Enchantment and Other Effects of Poetry in the Homeric *Odyssey*[1]

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Though in the *Odyssey* songs are 'spells of mortals' (1.337) and the singer 'ever' enchants his audience (17.521), it is remarkable that, except for the song of the Sirens, no specific song sung by a concrete singer is ever explicitly described in Homer as having produced enchantment. On several occasions the *Odyssey* gives a detailed description of a singer's performance at the feast; however, the effect created in such cases is invariably that of pleasure (1.347, 422, 8.91,368, 17.606, 18.304–5). Moreover, normal performances by Homeric singers not only are not described as enchanting the audience, but the characteristic feature of such performances is that the singer is obliged to hold himself, as Milman Parry put it, 'at the convenience of his hearers.'[2] Thus, when Demodocus' songs cause Odysseus to weep, his host Alcinous twice arrests the performance (8.93–100, 536–43): had Demodocus' songs indeed enchanted the audience one would have expected Alcinous not only not to have stopped the singer, but not even to have noticed that his guest was weeping. This is not to say, however, that a singer enchanting his audience

1 Since this paper mostly deals with the *Odyssey* (see H. Maehler, *Die Auffassung des Dichterberufs im frühen Griechentum* [Göttingen 1963], 29 ff.), references where no work is specified are to that poem. The English quotations from the *Odyssey* are given in the Loeb translation of A.T. Murray; a few slight changes have been made for the sake of terminological uniformity. Henceforth, Maehler, *op.cit.*, and W.J. Verdenius, 'The Principles of Greek Literary Criticism,' *Mnemosyne* 36 (1983), 14–59, will be referred to by the author's name alone.

2 See A. Parry (ed.), *The Making of Homeric Verse* (Oxford 1971), 457. See also J. A. Notopoulos, 'Parataxis in Homer,' *TAPhA* 80 (1949), 1–23, and 'Continuity and Interconnexion in Homeric Oral Composition,' *TAPhA* 82 (1951), 81–102.

corresponded to no real experience of Homeric man. Odysseus' audience in Phaeacia, left 'spellbound' by his narration (κηληθμῷ δ' ἔσχοντο 11.334, 13.2), and Eumaeus' reacting in a similar fashion in Ithaca (θέλγειν 17.514, 521) show that enchantment in Homer can indeed represent a concrete feeling aroused by a concrete person. The question therefore is this: why is enchantment, though explicitly described as the effect of poetry, not the effect of any given song sung in the Homeric poems?

Consider Eumaeus' description of the effect of Odysseus' narration: 'Even as when a man gazes upon a singer who sings to mortals words of longing that the gods have taught him, and their desire to hear him is insatiate (τοῦ δ' ἄμοτον μεμάασιν ἀκουέμεν), whensoever he sings, even so he enchanted me (ὣς ἐμὲ κεῖνος ἔθελγε) as he sat in my hall' (17.518–21). The fact that a singer's song consisted of words, music, and sometimes also dance, allows us to attribute the enchantment created by his song to any or all of these; thus, Homer describes pleasure derived from a song as resulting either from the singer's performance as a whole, or specifically from song and dance, from the words of a song, or from its musical accompaniment.[3] However, the enchantment adduced in Eumaeus' description is a *tertium comparationis* to singing and storytelling (*cf.* Maehler, 29), which seems to indicate that in Homer's view a song's enchantment was produced by no feature other than its words.[4] That enchantment was not seen by Homer as an effect of music also follows from the fact that often it is depicted as produced by persuasive speech (see 1.57, 3.264, 14.387, 18.282–3). Furthermore, Eumaeus' comparison also contains, so to speak, an inner translation of the term θέλγειν: the enchantment he experienced actually amounts to an 'insatiate desire to hear'.[5] Conse-

3 For pleasure as resulting from the performance as a whole see 1.347, 8.44–5 and 368, 17.385; from dance and song 1.421–2, 17.605–6, 18.304–5; from the words of the song 8.90–1. Musical accompaniment as a source of pleasure is explicitly mentioned only at *Il.* 9.186 and 189, but *cf.* also φόρμιγγι λιγείῃ/ἱμερόεν κιθάριζε *Il.* 18.569–70 and φόρμιγγα λίγειαν *Od.* 8.67, 105, 254, 261, and 537, 22.332, 23.133.

