



A pseudo-Homer gets exposed by Homer

Citation

Nagy, Gregory. 2015.06.24. "A pseudo-Homer gets exposed by Homer." Classical Inquiries. http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.eresource:Classical_Inquiries.

Published Version

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Classical Inquiries

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[Home](#) » [By Gregory Nagy, HeroesX](#) » [A pseudo-Homer gets exposed by Homer](#)

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June 24, 2015 By Gregory Nagy listed under [By Gregory Nagy, HeroesX](#)

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My point of departure here is a detailed study by Jonathan Ready concerning a theory that is meant to explain how Homeric poetry was made: supposedly, this poetry was first written down by way of dictation, and the text that resulted from the dictation became the archetype for the Homeric Iliad and Odyssey as we know them.



"Homer dictating to a scribe," Rembrandt (1606–1669) [Public domain], Nationalmuseum, via Wikimedia Commons

How a transcript of Homeric poetry may succeed or fail as a control text for Homeric performance

§1. My point of departure here is a detailed study by Jonathan Ready concerning a theory that is meant to explain how Homeric poetry was made: supposedly, this poetry was first written down by way of dictation, and the text that resulted from the dictation became the archetype for the Homeric Iliad and Odyssey as we know them.^[1] As Ready shows, none of the various different formulations of this theory comes up with any satisfactory explanation of the circumstances that could have led to the production of such an archetypal text. Accordingly, Ready formulates an alternative theory that builds on what I have described as an evolutionary model for the making of Homeric poetry.^[2] In terms of this model, there is no need to rule out the possibility that dictated texts of this poetry, as it evolved, did exist at some point or points in the chronology of its evolution, and Ready agrees with me in allowing for such a possibility.^[3] He cites with approval my formulation concerning period 3 of my five-period chronology for the evolution of the Homeric Iliad and Odyssey: in this period as I define it, which extends from the middle of the sixth century BCE to the later part of the fourth, I allow for the possible existence of transcripts that recorded the contents of these epics, and such transcripts could in theory have resulted from some kind of dictation.^[4] In using the

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word transcript here, I mean “the writing down of a composition-in-performance not as a performance per se but as a potential aid to performance.”[5]

§2. Up to this point in the argumentation, Ready and I see eye to eye. But now I need to clarify a related term that may have led to a misunderstanding between the two of us. That term is control text, as used by Douglas Frame with reference to period 3 in my evolutionary model.[6] This period, as I just said, extends from the middle of the sixth century BCE to the later part of the fourth. Frame and I agree that, in period 3, transcripts of Homeric poetry could have been used as a control text for rhapsōidoi ‘rhapsodes’ who competed with each other in relay-style performances of Homeric poetry at the seasonally recurring festival of the Panathenaia in Athens. And who would be the controllers of such a control text? As I have argued in my book *Homer the Preclassic*, these controllers were ‘the descendants of Homer’, the Homēridai of Chios, who were venerated not only as “the authorizers of Homer in Athens” but also as “the official regulators of rhapsodic competitions in performing the Homeric Iliad and Odyssey at the Panathenaia in Athens.”[7] This description of the Homeridai as authorities who control the performance of Homeric poetry dovetails with my understanding of a transcript as a potential control text, that is, as a text “used to record any given composition and to control the circumstances of any given performance.”[8]

§3. In terms of this formulation, I must stress that any transcribing of Homeric poetry in period 3 would have produced only a potential control text. As we will see later on, the use of transcripts as a control text could fail in some situations while succeeding in others. This qualification concerning the use of a transcript as a control text is meant to undo the misunderstanding that I might have created when I said at one point, in a review, that “my use of the term [transcript] makes it clear that a transcript has no influence on performance.”[9] Ready sees in this wording a contradiction of my formulation about a transcript as a control text: “If the transcript has ‘no influence on performance’, it cannot simultaneously ‘control’ any aspect of performance.”[10] But there is no real contradiction, once we consider the context of what I said in the review. There I was reacting to a claim made by Minne Skaftø Jensen in arguing against my evolutionary model. With specific reference to period 3, which allows for the possibility that there existed transcripts of Homeric poetry during that period, Jensen claims: “Nagy’s hypothesis attributes to the written transmission features that are characteristic of oral composition and transmission.”[11]

§4. Rejecting this claim of Jensen (hereafter = J), I said:

In fact, my point is just the opposite: period 3 is a time of oral transmission, not written transmission, and that is why I use the word transcript with reference to any possibility of existing texts. And I do not “imagine” what she describes as “a fertile interaction of performance and written text.” In the same context, she refers to “the dogma concerning the interaction between the two media” (J 217). But I posit no such “interaction,” and that is the point of my using the term “transcript.” Further, the existence of variants in transcripts is a symptom not a cause of multiformity in any oral tradition that is being transcribed. It is a gross misunderstanding to claim that the editors of the *Homer Multitext* project (Casey Dué and Mary Ebbott) assume that the Homeric tradition was shaped by a process of “a gradual writing” (J 229).[12]

It is evident here that I formulated the concept of transcript for the purpose of describing a period where a text does not necessarily have any influence on performance. In terms of my evolutionary model, as I emphasized in my review, later periods are different:

