

# Epic Traditions in the Contemporary World

*The Poetics of Community*

EDITED BY

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# Epic as Genre

*Gregory Nagy*

One of very few scholars who can speak authoritatively of both oral and written epic traditions, Gregory Nagy confronts the supposed divide between these traditions in this brief and suggestive exploration into the origins of the epic genre. In the spirit of his earlier work, such as *The Best of the Achaeans*, which demonstrated the impact of religious and political rituals on the Homeric poems, Nagy demonstrates that *epos* was even for the Greeks an elusive form whose generic expectations and demands changed considerably from archaic to classical Greece. In this rigorous philological reading of the term *epos* and its relationship to other terms such as *mythos*, Nagy cautions us to be sensitive to the varying cultural conditions that produce heroic poetry, arguing against a fixed definition of epic as such in order to encourage more flexible and inclusive models of genre.

In order to speak of epic as genre, we need a set of working definitions for three not two concepts: besides genre and epic, we need to define the concept of Homer as a prototypical exponent of epic as genre. This essay develops such a set, arguing that our received idea about epic results primarily from a narrow understanding of Homer as the author of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, to the exclusion of other ancient Greek traditions, such as the so-called Epic Cycle. As we will see, it is Aristotle's *Poetics* that ultimately made this idea prevail, just as it is Aristotle who has been most influential in shaping the concept of genre in general. In his essay "Epic and Novel," Mikhail Bakhtin goes so far as to say: "Aristotle's *Poetics*, although occasionally so deeply embedded as to be almost invisible, remains the stable foundation for the theory of genres."<sup>1</sup>

A problem more fundamental than the definitions of genre and epic is the definition of poetry itself in social contexts where the technology of writing is involved in neither the *composition* nor the *performance* of any given poem or song. My invocation of the two factors of composition and performance implies a derivation of ancient Greek poetry from oral poetry, as defined through the comparative fieldwork criteria developed by Milman Parry and Albert Lord.<sup>2</sup> From Lord's empirical study of living oral traditions, especially those of South Slavic heroic song, it becomes clear that composition and performance are aspects of the same process in oral poetry. In order to achieve a more accurate taxonomy of the earliest phases of the Greek song-making

tradition culminating in "Homer" and, ultimately, in our received notions of epic as genre, the two factors of composition and performance must be kept in mind. Only then may we arrive at a basis for considering the utility of a concept such as genre—and of a related concept, occasion.

In addressing these two factors of composition and performance, I propose to bring into play a crucial work that has taken them both into account, Richard P. Martin's *The Language of Heroes* (1989). Martin has pioneered an explicit connection between Lord's empirical observations about performance in living oral traditions and J. L. Austin's theories about the performative uses of language, as articulated in his book *How to Do Things with Words* (1962).

As Martin demonstrates, Austin's formulation of the performative, where you *do* something when you *say* something, meshes with Lord's formulation of performance as the key to bringing the words of a song to life. To use Austin's wording, song is a speech act, as Martin shows in detail with reference to Homeric poetry. Ironically, Austin himself resisted the idea that poetry could count as a speech act, and we can see clearly the reason for his reluctance: for Austin, poetry is a matter of writing, not speaking. For Austin, the dimension of oral tradition is utterly removed from his own conceptualization of poetry.

Martin's book demonstrates not only the self-definition of Homeric song as a speech act. It shows also that this medium is capable of demonstrating the function of song as "quoted" within its overall frame of song. That is to say, Homeric song dramatizes, as it were, the performative aspects of songs that it quotes. Ironically, the performative aspects of Homeric song itself are shaded over while the performative aspects of the songs *contained* by it are highlighted, including pronouncements of praise or blame, laments, proverbs, and so on. To put it another way, Homeric song specifies the occasion of songs that it represents, or even presents, while it leaves vague any potential occasion for its own performance.

I have used the word *occasion* here in referring to the contexts of speech acts "quoted" by Homeric song. In fact, I am ready to define occasion as the context of a speech act.<sup>3</sup> Further, I define genre as a set of rules that produce a speech act. In offering this definition of genre, I follow Tzvetan Todorov in chapter 2 of his *Genres du discours*; for him, genres are "principles of dynamic production" of discourse in society.<sup>4</sup>

Here I propose to build on this most useful formulation in three ways.

