

II

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Epic as genre

“Φήμιε, πολλὰ γὰρ ἄλλα βροτῶν θελκτήρια οἶδας,
ἔργ’ ἀνδρῶν τε θεῶν τε, τὰ τε κλείουσιν ἄοιδοί.”
(*Odyssey* I.337–38)

‘Phemios, you know many other enchantments of mortals,
deeds of men and of gods, those things that the singers memorialize.’

With these words Penelope attempts to steer the Ithacan bard Phemios away from his ongoing saga of the Achaeans’ homecoming and toward what would be for her a far less painful tale. In the process she offers precious testimony that his repertoire contains many other enchanting stories, accounts of human and divine actions that singers keep alive by celebration in epic performance. But Penelope’s words could also serve as a first approximation for epic, and not only in the Homeric context. As an international genre, epic always involves stories that enchant; it often features both humans and gods; and, most centrally, it memorialises the events that singers celebrate.

Beyond Penelope’s working definition, however, lies a world of variety, a world we have not always seen fit to explore or, having glimpsed its unfamiliar territory, actively taken into account. Does ‘the epic’ exist as one in a series of chapters constituting an overall cycle, or is it best understood as a singular and freestanding work? The answer will depend on whether we choose the Turkic and Mongolian epics of *Manas* and *Gesar*, for example, or the medieval Spanish *Poema de mio Cid*. Does ‘the epic’ involve performance features such as musical accompaniment and dancing? Is it situated in a ritual context? Once again, no absolute set of features conveniently characterises the west African *Son-jara*, Altai narrative from central Asia and the *Iliad*. Can the story behind ‘the epic’ be told or referenced through any other genres by different performers? Certainly the mythology behind the south Indian *Siri Epic* can take alternate forms, but not every epic story worldwide is available in different generic media. Length versus terseness, poetry versus mixed prose and poetry, tales of heroic combat versus stories of origin and descent – all these and many more commonly applied distinctions simply are not diagnostic of epic, which refuses to be pigeonholed according to the

dictates of any single culture, time or place. Thus the first goal of this chapter is to sketch the fundamental diversity of epic, to show by example how this master-genre takes many different shapes internationally and through time.¹

Paired with this aim is a second goal: to examine those features that scholars have identified as emblematic of or intimately related to the genre of epic *as we know it from Homer's poems*. For this purpose we will be concerned with many of the characteristics and topics previewed in part one of the chapter, such as length, omnibus genre (the epic's appropriation of other genres), diction and narrative pattern, the role of prologues, catalogues, and similes, national character, heroic attitudes and actions and the 'author' Homer. Which if any of these much-discussed features truly help us understand the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* as members of an international category of verbal art? On the other hand, which of them assist us in seeing and hearing the ancient Greek epics as something unique? It is well to remember that the profile of Homeric epic has had far-reaching influence outside its immediate context; the search for epic around the world has very often been focused – and sometimes severely constrained – by the unexamined assumption that 'the epic' is a universal, archetypal form identical or extremely similar to the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Scholars have not seldom tried to discover Homeric epic where it does not (and cannot) exist, and therein lies a cautionary tale of the need for diversity in frame of reference.²

One final preliminary matter should be addressed. In the interest of fairness and full disclosure, I should preface our discussion with a disclaimer. 'Epic' is of course an invented concept, a Western imposition on the natural heterogeneity of long narrative forms from cultures around the world. Stemming ultimately from ancient Greek *epos*, which spans the field from 'word' to 'tale' in Homer, and the popular term *epopoia* ('verse composition'), ancient

¹ For additional resources on the heterogeneity of the epic genre, see esp. Oinas (1978), Hatto (1980), Beissinger *et al.* (1999), and McCarthy (2001). Limitations of space make it impossible to cover more than a few examples of worldwide epic within this chapter; I especially regret not treating such major traditions as Arabic (Connelly (1986), Reynolds (1995)), Russian (Bailey and Ivanova (1998)), and Old French (Brault (1978a, b)). It has even been claimed that Native America produced a heroic epic in Inyo-kutavêre's *Mohave Epic* (Hatto (1999)). I leave aside here the question of Hesiod's and later Greek poets' epic and non-epic poetry, as well as the *Homeric Hymns* that are in some respects so closely related to the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*; see further Dowden in this volume, as well as Clay (1989) and Foley (1995) 136–80 on the *Hymns*.