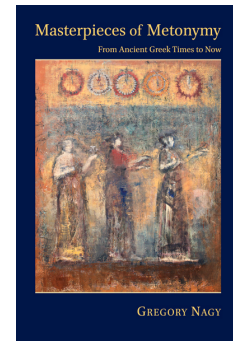
By transcript I mean the broadest possible category of written text: a transcript can be a record of performance, even an aid for performance, but not the equivalent of performance (HQ 34–36, 65–69). We must distinguish a transcript from an inscription, which can traditionally refer to itself in the archaic period as just that, an equivalent of performance (HQ 34–36). As for script, I mean a narrower category, where the written text is a prerequisite for performance (PP 153–186, HQ 32–34). By scripture I mean the narrowest category of them all, where the written text need not even presuppose performance.[13]

The differences conveyed by these terms transcript / script / scripture with reference to periods 3 / 4 / 5 respectively are essential for my evolutionary model. In terms of this model, a transcript can be “a record of performance, even an aid for performance, but not the equivalent of performance.” Only a script, which I posit for the later period 4, extending from the later part of the fourth century BCE to the middle of the second, is a prerequisite for a performance. To put it another way: yes, a script is a control text, but a transcript is only a potential control text. As for the Homeric text as scripture, which I posit for the still later period 5, extending from the middle of the second century BCE onward, there is no further dependence on the factor of performance.

The success or failure of a transcript as a control text

§5. As already noted, the use of transcripts as a control text for performing Homeric poetry could theoretically fail in some situations while succeeding in others. The success or the failure, as we will now see, depends on the authority of the performance. A control text will fail if the performer who uses it is not authorized to perform it. Only an authorized performer can succeed in performing Homeric poetry.

§6. In the *Life of Homer* traditions, we find a story about an unauthorized performer of Homeric poetry who fails in his attempt to use a transcript of that poetry as a way of legitimating his performance. In the book *Homer the Preclassic*, I have analyzed this story in some detail, and here I offer only the most relevant aspects of that analysis.



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About the historical value of the Life of Homer traditions

§7. Before we examine the story about a failure in the use of a Homeric transcript, I need to make a point about the medium that transmits this story. I have just referred to this medium as the Life of Homer traditions, but I must emphasize that this description, implying simply a biography, does not do full justice to the historical value of these traditions. That is because the narrative strategy of the Lives is to present a staging of Homer's reception. My choice of this word staging highlights the point that I am making, which is, that the stories of these Lives are myths, not historical facts, about Homer. To say that we are dealing with myths, however, is not at all to say that there is no history to be learned from the Lives. Even though the various Homers of the various Lives are evidently mythical constructs, the actual constructing of myths about Homer can be seen as historical fact.

§8. These myths about Homer in the Lives can be analyzed as evidence for the various different ways in which Homeric poetry was appropriated by various different cultural and political centers throughout the ancient Greek-speaking world. And these myths, in all their varieties, have basically one thing in common: Homeric poetry is pictured as a medium of performance, featuring Homer himself as the master performer. [\[14\]](#)

A story about Homer's encounter with a pseudo-Homer

§9. In the so-called pseudo-Herodotean Life of Homer, to which I will refer simply as Vita 1, we read the story about an encounter, in the Ionian city of Phocaea in Asia Minor, between Homer, who is a wandering poet, and an unscrupulous character named Thestorides, who is a teacher of grammata or 'letters' to young people (Vita 1.195). Thestorides makes Homer an offer: Homer will be provided with ample subsidy on the condition that he agrees to two things demanded by Thestorides. One, Thestorides will be allowed to possess written texts of the verses or epē (= epos plural) that Homer has 'made' (poieîn) and is 'making' (poieîn). And two, Homer will agree to 'attribute' (anapherein) these verses to Thestorides. Here is the relevant wording of the story:

... ἄ γε πεποιημένα εἶη αὐτῷ τῶν ἐπέων ἀναγράψασθαι καὶ ἄλλα ποιῶν πρὸς ἑωυτὸν ἀναφέρειν αἰεὶ ...

... [and if Homer would allow] a writing-up [ana-graphesthai] of the verses [epos plural] of his that he had made [poieîn] and of other verses that he was about to make [poieîn] and attribute [anapherein] them to him [= Thestorides] always ...

Vita 1.198–200[[15](#)]

At this point in the story, Homer is already blind, and he never writes anything. He simply 'makes' his poetry by way of composition-in-performance. In the logic of the wording in this passage, Homer's own act of composing poetry—past, present, and future—does not depend on someone else's act of writing down his compositions-in-performance. In terms of my evolutionary model, then, what is written down here is a transcript.