4 In his study of Orphism, M.P. Nilsson came to a similar conclusion about the source of Orpheus' power: "I am afraid that a warning is needed against the common misconception that Orpheus was primarily a musician and that the tunes of his lyre had the power of enchantment. It was his song." ('Early Orphism and Kindred Religious Movements,' *HThR* 28 [1935], 191).

5 This is also clear from Odysseus' reaction to the Sirens' song: αὐτὰρ ἐμὸν κῆρ / ἤθελ' ἀκουέμεναι 12.192–3.

quently, the meaning of θέλγειν, as this term is applied to poetry, can tentatively be assumed to be "*an insatiate desire to hear, directed towards the narrative content of song.*"

If this interpretation is correct, enchantment should be very much a typical effect of storytelling, whether or not the word θέλγειν is used. As a matter of fact, on many occasions in the *Odyssey* a narrated story arouses such enthusiasm that the audience cannot stop listening to it. Thus Penelope was so delighted with Odysseus' stories that 'sleep fell not upon her eyelids' (19.589–90, 23.308–9); Alcinous was ready to listen to Odysseus 'even till the bright dawn'(11.370–6), Eumaeus was so charmed with Odysseus' tales that he detained him in his cabin for three nights and three days (17.515–21); Aeolus hosted Odysseus for a whole month, 'and questioned about each thing, about Ilios, and the ships of the Argives, and the return of the Achaeans' (10.14–5); Telemachus was ready to listen to Menelaus' account of his travels 'even for a year' (4.595–8). The reason why singing and storytelling differ from each other in this regard will become clear if we take into account the fact that stories told by Homer's narrators generally inform the listeners of things of which they had not yet heard. Thus, in Phaeacia, though Alcinous praises Odysseus for the shapeliness of his words, the nobility of his mind and the masterly way in which he has delivered his story, he expresses no wish to hear the same story once again, but urges Odysseus to proceed with his account of his adventures (11.367–72). And when the narration reaches the point from which it started, Odysseus himself stops with the following words: 'But why should I tell thee this tale? For it was but yesterday that I told it in thy hall to thyself and to thy noble wife. It is an irksome thing, meseems, to tell again a plain-told tale' (12.450–3).

But if Homeric man sees no point in listening to the same story twice, this is by no means so where songs are concerned. However rich a singer's repertoire may be, it is not inexhaustible, and though singers move from one community to another (17.382–5), the fact is that both in Ithaca and in Phaeacia there is a resident singer. Accordingly, Homer's audiences must have been used to listening to songs with which they were familiar. Consider the following description of Demodocus' performance: 'And the nobles of the Phaeacians stirred him to sing, because they were enjoying the words (ἐπεὶ τέρποντ' ἐπέεσσιν)' (8.90–1). The song whose words the Phaeacians enjoyed was that concerning the quarrel between Odysseus and Achilles, a song whose popularity is attested to at 8.74: 'the song the fame of which had then reached the wide heaven.' Now, since listening to a familiar song produces pleasure, while listening to a new story effects enchantment, it appears that enchantment could emerge in the context of poetry only when a new song was sung. The

song of 'the pitiful return of the Achaeans', sung by Phemius in *Odyssey* 1, affords an opportunity to test this hypothesis.

When Penelope weeps on hearing the song and asks the singer to change the subject, Telemachus objects, arguing as follows: 'men praise that song the most which comes the newest to their ears (ἥ τις ἀκουόντεσσι νεωτάτη ἀμφιπέληται)' (1.351–2). As mentioned above, a similar sorrowful reaction on the part of Odysseus had twice given Alcinous sufficient reason to interrupt Demodocus' performance. Alcinous justified his action as follows: 'let Demodocus now check his clear-toned lyre, for in no wise to all alike does he give pleasure with this song (οὐ γάρ πως πάντεσσι χαριζόμενος τάδ' ἀείδει)... let the singer cease, that we may all alike enjoy (ἵν' ὁμῶς τερπώμεθα πάντες), hosts and guest, since it is far more proper (πολὺ κάλλιον) thus' (8.537–43). The fact that Alcinous used an argument based on guest-friendship to justify his interrupting the song clearly indicates that the situation was one in which certain ethical standards of the Homeric society were involved: what is καλόν is not simply hearing a singer but rather the sort of hearing that affords pleasure to all the participants in a feast.[6] Telemachus' words in *Odyssey* 1 are clearly a deviation from this norm.