² As recently as 1980, John William Johnson had to counter the conventional wisdom by showing that 'Yes, Virginia, There is an Epic in Africa'. Since that time, numerous editions, translations and studies of African epics have appeared; see esp. Johnson (1992), Johnson *et al.* (1997), Hale (1998), Belcher (1999), and, more generally, Okpewho (1975), (1992) 202–3.

Greek epic has been described as a genre in some depth since Aristotle;³ once canonised, it became a literary tool of unquestioned usefulness and applicability worldwide, primarily on the cultural and ideological strength of its Greco-Roman origins. Like all genre labels, ‘epic’ can help focus our vision, creating categories that facilitate comparison and contrast as well as filling in a background against which individual tales can be understood. In that sense it can function as an effective organising principle, and generic identity can certainly serve as a tool for effective reading. But, as already adumbrated, neither ‘the epic’ nor any other genre is an archetype. The nations and individuals who produce ‘epics’ have no uniform code of generic requirements; indeed, even their internal systems of nomenclature for various kinds of verbal art prove radically divergent.⁴ The fact is that – everywhere in the myriad traditions outside ancient Greek – ‘the epic’ is an analytic rather than an indigenous concept and label, and in applying it uncritically to long narrative forms from other cultures we run the risk of unintentionally colonizing their verbal art. Any gains we register by using this well established label should thus be weighed against its endemic shortcomings. What I attempt below is offered in that spirit.

Epic as cornucopia

Although any survey of international epics will inevitably present only a partial view of their richness and complexity, I have chosen traditions from India, North Asia, Africa, the Former Yugoslavia, Finland and England that in their variety begin to reflect the larger world in which the Homeric poems exist. In the order that we will examine them, the witnesses are: the *Siri Epic* from the Tulu people, the Gesar and Janggar traditions from Mongolia and Tibet, the *Mwindo Epic* from the Banyanga and the *Son-Jara* from Mali, the South Slavic epics from Bosnia, Croatia and Serbia, the Finnish *Kalevala* as collected and edited by Elias Lönnrot, and *Beowulf* from Anglo-Saxon England. This mix of contemporary and older epics, of living traditions and manuscript works, will provide points of both convergence and divergence from the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, as well as assist us in framing problems in ancient Greek epic that the paucity of direct evidence leaves insoluble. Again, I make no pretence whatsoever to thoroughgoing or even absolutely representative

³ On the origins and ancient use of this terminology, see Ford (1997) 396–99. Martin (1989) esp. 10–14 contrasts *epos* and *muthos* within Homer.

⁴ On local, ethnic labels created and used by each culture to name its verbal arts versus the analytic conception of ‘epic’ applied externally from Western scholarship, see Honko (1998) 205–6.

coverage, but bring these examples forward simply to sketch a fuller, more natural context for the Homeric epics that are our primary focus. Hopefully, these very brief remarks on international epic will set the stage for highlighting Homer's shared qualities and his uniqueness in part two of this chapter.

In December 1990 a team of Finnish and Indian fieldworkers responded to a request by the Tulu singer and possession priest Gopala Naika to record his performance of the *Siri Epic*, which in the event totalled some 15,683 lines of sung narrative.⁵ The story concerns the exemplary female character Siri and three generations of her descendants in a matrilineal society, and belongs to the Tulu people living in Karnataka province in southern India. Its mythology is not held at arm's length or treated merely as entertainment; the story of Siri informs people's everyday lives as a group charter of religious and ethnic identity. In addition to the long narrative, the Siri mythology also takes the separate forms of ancestor worship, pre-wedding celebrations, and work songs sung by people engaged in palm-tree tapping and plucking seedlings from rice paddies. This is to say nothing of the lengthy rituals that may last all night, in which different individuals are possessed by Siri and her son Kumara. Within the ecology of genres that serve as vehicles for various aspects of the story, Gopala Naika's narrative performance is a remarkable species, to be sure. But it is just one species in a complex, interactive ecosystem, and the critical act of singling it out and textualising it begins to detach his poem from its cultural and expressive environment.

