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Poetic Contests and the Interaction of Epic Traditions in the *Odyssey*

From Hesiod's victory at the funeral games of Amphidamas to Plato's picture of rhapsodes in the *Ion*, there is ample evidence that epic poetry in the archaic and classical periods was often performed in agonistic contexts. Yet, while those contests have been studied in detail from a historical and social point of view, less attention has been devoted to their poetic consequences and manifestations. The purpose of this paper is to explore traces of competition among epic poets in the stories told by Odysseus to the Phaiakians in books 9-12 of the *Odyssey*. I argue that the *apologoi* are set up in a context akin to a poetic contest and respond to a challenge raised by the three songs of the bard Demodokos. This agonistic stance can be connected, I suggest, with features of the *apologoi* which have long troubled commentators, especially their interaction with other epic traditions.

The stories told by Odysseus to the Phaiakians provide, on the one hand, a long-delayed answer to Arete's and Alkinoos' questions about his identity. On the other hand, they are framed in a context which makes them akin to a demonstration of poetic talent. The rest of the entertainment offered by Alkinoos to his guest explicitly aims at demonstrating the superiority of the Phaiakians over other people. Odysseus, in turn, is gradually pervaded by the Phaiakians' agonistic spirit. The second and third songs of Demodokos both respond, in effect, to challenges issued by Odysseus. Odysseus' own narrative, which follows Demodokos' third song, is thus preceded by a series of competitive performances.

The *apologoi* bear several features which characterize performances at poetic contests known to us from other sources. As Odysseus starts his narrative with his departure from Troy, he picks up the story of the Trojan War right where Demodokos left it, which reminds us of the so-called Peisistratean rule about the succession of epic recitations at the Panathenaia. His prelude, which stresses that there is nothing more pleasurable than banquets and songs, sounds like the answer to a riddle of a standard type in poetic contests. In fact, his performance is evaluated by Alkinoos and Arete in the "intermezzo" of book 11 according to the criteria defined by M. Griffith as the qualities tested in poetic contests.

Awareness of the agonistic context of the *apologoi* allows new light to be shed, I believe, on the often-noted resemblances between parts of Odysseus' stories and other poems. R. Martin recently proposed to interpret these similarities as the response of the master performer of the *Odyssey* to contemporary and competing repertoire traditions. This model may be refined, I suggest, by keeping in mind the agonistic context which frames the *apologoi* within the poem itself. From that perspective, the interaction of the *apologoi* with other traditions stands not only as a trace of the real-life circumstances of epic performance, but also as a self-conscious characterization of Odysseus' narrative. Just as the three songs of Demodokos demonstrate the breadth of his repertoire, ranging from the Trojan cycle to the "bourgeois" story of Ares and Aphrodite, the *apologoi* show the control of both the master poet and of Odysseus as narrator over the Iliadic, Hesiodic and Argonautic traditions. In some episodes of book 12, not just two but three layers of

competition reflect one another in a subtle mirroring effect: Odysseus as a character following the traces of Jason, Odysseus as a performer responding to Demodokos, and the master poet of the *Odyssey* responding to other epic traditions. The agonistic spirit derived from the circumstances of epic performance deeply pervades the structure of the *apologoi*.