First, I hope to tighten up the notion of speech act, correlating it with the specific interweavings of myth and ritual in traditional societies and dissociating it from purely philosophical considerations that center on individual judgments concerning when a speech act is a speech act. For purposes of this presentation, a speech act is a speech act *only when it fits the criteria of*

*the community in which it is being used.* To determine the validity or invalidity of a speech act is to observe its dynamics within the community in question.

Second, I would observe that the genre, the set of rules that generate a given speech act, can equate itself with the occasion, the context of this speech act. To this extent, the occasion *is* the genre.<sup>5</sup> For example, a song of lament can equate itself with the process of grieving for the dead. A case in point is the Homeric use of the words *akhos* and *penthos*, both meaning "grief," as programmatic indicators of ritual songs of lament.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, I would note that if the occasion is destabilized or even lost, the genre can compensate for it, even recreate it.<sup>7</sup>

In view of these criteria for defining the concept of genre, are we ready to say that epic is a genre? Or that Homeric song is epic? I would suggest that the answer is "Not yet." Granted, we may say that Homeric song dramatizes genres such as pronouncements of praise or blame, laments, proverbs, and so on, but we can recognize those genres *only because their performative aspect is represented by Homeric song.* By contrast, Homeric song does not directly refer to its own current performative aspect, and so we cannot easily recognize it as a genre in and of itself. Further, we are as yet far from being able to identify Homeric song as epic.

For Albert Lord, in fact, the term "epic" is far too vague to be useful in his description of Homeric song-making—or of its counterparts in the South Slavic traditions:

The word "epic," itself, indeed, has come in time to have many meanings. Epic sometimes is taken to mean simply a long poem in "high style." Yet a very great number of the poems which interest us in this book are comparatively short; length, in fact, is not a criterion of epic poetry. Other definitions of epic equate it with heroic poetry. Indeed the term "heroic poetry" is sometimes used (by Sir Cecil M. Bowra, for example) *to avoid the very ambiguity in the word "epic" which troubles us.* Yet purists might very well point out that many of the songs which we include in oral narrative poetry are romantic or historical and not heroic, no matter what definition of the hero one may choose. In oral narrative poetry, as a matter of fact, I wish to include all story poetry, the romantic or historical as well as the heroic; otherwise I would have to exclude a considerable body of medieval metrical narrative.<sup>8</sup>

Despite the imprecision of the term "epic," we may still say with confidence that there are many oral traditions strikingly comparable to what we find in the "epic" of Homer. There has been a wealth of comparative evidence about oral "epics" collected over recent years in Eastern Europe,<sup>9</sup> central Asia,<sup>10</sup> the Indian subcontinent,<sup>11</sup> Africa,<sup>12</sup> and so on.<sup>13</sup> In this context, I cannot stress enough the abiding importance of the comparative evidence provided by the South Slavic tradition of "epic": although it is different in many ways

from what we see in the Homeric poems, this tradition, as Martin argues, "still has a claim to being one of the best comparanda."<sup>14</sup>

But the point is, what leads us to persist in referring to the South Slavic tradition as "epic" is the influence of received notions about Homeric poetry. My further point is that the classical Greek idea of epic, as presupposed by these received notions, needs to be situated in its own historical context. Once we see it in that light, this idea of epic may continue to serve as a useful point of comparison, but it cannot any longer be imposed as some kind of universal standard.

Applying comparatively the classical Greek idea of epic, one Africanist has developed a working definition, based on his experience with living oral traditions of Africa and elsewhere:

An oral epic is fundamentally a tale about the fantastic deeds of a man or men endowed with something more than human might and operating in something larger than the normal human context and it is of significance in portraying some stage of the cultural or political development of a people. It is usually narrated or performed to the background of music by an unlettered singer *working alone or with some assistance from a group of accompanists.*<sup>15</sup>

Although there is no need to impose classicist models like the classical concept of epic on indigenous African oral poetic forms,<sup>16</sup> and although Lord himself, as we have seen, has explored the inherent difficulties of defining epic in terms of living oral traditions,<sup>17</sup> the fact remains that there are striking empirically observable analogies in a wide range of African oral poetic forms to what any classicist would indeed classify as epic.<sup>18</sup> As one Africanist puts it, "The burden of explanation therefore rests with those scholars who, for reasons best known to themselves, bandy about phrases like 'epic poetry in the normal sense of the word' and contend that on the whole the heroic narrative traditions in Africa yield little more than 'certain *elements* of epic.'<sup>19</sup>