§10. Having accepted the deal offered by Thestorides, Homer stays in Phocaea and 'makes' the Little Iliad and the Phokais, while Thestorides has it all written down:

διατρίβων δὲ παρὰ τῷ Θεστορίδῃ ποιεὶ Ἰλιάδα τὴν ἐλάσσω ... καὶ τὴν καλουμένην Φωκαῖδα, ἣν φασιν οἱ Φωκαεῖς Ὀμηρον παρ' αὐτοῖσι ποιῆσαι. ἐπεὶ δὲ τὴν τε Φωκαῖδα καὶ τὰλλα πάντα παρὰ τοῦ Ὀμήρου ὁ Θεστορίδης ἐγράψατο, διενόηθη ἐκ τῆς Φωκαίης ἀπαλλάσσεσθαι, τὴν ποιήσιν θέλων τοῦ Ὀμήρου ἐξιδιώσασθαι.

Spending his time in the house of Thestorides, he [= Homer] made [poieîn] the Little Iliad [literally, the 'Smaller Iliad'] ... He [= Homer] also made the so-called Phokais, which the people of Phocaea say Homer had made [poieîn] in their city. And when Thestorides had the Phokais and all his [= Homer's] other things written down [graphesthai] from Homer, he [= Thestorides] made plans to depart from Phocaea, wishing to appropriate the songmaking [= poiēsis] of Homer.

Vita 1.202–210

I note that the story treats the idea that Homer 'makes' (poieîn) the poetry and the idea that Thestorides has it 'written down' (graphesthai) as two separate processes. Homer 'makes' the poetry by composing it in performance, while Thestorides, as the collector of this poetry, arranges for the transcription of the performance. The role of Thestorides in collaborating with Homer here fits Ready's view of a dictated text as the product of a "co-creation" involving the poet, the collector, and the scribe. [\[16\]](#)

§11. After securing a transcript of Homer's poetry, as we saw in the passage just quoted (Vita 1.201–210), Thestorides sails away from Phocaea. The story makes explicit the motive for this action: Thestorides intends to appropriate the poetry of Homer by performing it somewhere else, in the absence of Homer. But Homer, as we are about to see, refuses to let himself become an absent author.

§12. Thestorides sails from Phocaea to the island of Chios (Vita 1.210 and following), where he goes about performing (epideiknunai 1.215 and 222) the verses or epē (= epos plural) of Homer as if they were his own. Meanwhile, back in Phocaea, Homer finds out about this misappropriation and angrily resolves to make every effort to travel to Chios in order to set things straight (1.224–225). It appears that Homer had

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not minded if Thestorides claimed as his own the poetry of Homer as a written text, but now he is very angry that Thestorides is actually performing this poetry as if Thestorides, not Homer, were the real Homer.

§13. Trying to make his way to Chios, Homer lives through many adventures (1.225–275). After finally arriving on the island (1.275–276), Homer 'makes' (poieîn) new poems while staying in the countryside, and his reputation as a master poet reaches the city of Chios (1.332–336). Thestorides, who operates out of the city, hears about the presence of Homer in the countryside and, seeing that he is about to be exposed as a pseudo-Homer, that is, as an unauthorized performer who claims as his own the compositions of Homer, he abruptly leaves Chios (1.336–338). Now Homer moves into the city as the true master poet of Chios (1.339–340).

§14. In this story of Homer and the pseudo-Homer, we see that the pseudo-Homer owns a transcript that he uses as a control text for performing Homeric poetry. But the control text fails him because his performance of this poetry is not authorized by Homer himself.

§15. By contrast, such a control text will not fail the Homeridai as the authorized performers of Homer in the future, long after he is dead. If the Homeridai claimed to own any text of Homeric poetry, such a text would be a transcript of an authorized performance. So, such a text could become the control text of Homeric poetry during what I have called period 3 in the evolution of this poetry. And such a control text could notionally live on forever, eternally renewed in Panathenaic performances authorized by Homeric descendants who supposedly control the text of Homer's eternal words.

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Notes

- [1] Ready 2015.
- [2] The most updated summary of this evolutionary model is Nagy 2014; see also Ready 2015:1–3.
- [3] Nagy 2003:4, seconded by Ready 2015.
- [4] Ready 2015:58–59, citing Nagy 1996b:110–111.
- [5] Nagy 1996b:36; also Nagy 1996a:112.
- [6] Frame 2009:559n111.
- [7] Nagy 2009|2010:61, 62 (see also 69n16), as quoted by Ready 2015:61.
- [8] Nagy 1996b:65, as quoted by Ready 2015:62n152.
- [9] Nagy 2014:100.
- [10] Ready 2015:63n152.
- [11] Jensen 2011:217.
- [12] Nagy 2014:100. On the Homer Multitext Project, see Du  and Ebbott 2009; also Nagy 2010.

[13] Nagy 2008|2009 P§12, recast in Nagy 2014:100, with references to my earlier formulations in Nagy 1996a (abbreviated PP) and 1996b (abbreviated HQ).

[14] Nagy 2009|2010:30.

[15] Nagy 2009|2010:37–38. My translation of πρὸς ἑωυτὸν ἀναφέρειν as ‘to attribute them to him’ differs from what we read in West 2003:371, ‘to bring them to him’.

[16] On the formulation of such “co-creation” for any dictated text, see Ready 2015:1–2. I thank David Elmer for his advice on this point.

Tags: [evolutionary model](#), [Homeric epic](#), [Jonathan Ready](#), [Lives of Homer](#), [transcript](#)