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From Homeric *Transcripts* to Homeric *Scripts*: Rhetorical *autoskhediasmós* and Rhapsodic Practice in V–IV BC

The historical circumstances and social processes to which we owe the written texts of the Homeric poems continue to be hotly disputed by scholars. My paper explores this topic from the perspective of rhapsodes and their practices in Athens during the 5th and 4th centuries BC. But since relatively little about these practices is attested in immediate connection with rhapsodes and their trade (and much of it, e.g. Plato's *Ion*, is clearly prejudiced), I conduct my exploration in a broader context: one that includes the debate among sophists in which 'improvisation' (*autoskhediasmós*) was opposed to the oral delivery of a previously written and memorized text. Using the rhetorical model as a heuristic guide to the issues involved in rhapsodic performance, I seek to determine why, how, and to what extent rhapsodes might have used written texts as aids to performance, departing—in so doing—from a centuries-old practice of recomposition in performance.

Scholars who argue for the progressive textual fixation of the Homeric poems usually hold to a version of Gregory Nagy's evolutionary model (*Homeric Questions* 1996): at one end, beyond the Archaic Age, there are rhapsodes for whom writing plays no role at all; at the other end, the Hellenistic age of Alexandrian scholarship, broadly speaking, we find a "canonical" written text to which oral declamation must conform. But how should we conceive of the middle stage, when Greece increasingly turned from oral to written habits of thought and culture? How are we to envision Homeric rhapsodes effecting this transition? What social forces might have encouraged them to use written texts (their own or others') to hone and polish their professional skills? Would there have been a demand by the general public for self-made "transcripts" of their performances? Is there room for the coexistence of the competing drives to recompose in performance (as described by A.B. Lord 1995)—arguably a form of "improvisation"—and to declaim material written and polished in advance?

With these questions in mind, this paper reassesses the 1914 study *Extemporaneous Speech in Antiquity* by H.L. Brown, complemented by recent work on improvisation. The use of the rhetorical model proves successful in highlighting, e.g., how the audience's expectation of a high degree of polish caused performers increasingly to rely on previously written texts; this same dynamic, I argue, prompted rhapsodes eventually to yield their trade to the control of poetic "scripts," thus maximizing their chances of success in competitive performance. This, of course, could only happen where the rules of the poetic *agôn* favored predictable subject matter and performance sequence. My primary sources for this study are Alkidamas' *Peri Sofistôn*, which directly addresses the opposition between *gegramména légein* and *ágrafa légein*; Plato's *Phaidros* and *Ion*; and statements and observations scattered throughout the Isokratean *corpus*.

Since Homeric poetry and oratorical prose are subject to the peculiar constraints of their own particular genres, the legitimacy of comparing them should not be assumed, but established. Recent linguistic studies of oral poetry have done much to bring prose and poetry together. And though forensic and deliberative oratory might well seem removed

from epic performance, epideictic oratory—its setting, its verbal display, its competitive nature—is far closer, especially when one considers rhapsodic performance at the Panathenaia diachronically. Ultimately, the use of *rhêtorikê* as a heuristic guide to the study of *rhapsôidikê* not only can be justified on the grounds of intrinsic similarities (elements such as the centrality of the interaction between speaker and audience), but also has a long-standing ancient pedigree, as is shown by Alkidamas' inclusion of the *Certamen* in the *Mouseion*, and by the persistent engagement of rhetorical writings with *rhapsôidia*