What is needed, then, is an understanding of epic that accommodates comparative perspectives:

What is epic according to one definition may be excluded according to another. And, most important, a general definition of a genre will often violate the internal definition of genres inside a given society. Ideally, if oral epic were to be directly comparable from one society to another, it would not be enough that the epic genres themselves were similar; their place in the general spectr[um] of literary forms of the society in question ought to be similar too.<sup>20</sup>

Further, it is not enough to say that "epic" may or may not exist as a genre in the oral traditions of a given society. For epic to be a "genre," it has to have a functional relationship of interdependence or complementarity with another "genre" or other "genres." The principle of complementarity is key to Laura Slatkin's formulation of genre in oral traditions:

Genres can be viewed, like other cultural institutions, as existing in a *relationship of interdependence*, in which they have complementary functions in conveying different aspects of a coherent ideology or system of beliefs about the world. The crucial point about these distinctions or differentiations is their *complementarity*: they exist within, and serve to complete, a conception about the way the world is ordered.<sup>21</sup>

Thus genre is not an absolute.<sup>22</sup> We may apply the classical Greek model of epic for comparative purposes only after we succeed in defining epic as a genre in relation to other genres within the historical context of classical and pre-classical Greece.<sup>23</sup>

The earliest available evidence is the usage that we find in Homeric song, where the word *epos* is regularly used as a complement to *muthos*: as Martin has argued, *muthos* is a marked way to designate speech, whereas *epos* is the unmarked way—at least with reference to an opposition with *muthos*.<sup>24</sup> Martin defines the terms "marked" and "unmarked" as follows: "The 'marked' member of a pair carries greater semantic weight, but can be used across a narrower range of situations, whereas the unmarked member—the more colorless member of the opposition—can be used to denote a broader range, *even that range covered by the marked member*: it is the more general term."<sup>25</sup> The Homeric sense of *muthos*, in Martin's working definition, is "a speech-act indicating authority, performed at length, *usually in public*, with a focus on full attention to every detail."<sup>26</sup> This is the word used by Homeric song in referring to genres that are dramatized *within* Homeric song, such as pronouncements of praise or blame, laments, proverbs, and so on.<sup>27</sup> To this extent, *muthos* is not just any speech act reported by song: it is also the speech act that is the song itself, the "epic" of Homer.<sup>28</sup> The Homeric counterpart *epos*, on the other hand, is "an utterance, ideally short, accompanying a physical act, and focusing on message, as perceived by the addressee, rather than on performance as enacted by the speaker."<sup>29</sup>

As the unmarked member of the opposition, *epos* or its plural *epea* can occur even in contexts where *muthos* would be appropriate.<sup>30</sup> On the other hand, "one can never simply substitute the semantically restricted term *muthos*—meaning authoritative speech-act, or 'performance'—for the ordinary term *epos*."<sup>31</sup>

Whereas *epos* can be found in place of *muthos* in Homeric diction, the reverse does not happen: "In Homer, a speech explicitly said to be an *epos*, and not also represented as *epea* (the plural), is never called a *muthos*." Further, "*epea* can co-occur to refer to a *muthos*, but *muthoi* in the plural is never correlated with the singular form *epos*, to describe a speech."<sup>32</sup>

Even if *epos* designates "ordinary" speech when early Greek epic refers to speech, we must keep in mind that the unmarked category of "ordinary" speech is a "default" category: "'Ordinary' is a variable concept, depending on whatever is being perceived as 'special' in a given comparison or set of

comparisons.<sup>33</sup> Further, "the perception of plain or everyday speech is a variable abstraction that depends on the concrete realization of whatever special speech . . . is set apart for a special context."<sup>34</sup> In the case at hand, if it were not for the opposition to unmarked *epos* by way of marked *muthos*, the word *epos* need not designate speech that is "ideally short," nor need it be perceived as merely "focusing on message."<sup>35</sup> Even an adjective added to the plural of unmarked *epos* can achieve a marked opposite of *epos* in Homeric diction: as Martin shows, *epea pteroenta*, "winged words" is a functional synonym of *muthos* in denoting certain kinds of marked speech.<sup>36</sup> If *muthos* can designate song as performed, then so too can *epos*, provided that *muthos* is not contrasted with it.

