

## §1. Demodocus

Such was the story he sang, this singer renown'd . . .

– *Odyssey* 8:367

In this chapter and the next two, we attempt to establish the existence of three different performance modules, of different length and social context.

Our earliest information is in the *Odyssey*. Odysseus is twice praised for the bardic convincement with which he tells his own story; he himself weeps on hearing a singer tell the tale of the Trojan Horse, one of his own exploits.

Two singers figure in the *Odyssey*: Phemios (at Ithaka) and Demodocus (at Phaiakia). Both are palace situations. The singers need not be on staff at the palace; they or their real-life counterparts are more likely to be local reciters, self-supporting, but available to the palace for special occasions.

We begin where Phemios has been reciting, for the feasting suitors, a tale of the return of a hero of Troy. Penelope, listening from above, is distressed, and in 1:336-340 begs him to sing something else:

Suddenly bursting in tears, to the godlike bard she addressed her:  
 “Phemios, many another enrapturing story thou knowest,  
 deeds of immortals and men – themes often by singers recounted.  
 Such be thy song as thou sits’st with the guests; let them listen in silence,  
 quaffing their wine. But desist, I beseech, from the strain thou art singing.”

In other words, *he has a repertoire*, and should sing something else from it.

This is further expanded by what Telemachus says in reply (1:346-349):

Wherefore, mother, prevent that the sweet-voiced singer delight us  
 e’en as his spirit is moved? It is never the singer, believe me,  
 bringeth us bale; it is Zeus that is guilty therefor; he allotteth  
 every mortal that liveth on bread what fortune he willeth.

And Telemachus goes on (1:350-352), most revealingly for our purposes:

Nor do I blame that he singeth the pitiful fates of the Argives,  
 seeing that ever by mortals the more extolled is a singer  
 singing the song that the newest resounds in the ears of the people.

Here is the point. Not only does Phemios have his songs, from which he may choose, but some of them are newer than others, and these the audience will be especially eager to hear – and may well show him the greater appreciation. His is an active repertoire, to which new turns are constantly being added. The hard homecomings of the Greek heroes are *news*; songs about them are all the rage. And the singer who can cash in first on that fad will be the better for it.

There is a hint here of contests between singers, which we know did exist; the Panionia at Mycale in Ionia is one. But how early these began is uncertain. The best guess may be that they are later than the core *Menis* (perhaps c0750), but early enough to have been known to the poet of the *Odyssey*.

Notice that the new things are not just novelties; they are stories that people *already know about*, and want to listen to. In this case, stories about persons of recent renown. And that the “people” here are people at large; the demos.

Later in *Odyssey* 8, we are in Phaiakia. A banquet is in progress. Odysseus, his identity unknown, attends. The singer Demodocus is summoned. He sings. Is his song doleful? No, it is notably lighthearted. Here it is (8:266-366):

Then, to his harp uplifting his beautiful voice, did the singer  
sing of the passion of Ares for fair-crowned Queen Aphrodite,  
how they as lovers at first held tryst at the house of Hephaistos,  
secretly meeting, and how by his gifts he prevailed, and dishonor  
brought on the bed of her lord; but as messenger hastened to tell him –  
Eëlios, who had noted them meeting in tender embracement.  
Then did Hephaistos, as soon as the grievous tidings had reached him,  
go to his forge, devising revenge in the depths of his bosom.  
Here on the smithy he set the enormous anvil, and forged him  
fetters not to be broken or loosed, to entrap and to hold them.  
Now when at last he had fashioned the toils, in his anger at Ares,  
into the chamber he entered, wherein, as of old, was his bedstead.  
Here to the posts of the bed, all round it, he fastened the netting;  
much of it also he fastened above it, attached to a rafter,  
fine as the web of a spider, that none could ever perceive it,  
e’ven of the blessed immortals, so cunningly fine was it fashioned.  
So, when at last he had fastened the toils all over the bedstead,  
then he proceeded to go to the well-built city of Lemnos,  
land that was dear to his heart, far dearer than every other.

Surprise! Just when the story is getting good, and we are all set to hear what comes next – wow, an embarrassing encounter! – Hephaistos simply goes off.

All have forgotten their food and their drink, to hear what comes next.