But that Telemachus did not wish the Song of the Return to be interrupted is not the only peculiar thing about it. In reference to this song Penelope calls songs in general 'other spells of mortals,' plainly implying that the song had actually enchanted the audience.[7] It is this song, once again, that even the suitors heard in silence.[8] Finally, Telemachus calls this song 'the newest,' a clear indication that, like the stories of Homer's narrators, it informed the listeners of things that they had not heard before.[9] Note also that in another

6 *Cf.* G.B. Walsh, *The Varieties of Enchantment* (Chapel Hill & London 1984), 3–4, 5–6. Listening to the singer is characterized as καλόν in the formula καλὸν ἀκουέμεν ἐστὶν ἀοιδοῦ (1.370, 9.3), and constitutes an inseparable attribute of the ideal of peacetime life as formulated by Odysseus in Phaeacia, see 9.5–11. On the ethics of Homeric feasting see M.I. Finley, *The World of Odysseus* (London 1954), 138–40.

7 1.337 πολλὰ γὰρ ἄλλα βροτῶν θελκτήρια οἶδας. *Cf.* J. de Romilly, 'Gorgias et le pouvoir de la poésie,' *JHS* 93 (1973), 156.

8 1.325–6 οἱ δὲ σιωπῇ / ἦατ' ἀκούοντες, *cf.* also 11.333, 13.1. K. Rüter, *Odysseeinterpretationen* (Göttingen 1969), 205, remarks *ad locum*: "im Schweigen der Zuhörer wird der Zauber des Gesangs spürbar". *Cf.* also D. Page, *The Homeric Odyssey* (Oxford 1955), 60.

9 *Cf.* Maehler, 31. As to the argument that Phemius' subject in his song could not be considered new because "it was probably on every poet's lips" (R. Sealey, 'From

similar situation, in the Intermezzo, when Odysseus interrupts his narration, arguing that 'it is now time to sleep,' Alcinous, like Telemachus in our passage, objects to the interruption, because of his eagerness to hear the continuation of Odysseus' story (11.330–1, 373–6, 380–1). Considering all these, it seems reasonable to infer that Homer means to tell us that the song of Phemius effected enchantment just like a narrated story.

If our hypothesis is correct, enchantment aroused by a song differs from pleasure in a song as the fascination of a first acquaintance with a subject differs from the enjoyment of an old favourite.[10] Accordingly, we should not regard enchantment as a *sine qua non* of Homeric song — otherwise, we would have to conclude that the singer was obliged to present new songs to his audience over and over again. Indeed, the words with which Alcinous stops Demodocus' performance ('let the singer cease, that we may all alike enjoy') demonstrate that for Homer pleasure is just such a *sine qua non*.[11] In the list of δημιοεργοί, 'those who work for the people,' the singer is characterized as one who 'ever delights with his singing' (ὅ κεν τέρπῃσιν ἀείδων 17.385, *cf.* 8.45): just as the physician is professionaly committed to curing diseases, the seer to practicing divination, and the carpenter to building houses, so also the Homeric singer is committed to entertaining the community in its hours of

Phemios to Ion,' *REG* 70 (1957), 315), one must keep in mind that the plot of the *Odyssey* begins just when the last of the Achaeans have returned home. Thus Menelaus has returned only recently, and in both Ithaca and Pylos he is thought to have the most up-to-date information (1.286, 3.317–8). Even Nestor's story of his and the other Greeks' return nearly ten years ago is still news to Telemachus (upon his visit to Pylos in *Odyssey* 3) and, consequently, to the other inhabitants of Ithaca.