We may see in the Homeric term, *epea pteroenta*, "winged words," a poetic expression that recognizes the semantic potential of the word *epos* to designate, in its own right, song as *performed*. This potential gets activated as soon as *epos* gets detached from its complementarity with *muthos*. Such a detachment, I suggest, is made historically permanent by the eventual semantic destabilization of the word *muthos*. In post-Homeric contexts, as I have argued elsewhere, the words *alēthēs*, "true," and *alētheia*, "truth," evolve in explicit opposition to the word *muthos* in contexts where true speech is being contrasted with other forms of speech that are discredited, that cannot be trusted (e.g., Pindar *Olympian* 1.29–30).<sup>37</sup> As the word *alēthēs*, "true," or *alētheia*, "truth," becomes marked in opposition to *muthos*, which in turn becomes unmarked in the context of such opposition, the meaning of *muthos* becomes marginalized to mean something like "myth" in the popular sense of the word as it is used today in referring to the opposite of truth.<sup>38</sup>

The marginalization of *muthos*, resulting from its relatively later opposition to *alēthēs*, "true," or *alētheia*, "truth," may be pertinent to the earlier opposition of marked *muthos* and unmarked *epos*.<sup>39</sup> We may allow for the possibility that the unmarked member of this earlier opposition had once been the marked member in still earlier sets of opposition.<sup>40</sup> The semantic markedness of *epos* reemerges in post-Homeric contexts: as Martin points out, this word begins to appear in the specialized sense of "poetic utterance" and even "dactylic hexameter verse."<sup>41</sup> In other words, the semantic specialization of *epos* in post-Homeric contexts suggests that it had once been a marked word in opposition to some other unmarked word for "speech," and that "it had served as an unmarked word in Homeric diction only within the framework of an opposition with *muthos*."<sup>42</sup> In our own contemporary usage of the English words *epic* and *myth*, we see indirect reflexes of the later semantic specialization of *epos*, and of the later semantic specialization of *muthos*. As parallels to English *epic* and *myth*, we may look back and compare Aristotle's use of *epē* (the Attic form of *epea*) in the sense of epic and of *muthos* in the sense of myth as "plot."<sup>43</sup>

Mention of Aristotle brings us full-circle, finally, to his own concept of

"epic," which he regularly designates as *epē*. Near the beginning of the *Poetics* (1447a14–15), he says: "The making of *epē* [*epopoia*] and the making [*poiēsis*] of tragedy, also comedy, and the making [*poiētikē*] of dithyrambs, and the [making] of reed songs and lyre songs—all these are in point of fact forms of *mimēsis*, by and large" *ἐποποιία δὲ καὶ ἡ τῆς τραγωδίας ποιήσις, ἔτι δὲ κωμωδία, καὶ ἡ διθυραμβοποιητικὴ, καὶ τῆς αὐλητικῆς καὶ κιθαριστικῆς πᾶσαι τυγχάνουσιν οὐσα μίμησις τὸ σύνολον*. For Aristotle, as we can see from the underlined portions of the passage, there exists a basic complementarity between epic and tragedy, as also between tragedy and comedy. If we follow Slatkin's formulation of genre in oral traditions, it is the principle of complementarity here that defines epic as genre, in opposition to the genre of tragedy. Analogously, it is the principle of complementarity that defines tragedy as genre, in opposition to the genre of comedy, and so on.

In the historical context of classical Athenian traditions, it seems preferable to specify that these genres are a matter of *performance* traditions, not so much oral traditions in a looser sense of the term "oral." In Athens, during a period starting roughly from the middle of the sixth century and running through the fourth, tragedy and comedy can be viewed as two complementary genres evolving side by side and becoming mutually assimilated as *performance media* within the framework of a major Athenian state festival, the City Dionysia. In the same historical context, we can see taking shape an analogous complementarity between tragedy and epic, evolving side by side and becoming mutually assimilated as performance media within the two complementary frameworks of the City Dionysia and the Panathenaia respectively, subsumed under the larger framework of the overall cycle of Athenian state festivals.<sup>44</sup>

