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Andrew Ford, *Homer: The Poetry of the Past*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992.

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Andrew Ford, *Homer: The Poetry of the Past*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992. Pp. xii + 225. ISBN 0-8014-2700-2.

Reviewed by Sheila Murnaghan, University of Pennsylvania.

The aim of this learned, lucid, and gracefully-written study is to recover the conception of poetry that animated the poet or poets we know as Homer. Focussing on the terminology Homer applies to poetry and on the depictions of poetic performance found in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Ford fills out the picture sketched by such archaeologists of archaic poetics as Jesper Svenbro, Gregory Nagy, Marcel Detienne, and William Thalmann. What emerges is a vision of poetry far closer to magic or seercraft than to anything we would call art. The Homeric poet's vocation is bound up with his relationship to the Muses, through whom he taps into an unceasing flow of divine voice that transmits unmediated the entire compass of past events. These events are laid out in a timeless panorama, which is normally hidden from human view, but which the Muses effortlessly witness. The effect of a poet's performance is to make this past vividly present to his audience. The signs of his success are his listeners' impression that they are actually witnessing past events and their forgetfulness of the present. What distinguishes the epic poet from a prophet is that, out of the store of past, present, and future events that the gods simultaneously contemplate, the poet relates, not the future, but the past. Ford stresses this distinction in the phrase he uses to sum up Homer's sense of what he is about: "the poetry of the past."

What makes this vision of poetry so alien to any that we are familiar with is its utter imperviousness to reading, in both its most literal and its more extended sense. Developed in the context of oral performance, this vision leaves no room for written texts or the relationships that readers develop with texts. And with its claim that through the poet and his Muses the audience gains unmediated access to past events, this vision leaves no room for interpretation in any of the manifold forms in which it has been practiced: not for an Aristotelian stress on the significance of form; not for a Romantic interest in the personality and original genius of the poet; not for post-modern doubts about the referential capacities of language. Ford thus takes a very different tack from certain other contemporary Homerists, for example Marilyn Katz and John Peradotto in their recent studies of the *Odyssey*, who find the Homeric epics to be overtly engaged with the same issues that occupy contemporary literary theorists. In this respect, Ford's own project resembles the mission he identifies as Homer's: he too is trying to put his audience in touch with the experience of the past while banishing the concerns of the present.

However sympathetically we imagine Homer's relationship with his Muses, we can never escape our own view of it as fiction, and we will never suppress our own need to interpret the Homeric epics. As Ford acknowledges, even Homer could not ignore the human realities of poetic composition, and this book is most interesting for its account of how Homer tries to come to terms with those realities while protecting his claim to superhuman inspiration. One vulnerable point for such a poet is the need to be selective: a time-bound mortal poet can only fit so much of the endless continuum of past experience into a single song. As Ford shows, Homer eschews claims to completion or formal unity for his poems, and gestures towards the Muses and their exhaustive vision at those points where he is most clearly driven to be selective. One

such point is the invocation to the Catalogue of Ships at *Iliad* 2.484-493. There the poet evokes the Muses' complete knowledge of all who fought at Troy even as he admits he can only mention the leaders. At this point, then, the poet is forced to identify the political allegiances that shape his work, as he does also in the episode in which Thersites' voice is banished from the record of what was said and done at Troy.

Another threat to the poet's superhuman authority is the existence of rival poets and alternate traditions. Homer is well aware of the problem of different tellings and their susceptibility to distortion, and he tries to maintain a distinction between his song and ordinary, humanly-shaped *kleos*. He masters the threat posed by other poets by recasting the poetic competitions that were part of his experience in forms that involve no challenge to his authority. At *Iliad* 2.594-600 he includes a brief account of the legendary poet Thamyris' competition with the Muses; in the Phaeacian episode of the *Odyssey* he offers a more extended reworking of contemporary festive competition through the encounters of Odysseus and Demodocus. In both cases, the human poet is given a rival who does not threaten, but rather elevates, his stature, either the Muses themselves or the epic hero whose experiences are being recounted. Otherwise, the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* adopt different strategies for putting to rest the issue of competing traditions: the *Iliad* presents its action as prior to all singing, acknowledging no versions that might rival itself, while the *Odyssey* represents itself as the last and thus most complete and authoritative of many accounts of the return of the Achaeans from Troy.

Yet another awkward fact for a poet who claims to take on the Muses' voice is the rival medium of the written text. Ford assumes that Homer must have been aware of written texts and that he must have been provoked by their claim to transcend time in a new way, not by connecting to the vision of the timeless gods, but by preserving their contents forever. Because Homer uses *semata* as his term for writing in his one reference to it, Ford assumes that depictions of other signs, especially physical monuments, can be understood as means of addressing -- and dismissing -- the claims of writing. Again he finds the two epics using different methods for achieving the same defensive goals. The *Iliad* in its depiction of the doomed Achaean wall asserts the impermanence of physical remains. The *Odyssey* in its evasiveness about its hero's final *sema*, or tomb, more playfully questions the capacity of concrete monuments to preserve heroic experience.

While Ford undoubtedly succeeds in putting us in touch with an Homeric vision of poetry as excluding all interpretation, his reconstruction by no means forecloses the ongoing and inevitable process of reading and interpreting the Homeric epics. Rather, his investigations of the gaps between what Homer wishes us to believe about his craft and what we actually can believe point to a fruitful new direction for Homeric criticism. Perhaps most promising is the light Ford begins to shed on the submerged but highly operative politics of Homeric composition. More work along these lines may also show that the stance of the epics' poet-narrators is more complicated than Ford allows, more divided between grateful reliance on the Muses and active interest in the artfulness of human making. Even more generally, Ford's study should free up Homeric interpretation through its demonstration of the futility of debates about which interpretive strategies are most historically authentic or attuned to the poet's own intentions. Anyone who reads the epics and thinks about them as art -- whether a problem-solving ancient scholiast or an admiring new critic or a high-tech modern theorist -- performs an operation that Homer had hoped would be superfluous. Each fails equally to experience the magical direct contact with the past that Homer intended to create.