10 This does not necessarily mean that enchantment could not be conceived by Homer as, to use C. Macleod's definition, 'an intenser term' for pleasure, see his *Collected Essays* (Oxford 1983), 7. Thus, for example, Telemachus' fascination with Menelaus' tale is described as just such a more intense pleasure, see αἰνῶς γὰρ μύθοισιν ἔπεσσί τε σοῖσιν ἀκούων / τέρπομαι 4.597–8, *cf.* also 19.590, 23.308. The relevant distinction between enchantment and pleasure may lie more in their respective aetiologies than in the character of the emotions involved.

11 Note that, apart from the singer's performance, the feast itself is generally regarded in Homer as a pleasurable occasion, see 1.26 and 369, 4.15–7. The formulaic line τερπόμενοι· μετὰ δέ σφιν ἐμέλπετο θεῖος ἀοιδός (4.17, 13.27, *cf. Il.* 18.604) is especially characteristic in this connection: here, enjoyment on the part of the participants of the feast is a self-contained state of mind, making them receptive to the pleasure created by the singer rather than deriving from it. *Cf.* also 8.429 δαιτί τε τέρπηται καὶ ἀοιδῆς ὕμνον ἀκούων.

leisure. It follows that the singer fulfils his function insofar as his performance gives pleasure to those who partake of the feast, whether or not he also enchants them. It would be wrong, therefore, to see in enchantment an effect of song representative of the normal experience of Homeric audiences. Rather, enchantment may be an incidental effect of song, like tears flowing in one who remembers his personal involvement in the events recounted (see 1.336, 8.83–6, 90–3, 521–31, *cf.* 4.113–6). However, the fact that Homer calls songs 'spells of mortals' and says of the singer that he 'ever' arouses an insatiate desire to hear, indicates that this effect of song does somehow belong to his basic conception of poetry. It seems to me that we cannot solve the problem of Homer's viewing enchantment as both the incidental effect of song and its characteristic feature unless we look beyond concrete occasions like singers' performances at feasts: to find the answer, we must investigate not so much what reactions the performance of a given song calls forth under given circumstances as what song in general signifies for Homeric man. The story of the Sirens seems to be especially pertinent to this undertaking.

The Sirens of the *Odyssey* share two fundamental features with Homer's Muses — they know 'all things,' and they pass their knowledge on to men by means of song.[12] But while the song inspired by the Muses is sung in the social context of a singer's performance at a feast, the song of the Sirens is subject to no such limitation: unlike singers, the Sirens are not committed to entertaining their listeners. Hence, in the case of the Sirens the pure effects of song are much clearer. Thus, the first time they appear in Circe's instructions to Odysseus regarding his future voyage, we learn that their song has a twofold effect — it both delights and enchants: 'To the Sirens first shalt thou come, who enchant (θέλγουσιν) all men whosoever comes to them. Whoso in ignorance draws near them and hears the sound of the Sirens' voice... the Sirens enchant them with their clear-toned song (λιγυρῇ θέλγουσιν ἀοιδῇ) ... but if thou thyself hast a will to listen, let them bind thee in the swift ship hand

12 *Cf.* 12.189–91 as against *Il.* 2.485. On the Sirens and their relation to the Muses see E. Buschor, *Die Musen des Jenseits* (München 1944), W. Otto, *Die Musen*[3] (Darmstadt 1971), 57–8, H. Koller, *Musik und Dichtung im alten Griechenland* (Bern-München 1963), 45–8, P. Pucci, 'The Song of the Sirens,' *Arethusa* 12 (1979), 121–32. The question of whether or not the Muses and the Sirens should be considered mythologically allied (as J.R.T. Pollard, 'Muses and Sirens,' *CR* n.s. 2 [1952], 60–3 and G.K. Gresseth, 'The Homeric Sirens,' *TAPhA* 101 [1970], 203–18 would have it) is not relevant to the present discussion. It is sufficient for our argument that both the Sirens and the Muses are, as W. Schadewaldt put it, 'epische Sängerinnen,' see *Von Homers Welt und Werk*[2] (Stuttgart 1951), 85.

and foot... that with delight thou mayest listen to the voice of the two Sirens (ὄφρα κε τερπόμενος ὄπ' ἀκούῃς Σειρήνοιϊν)' (12.39–52). It is also clear from this passage that the pleasure produced by the Sirens derives from their voice ('that with delight thou mayest listen to the voice of the two Sirens'), while their song causes enchantment ('the Sirens enchant with their clear-toned song').[13]