Applying Aristotle's point of view, we may justifiably describe the Homeric *Iliad* and *Odyssey* as the genre of epic—but only in the historical context of Athens during the period just noted, starting roughly from the middle of the sixth century and running through the fourth. In a separate work, I have argued extensively that this particular phase in the evolution of Homeric song making represents but one of at least five distinct periods, "Five Ages of Homer."<sup>45</sup> During this particular phase, the equivalent of "period 3" within an evolutionary scheme of five periods, the very idea of "Homer" as author became restricted to the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, to the exclusion of a vast reservoir of additional or alternative material known as the Epic Cycle.<sup>46</sup> For Aristotle, the "authors" of the Epic Cycle are clearly distinct from the Homer of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* (*Poetics* 1459b1–7). As we read the words of the fourth-century Athenian statesman Lycurgus (*Against Leocrates* 102) declaring that only the *epē*—which we may now confidently translate "epic"—of Homer could be performed at the Feast of the Panathenaia in Athens, we can be sure of what he means: for Lycurgus, only the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* can be considered true epic.<sup>47</sup>

In sum, we may expect the criteria for determining the status of epic as genre to vary from culture to culture, even from period to period within a culture. When Bakhtin speaks of "epic" in his essay "Epic and Novel," he obviously has in mind the taxonomy of Aristotle. And yet, as valid as Aristotle's criteria may be from a classical and postclassical Greek point of view, they cannot be universalized or absolutized.

Even in the ancient Greek epics that we have, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, we may detect patterns of complementarity that point to the need for genre distinctions that require subdivisions of Aristotle's notion of "epic." I would go so far as to say that Bakhtin's hermeneutic model of "epic," if we follow through on his criteria for distinguishing it from "novel," fit the *Iliad* only, to the exclusion of the *Odyssey*, which actually seems more appropriate to Bakhtin's hermeneutic model of "novel," not "epic."

If we take a broader view of ancient Greek civilization, there are still further possible criteria to consider. For example, in light of typological evidence for oral "epics" transmitted by women in various cultures,<sup>48</sup> we may see in song 44 of Sappho, "The Wedding of Hektor and Andromache," the traces of earlier Greek "epic" traditions that could cross back and forth between female and male performative conventions.<sup>49</sup>

In this connection, I invoke a distinction made by Joyce Flueckiger and Laurie Sears in their general formulation of epic: "Epic narratives exist both as oral and as performance traditions."<sup>50</sup> In terms of these shorthand designations "oral traditions" and "performance traditions," we may in effect distinguish between "a general knowledge of the 'whole story' (as summary) that many in the folklore community would be able to relate and the epic as it is performed in a marked, *artistic* enactment of that oral tradition."<sup>51</sup> That is to say, there is a gap between the notional totality of epic as oral tradition and the practical limitations of epic in actual performance:

Thus, although scholars have spent considerable energy recording epic stories "from beginning to end," counting the number of hours and pages required to do so, this is not how the epic is received by indigenous audiences. Further, certain episodes of the epic are performed more frequently than others; and there may be episodes that exist only in the oral tradition and not in performance at all.<sup>52</sup>

This insight may prove to be a key to understanding the inclusiveness of "epic" as a form, or even as a genre: if indeed epic can be realized informally as well as formally, it becomes the ideal multiform, accommodating a variety of forms. I draw attention to the inclusiveness, the notional wholeness, of Homeric poetry. Here is a genre that becomes a container, as it were, of a vast variety of other genres, realized in varying forms of performance and in varying degrees of formality in performance. Here is a repertoire shared

by men and women, replete with stories suitable for a broad spectrum of different performances, ranging from the songs of Sappho to the declamations of rhapsodes who claim, at the very start of their performances, to be Homer himself.<sup>53</sup> Here, finally, is a medium of discourse that sees itself as all-embracing of the society identified by it and identifying with it.