Neither was blind, as a watcher, the god, gold-glistening Ares.  
Seeing Hephaistos, the worker renowned, set forth on a journey,  
speedily unto the house of the far-famed god he betook him,  
filled with the longing of love for the fair-crowned queen Cytherea,  
newly arrived from the home of her father, the mighty Cronion.  
Resting she quietly sat; he, entering into the mansion,  
tenderly clung to her hand; then he opened his lips and addressed her:  
“Come, let us go, my beloved, and lie on the bed and enjoy us!  
Nowhere nigh is Hephaistos, but started already for Lemnos,  
close to the Sintiian folk, that people of barbarous language.”  
Thus did he speak, and a thing right pleasant it seemed to the goddess.  
So they ascended the bed and reclined them to sleep; but the netting,  
cunningly wrought by the crafty Hephaistos, descended upon them:  
suddenly gone was the power of lifting a limb, or of moving.  
Then at the last they perceived it, when all was too late to escape it;  
Ay, and already at hand was the famed deft-handed Hephaistos.  
He’d returned on his way, before he had reached the land of Lemnos.  
Eëlios on the watch had remained, and had brought him the tidings.

The husband is returning! The crisis impends! The illicit lovers are in for it.

And the singer, having everyone's attention, continues his tale:

Homeward straight he returned, with a heart sore troubled within him;  
 up to the portal he strode, and he stood. Fierce anger possessed him;  
 then, with a terrible cry to the gods of Olympus, he shouted:  
 "Father Zeus, and ye other immortals, eternally blessed,  
 come and behold! 'Tis a matter to laugh at, but not to be suffer'd.  
 Lo now, me that is lame, this daughter of Zeus, Aphrodite,  
 Ever dishonors, and loveth instead man-murdering Ares,  
 since he is fair to the sight and in limb he is straight; but a body  
 weakly was mine from my birth. Nor verily blame I another,  
 Only my parents; I would they had never begotten and borne me!  
 Come! ye shall see these twain now, lying in loving embracement,  
 here on my bed they are mounted – behold! At the sight I am maddened!  
 Scarce for a moment more, do I think, are they longing to lie here,  
 Even though hotly in love, nor quickly again will be longing  
 thus to be bedded together. But here they are, trapped and imprisoned  
 till that her father repay, to the last one, every bride-gift,  
 all that I left in his hands as the price of the impudent baggage –  
 Ay, for his daughter is fair, but she knows not to bridle her passions."  
 Thus did he speak, and the gods to his brass-floor'd mansion collected.  
 Hither Poseidon, girdler of Earth, did hasten; and Hermes,  
 bringer of fortune; and hither the prince, far-working Apollo,  
 while that behind, with a womanly shame, stay'd every goddess.  
 Soon at the porch were standing the deities, bringers of blessings.  
 Then an unquenchable laughter arose 'mid the blessed immortals  
 as they beheld the device that was wrought by the cunning Hephaistos,  
 Looking whereon, thus whispered the one, to the other beside him,  
 "Ill deed prospereth never; the slow oft catcheth the nimble,  
 even as now by the tardy Hephaistos o'ertaken is Ares –  
 Ares, the swiftest of all of the gods that inhabit Olympus,  
 caught in the toils of the Limper; and compensation he oweth."

The poet does not focus on the love act – that would be indecorous – but on the ridicule of the gods. He has now used up 67 lines, or going on 7 minutes. Will he now come to an end? Yes, he will. But first, he works it for laughs:

Thus conversing together they whispered, the one to the other.  
 Then spake lordly Apollo, the son of Cronion, to Hermes,  
 "Zeus-born Hermes, the herald of heaven and bringer of blessings,  
 say now, feelst thou a longing in such strong fetters imprisoned,  
 lying beside her in bed to embrace Aphrodite the golden?"  
 Him thus answered the herald of heaven, the slayer of Argus:  
 "Had I but only the luck, O lord, far-darting Apollo!  
 E'en though triple in number the toils – yea, endless – that held me,  
 e'n though all of you gods stood gazing, and every goddess,  
 give me to lie by her side and embrace Aphrodite the golden!"  
 Thus did he speak, and anew fell laughter upon the immortals,

But now comes an exception to the general merriment; an ending device:

all but Poseidon; unsmiling he stood, and entreaty  
 made to Hephaistos the cunning, to loosen the fetters of Ares.  
 Then raising his voice, these swift-winged words he addressed him:  
 "Loose him, I pray! and I promise that whatsoever thou biddest,  
 all shall he pay that is held to be fair with the gods everlasting."

This raises a legal question: How shall the payment be guaranteed?

Him then addressing in turn gave answer the famous Craftsman:  
 "Nay, but Poseidon, Earth-girdler, thou shouldst not demand it!  
 This giving of pledges for others is ever a risky business.  
 How can I hold thee bound in the eyes of the blessed immortals  
 should our Ares depart, and escape both fetters and forfeit?"

Him then gave answer the King, Earth-shaking Poseidon:  
 "Nay, but Hephaistos, if ever it hap that avoiding the forfeit  
 Ares elude thee, I promise myself all dues to repay thee."