When Odysseus' ship approached the island of the Sirens, the Sirens caught sight of it: 'and they raised their clear-toned song (λιγυρὴν ἀοιδήν): "Come hither, as thou farest, renowned Odysseus... stay thy ship that thou mayest listen to the voice of us two. For never yet has any man rowed past this isle in his black ship until he has heard the sweet voice from our lips (πρίν γ' ἡμέων μελίγηρυν ἀπὸ στομάτων ὄπ' ἀκοῦσαι). Nay he has the pleasure of it, and goes his way knowing more things (ἀλλ' ὅ γε τερψάμενος νεῖται καὶ πλείονα εἰδώς). For we know everything that in wide Troy the Argives and the Trojans endured through the will of the gods, and we know all things that come to pass upon the fruitful earth." So they spoke, sending their beautiful voice (ὄπα κάλλιμον), and my heart was fain to listen, and I bade my comrades loose me...'(12.183–93). Though the resources at the Sirens' disposal are the same as in the first passage, namely, 'voice' and 'song,' here the Sirens are described as delighting and imparting knowledge rather than as delighting and enchanting. Now, the knowledge imparted by the Sirens can derive only from the content of their song, and not from their voice, and it is reasonable to assume that the Sirens' 'sweet' and 'beautiful' voice causes the pleasure created by their song.[14] Hence, the two passages prove to be completely parallel: the

13 The distinction is not accidental. If Odysseus follows Circe's instructions, he will not stay to listen to the Sirens' song and so will not be enchanted by it as other travellers were; the only consequence of his giving ear safely but briefly to the Sirens will be enjoyment derived from their pleasurable voices. Note that not only the Sirens, but Calypso and Circe as well are represented as having beautiful voices (5.61, 10.221 and 227); though the last two also practice magic, that has nothing to do with their voices, see 1.56–7, 10.213, 235–7, 290–1, 316–20, 326.

14 The inner structure of the Sirens' address to Odysseus substantiates this distinction: of the two promises made by the Sirens, the promise of pleasure concludes the Sirens' description of their delightful voice, whereas the promise of knowledge introduces their characterization of the content of their song. This is not to say, of course, that the distinction is always clear-cut: 'voice' and 'song' (that is, the verbal content of a poem) are distinct in that only the latter is regarded as bearing the Sirens' message, but they overlap in that both are seen as possessed of aesthetic qualities, see λιγυρὴ ἀοιδή 12.44 and 183, *cf.* Verdenius, 16, n. 3.

effect of the content of the Sirens' song, as distinct from the pleasure of hearing their voice, is called 'enchantment' by Circe and 'acquiring knowledge' by the Sirens themselves. In other words, *enchantment and acquiring knowledge are one and the same effect of the Sirens' singing.*

This conclusion accords with our previous observation that only hearing a new story or song produces enchantment in the listener. Indeed, if an audience is eager to listen to a traveller who has seen 'cities of many men' 'till the bright dawn' or 'even for a year,' it is not surprising that Homeric man is irresistibly tempted to listen to the omniscient Sirens forever and ever (*cf.* Maehler, 30–1). Significantly, enchantment produced by a human narrator ends when his subject is exhausted: Penelope did not go to sleep till Odysseus had told her the whole story (23.308–9), and Alcinous was eager to listen to Odysseus until the narration had returned to its starting-point (12.450–3). However, the subject matter of the Sirens, who know 'all things,' cannot be exhausted: hence the enchantment produced by them never ceases.[15] Like the difference between human and divine knowledge, of which it is a reflection, the difference between the enchantment produced by men and the Sirens' enchantment seems to be only one of degree.[16]

In the everyday context of the singer's performance, listening to a song whose content was already known to the audience would have been the norm. Consequently, the function of song as a means of entertainment would have come to the fore. The song of the Sirens restores the balance of functions inherent in Homer's conception of epic song. This song both delights and enchants: it delights, because listening to the Sirens' voice affords pleasure, just as do the singer's melodies, and his words,[17] and it enchants, because in their song they impart knowledge of everything that happens in the world — just as the Muses' song is divine evidence of events of the past (see *Il.*

15 The comparison in W.B. Stanford, *The Odyssey of Homer,* I (London 1967), 412, of the temptation of the Sirens with that of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge in *Genesis* seems to be pertinent. See also S.H. Butcher, 'The Greek Love for Knowledge,' in: *Harvard Lectures on Greek Subjects* (London 1904), 97, and Verdenius, 32 and n. 87.

