representation rests neither in the category of denial nor complete acceptance but simply accepts the potential for the spirit stirred within.

Conclusion

Oral tradition and the performance of epic poetry opened up the possibility for the distribution and circulation of information at a time when there was no written language. The examples analyzed above reveal the respect, authority, and genuine interest in bards' abilities. The Muse is repeatedly invoked as the source of their inspiration, reinforcing the divine nature of their craft. In one of the clearest self-references, a bard states, “a god has planted deep in my spirit all the paths of song” leaving little ambiguity about the perceived origin of bardic skill (Homer, 1996, Book 22, pp. 365-367). Bards were highly influenced by the muse, which had a direct correlation with the position they held in society. They were viewed as individuals who held power, knowledge, and the capacity for greater understanding. Due to the authoritative status of the bard, he is treated more similarly to the higher power with which he can communicate than to the people he shares his visions and knowledge with. Through this association and assimilation, bards are thus revered and respected more than those of similar status.

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Biography

Anika Elema is a SCUBA diving instructor and technical diver, holding a Master's degree in Global Maritime Archaeology from the University of Malta. With a passion for underwater exploration, she has dedicated her time to the study and preservation of terrestrial and maritime archaeological sites. Her commitment to education and global outreach is further reflected in her attainment of a TESOL certificate. She is the published author of *Waves of the Mystique: Mermaids, Manifestation, and the Age of Exploration* and a supporting author in *Speaking the Past: Heritage, Discourse, and Publishing in the Digital Age*. Originally from both California and the Netherlands, Ms. Elema brings a unique, international perspective to her work. Her interests include working with adaptive divers through Diveheart, deep diving, sketching artifacts, and advancing public awareness of archaeological heritage.

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