Him then addressing again, gave answer the famous Craftsman:  
 "Truly, 'tis neither becoming nor possible, this to refuse thee."

These words uttered, the mighty Hephaistos unfastened the fetters.  
 Then did the twain, set free from the grievous constraint of the netting,  
 spring straight upward, and vanish. To Thracia Ares departed;  
 she, to the Cyprian Isle, Aphrodite, the lover of laughter,  
 even to Paphos, for here is her shrine and her altar of incense.  
 Here did the Graces receive her and bathe and anoint her with unguent  
 not of the earth, but it lieth as bloom on the limbs of immortals.  
 Then did they clothe her in beautiful raiment, a wonder to gaze at.

Justice is done, reparation is promised, and the lovers escape. So ends the tale.  
 And how did the hearers take it, we ask? They took it this way:

Such was the story he sang, this singer renown'd, and Odysseus  
 Listened rejoicing in spirit, as also the rest of the hearers:  
 all those lovers of oars, those famed Phaiakian seamen.

And what about Odysseus, who, unlike Ares in the song, has lain not once  
 with a goddess, but has spent every night for the last seven years in the arms of  
 immortal Calypso? Could he tell the other fellows a thing or two, if he chose?  
 Is the poet of the Odyssey having her little joke, not with anyone in particular,  
 but simply about these inner resonances in her own composition?

We don't know. Passing on, we note that Demodocus' song is not a concert  
 piece, *it is an interlude in a banquet*. Are other diversions offered to the guests?  
 Indeed they are. The next interlude (8:370-376) is a dance routine:

Bidden was now Halios, and Laodamas, by the monarch  
 single to dance, for in dancing was no one able to match them.  
 These then, into the hand when a beautiful ball they had taken,  
 purple in hue, by the skillful artificer Polybus fashioned,  
 one of them hurled it aloft to the shadowy clouds of the heaven,  
 bending him back for the throw. From the ground upleaping, the other  
 easily caught it before with feet on the earth he alighted.

and so on. What we have is a banquet, with songs and dances as diversions.

Phemios' piece occupies 101 lines, just 10 minutes. It is not long, and it is not solemn. The light tone, the feel of entertainment and not uplift, is evident.

Does this entertainment context demean the sacred art of song? Probably no more than it does elsewhere. Among the treasures of Western culture is the symphonic literature, and the composer at the head of that tradition is Haydn. Haydn was a court flunky. His symphonies were written as entertainments, to be performed during banquets at Esterhazy. Except for the last years of his life, Haydn was little more than a provider of miscellaneous musics for the palace.

And how long, in performance, were the symphonies of Haydn? At first, about 10 minutes, though they gradually got longer. Haydn had his grander side; interludes were not his whole duty. But at the beginning of that tradition, as with the banquet side of the Homer tradition, we find musical enhancements to something else. Music written primarily to please.

Not that some of those Odysseus songs were not very affecting. We have seen how one moved Penelope. Later on (8:514-522), we see the same effect produced on Odysseus by the song mentioned above, a song about himself:

Then did he sing of the sack of the town by the sons of Achaea,  
How from the horse outpouring and leaving the lair of the ambush,  
hither and thither they scattered, the steep-built city to ravage;  
sang of Odysseus too; how unto the house of the hero  
Deiphobos, like Ares he went with divine Menelaos.  
Here did Odysseus (so sang he) adventure a terrible conflict,  
Ay, and prevailed in the end by the grace of Athena the dauntless.  
Such was the story he sang, this singer renowned, and Odysseus  
melted in tears, and the great drops fell on his cheeks from his eyelids.

Short they may be, these little songs, but they have their emotional range.

As Zeus himself says,<sup>1</sup> the value system of the *Odyssey* is different from that of the *Iliad*. In the *Odyssey*, people's misfortunes are their own fault, not some whim of the gods. Is this idea visible in the Love of Ares and Aphrodite? If so, it probably lies in the issue of reparation. Hephaistos' wife is unfaithful; he can no longer live with her. He is entitled to a refund of the gifts he gave for her. In early societies, with no legal structure, how shall these obligations be enforced? The poet of the *Odyssey* is not so heedless of verisimilitude as to bring a lawcourt onstage. Instead, as early societies did, she resorts to an oath. At first, Hephaistos refuses that as inadequate: What do I do if they get away? But Poseidon, who is after all a god, repeats his offer to guarantee the debt. This is as good it will get in that society, and Hephaistos accepts.

So, a bit off-color as it is (and none the worse for that, in banquet context), the song of Demodocus does not really violate the values which the *Odyssey*, as it turns out, consistently respects.

<sup>1</sup>At the very beginning of the *Odyssey*. See §27, below.