## NOTES

1. Bakhtin 1981, 8.
2. See Parry 1971; Lord 1960, 1991, 1995.
3. Cf. Nagy 1990, 31.
4. Todorov 1990, 20.
5. See Nagy 1990, 362; Flueckiger 1996, 21.
6. Cf. Nagy 1979, 79-93.
7. See Nagy 1990, 9 and 362 n. 127.
8. Lord 1960, 6 (my emphasis).
9. Lord 1991.
10. Reichl 1992.
11. Blackburn et al. 1989.
12. Okpewho 1979.
13. See in general the valuable bibliography of Foley 1985.
14. Martin 1989, 150.
15. Okpewho 1979, 34 (my emphasis).
16. See Edwards and Sienkewicz 1990, 187-189, esp. p. 188: "The epic is considered so important and such a quintessential art form that, if epic performances did not evolve in a particular society, that society was considered to be somehow deficient."
17. Lord 1960, 6.
18. See Okpewho's summary (1979, 240-243).
19. Okpewho 1979, 241, with reference to Finnegan 1970, 109-110. In fairness to Finnegan, I should note that I consider her book, *Oral Literature in Africa* (1970), a veritable treasure-house of comparative evidence. Okpewho (p. 242) praises Finnegan's book for its reliance on "the relevance of African oral literature for comparative literature in the wide sense" (Finnegan, p. 518).
20. Jensen 1980, 18.
21. Slatkin 1987, 260 (my emphasis); cf. Smith 1974 and Ben-Amos 1976.
22. Absolutist notions of genre can be traced back to Plato: *eidos*, a word used by Plato in the sense of "genre" (Nagy 1990, 87, 109), is also used in the sense of "form" in his Theory of Forms.
23. Cf. Flueckiger 1996, 132.
24. Martin 1989, 10-26.
25. *Ibid.*, 29 (my emphasis).
26. Martin 1989, 12 (my emphasis).
27. *Ibid.*, 12-42.



28. Cf. Nagy 1996a, 132-133.  
 29. Martin 1989, 12.  
 30. Ibid., 26-30.  
 31. Ibid., 30.  
 32. Ibid., 30.  
 33. Nagy 1996a, 121.  
 34. Nagy 1990, 30.  
 35. Nagy 1996a, 121.  
 36. Martin 1989, 30-37.  
 37. Nagy 1996a, 122.  
 38. Ibid., 122-128.  
 39. Ibid., 127.  
 40. Cf. Nagy 1990, 68 n. 84.  
 41. Martin 1989, 13. For further details and bibliography, see Nagy 1996a, 128, esp. n. 68.  
 42. Nagy 1996a, 128.  
 43. Ibid., 128.  
 44. Nagy 1990, 388, 390-391; 1996b, 81-82.  
 45. Nagy 1996b, 110.  
 46. Nagy 1996a, 37-38.  
 47. Nagy 1996b, 71.  
 48. Flueckiger 1989, 40; see also Flueckiger 1996, 131-155, esp. p. 146.  
 49. Nagy 1996a, 56-57.  
 50. Flueckiger 1996, 133, summarizing Flueckiger and Sears 1991, 6.  
 51. Flueckiger 1996, 133, with reference to Bauman 1977, 3.  
 52. Flueckiger 1996, 133-134). For more on the notion of "episodes," see also Nagy 1996a, 77-82.  
 53. See Nagy 1997.

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## Performing Interpretation

### *Early Allegorical Exegesis of Homer*

Andrew Ford

Ethnographic accounts of living epic traditions show that "context" is a very complex thing that can extend to providing a social frame for the reception and evaluation of poetry as well for its performance. Andrew Ford's essay explores how far we may discern such traditions of performing epic interpretation behind the texts of Homer. Ford's focus is epic's very ancient connection with allegory, and he shows that even such an apparently textual affair as allegoresis can be fully understood only in the light of social and political contexts of interpretation. Ford turns to pre-Socratic evidence to argue that allegoresis becomes a part of the Homerist's arsenal a full century before the early sophists and two centuries before Aristotle's *Poetics*. Especially in the context of the archaic Greek city, the use of allegorical commentary allowed performers to constitute a select, elite audience, giving those with pretension to cultural leadership in the city a claim to authority based on having access to an exclusive meaning intended for an exclusive audience.

The study of living epic traditions valuably reminds readers of Homer that an oral poem is never presented to an audience "in itself" but always in the context of performative conventions, which can powerfully determine its significance.<sup>1</sup> Because the Homeric poems have for so long exerted their influence on Western criticism and poetry in the form of canonized texts—scrupulously reconstructed in Hellenistic academies and minutely examined in Greek and Roman classrooms—it may be difficult fully to appreciate that in their case, too, performative context was not something "extra" added to the "pure" text but was inextricable from epic as a social and cultural object. Among the ways in which context may shape a poem on a given occasion is by providing a structured forum for the evaluation and interpretation of epic as well for its performance. Some measure of what a text of Homer cannot give to modern readers is suggested by Dwight Reynolds's recent ethnographic account of Arabic epic poets in the Nile Delta:

In al-Bakātūsh one attends a performance of epic first of all to participate in and share a social experience and only secondarily to attend to the "text." In essence, the social action within the event is, in this indigenous "reading," the *text*. . . . The sarha [epic performance] is a stage for social interaction; though