16 *Cf.* Verdenius, 27, n. 68. On the relation between human and divine knowledge in Homer see B. Snell, *The Discovery of the Mind,* trans. T.G. Rosenmeyer (New York 1960), 136–52, and E. Heitsch, 'Das Wissen des Xenophanes,' *RhM* 109 (1966), 196.

17 See φόρμιγγα λίγειαν (n. 3), ἱμερόεσσαν ἀοιδήν 1.421, 18.304, ἡδεῖαν ἀοιδήν 8.64, ἔπε' ἱμερόεντα 17.519. *Cf.* n. 14.

2.484–93). Accordingly, enchantment is that effect of song which results directly from this essential function. That is why, though only on rare occasions is a specific song said to have produced enchantment, ideally, the singer 'ever' arouses the 'insatiate desire to hear,' and songs in general are 'spells of mortals.'

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Though the effect of poetry most frequently mentioned in Homer is undoubtedly pleasure, pleasure was not the only effect Homer intended for poetry to produce. Thus, the poet's request for knowledge in the invocation of the Muses preceding the Catalogue of Ships cannot be accounted for in terms of pleasure (see *Il.* 2.484–93). In this context, it is of the utmost importance to keep in mind that the effects of poetry described in the epics are in fact the effects of *performance,* which involved not only recitation but also music and dancing. Performance, with its surrounding social context, was the sole form in which the oral poem, or the 'song,' could be actualized in oral societies. Still, the whole of the oral poem did not reside in performance.[18] True, the Homeric singer, professionally committed as he is to satisfying the community's need for entertainment, was one of the δημιοεργοί; but his song was also the song of the Muses, deriving from the goddesses' knowledge of everything that happens on earth: this is why the singer is called 'divine,' and his song 'inspired.'[19] That is to say that though the song of the Muses is employed as a

18 The importance of distinguishing between oral performance and the oral poem as a 'text' was recognized by J. B. Hainsworth and Ruth Finnegan. Thus, Hainsworth, though he admits that 'the oral poem properly speaking is knowable only through its performances,' proposes to separate the performance from the poem and to 'set the performance apart for its own special criticism,' 'The Criticism of an Oral Homer,' *JHS* 90 (1970), 90, 98. Finnegan, while stating that 'an oral poem is an essentially ephemeral work of art, and has no existence or continuity apart from its performance,' at the same time warns against the reduction of oral poetry to its performance, arguing that 'the linguistic content — the text — provides the frame and focus of the piece [of oral poetry], whatever the surrounding circumstances,' *Oral Poetry* (Cambridge 1977), 28–9.

19 θεῖος ἀοιδός 1.336, 4.17, 8.43, 47, 87 and 539, 13.27, 16.252, 17.359, 23.133 and 143, 24.439, *cf.* also *Il.* 18.604; θέσπις (the song) 1.328, 8.498, (the singer) 17.385; *cf.* also *Il.* 2.599–600 ἀοιδὴν / θεσπεσίην. *Cf.* Verdenius, 27, n. 68: 'the constant influence of the Muse elevates the singer to a semi-divine status.'

means of entertainment, the Muses are not δημιοεργοί, and their song is not meant for entertainment alone. The Muses' song is also the vehicle through which men have access to things not given to them in their immediate experience. In oral societies like that of Homer, nothing else can fulfil this function.[20]

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20 *Cf.* E.R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley 1951), 81: 'But in an age which possessed no written documents, where should firsthand evidence be found? Just as the truth about the future would be attained only if man were in touch with a knowledge wider than his own, so the truth about the past could be preserved only on a like condition.' True, knowledge acquired by means of song is usually not actualized at the time of performance; but it is present virtually whenever Homeric man demonstrates his acquaintance with events of the past.