Even these few observations highlight both similarities to and differences from the Homeric poems. The *Siri Epic* is only five lines shorter than the *Iliad*; were we to inquire further into its composite structure, we would find constituent parts not unlike the *Odyssey*'s main narrative, the Telemacheia (Books II–IV), and the Apologia (Books IX–XII). But in the Tulu epic we encounter a female hero, together with a general deprecation of male figures and a virtual absence of violence, none of which the Western model of epic leads us to expect. And in addition to the common epic trait of serving as a digest of smaller genres, it soon becomes clear that the *Siri Epic* is in active symbiosis with other genres, apparently because of the broadly and deeply functional role of the Siri-Kumara mythology in social life. More thorough examination would also uncover the building blocks of narrative composition typical of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, that is, the formulas and typical

⁵ For the original text and English translation, see Honko *et al.* (1998a), (1998b); for context, Honko (1998) and Honko and Honko (2000). For additional sources on other Indian epics, see esp. Blackburn *et al.* (1989), Richman (1991) and Smith (1991).

scenes that have become familiar to readers of Homer.⁶ But, as common sense would suggest, the Tulu epic's building blocks have their own size, shape and flexibility, as well as their own set of idiomatic implications. Based on only this single analogy, we can already see 'the epic' resisting any neat definition by recipe. Penelope's description still holds, of course, but we might wonder how much further it is prudent to go.

That impression deepens as one looks across the vast expanse of North Asia, in particular at the enormous epic cycles featuring the heroes Gesar and Janggar.⁷ Sung in numerous different societies in a broad range of Turkic languages as well as Mongolian and Tibetan, these epics can run to literally hundreds of thousands of lines, dwarfing European epics. Depending on the region, singers may employ instruments for musical accompaniment or sing *a cappella*; they may depend on the magical resources of certain implements or on particular costumes; and their stories may be grounded in indigenous or foreign religions. Over time pre-performance rituals such as prayers have become part of the epics themselves, while detached performances have found their way into printed volumes and wood-block representations. Among Tibetan composers of epic (*sgrungmkhan*) are found bards who are also sorcerers, shamans, and even an associate professor; as in much of the rest of the world, the supposed boundary between orality and literacy is hardly absolute.⁸ But perhaps the most intriguing of the *sgrungmkhan* are the so-called 'paper-singers', illiterate bards who gaze intently at a sheet of white paper as they perform. Contrary to our expectation, the sheet contains no text, not even notes; it is completely blank. And if no blank paper is available, this kind of singer simply resorts to some newsprint; since he can't read, it hardly matters. As he explains, looking at the paper brings the epic's action to his mind in visual form, and that is what he sings.⁹

Modelled after the North Asian epics, and especially the performances of the Tibetan paper-singers, our definition has to make room for a host of unfamiliar phenomena. First is the criterion of length: no Western epic can match the Gesar and Janggar stories, one of which was published in Beijing in a version of more than one million verses. Apart from their sheer size, these epics also present the riddle of the *cycle*, a loosely confederated series of episodes in which a main hero like the Mongolian Janggar presides

⁶ On these traditional units, see Clark in this volume, as well as Foley (1990) chs. 4, 7; (1991) chs. 1, 2, 5; (1999a) chs. 5–7.

⁷ On the Turkic epic tradition, see Reichl (1992), (2000); on Uzbek, Reichl (2001); on Mongolian, Heissig (1987), Chogjin (1997), Chogjin and Foley (2002); on Tibetan, Yang (1998).

⁸ See further Yang (1998); on the interaction of orality and literacy more generally, Finnegan (1992).

⁹ For more on the paper-singer, see Foley (2002a) Four Scenarios.

over a troop of subsidiary heroes to whom he (and the poetic tradition) delegate many of the individual adventures. Whether the most basic unit of such epics is the so-called ‘canto’, which may itself cover many thousands of verses, or the larger superstructure, which is always imminent but almost never performed as a sequenced whole, is a problem created by imposing the Western notion of an epic text complete in itself.¹⁰ As for the structural and expressive units of North Asian epic, once again research has shown that singers do employ building blocks of diction and narrative to make and remake their epics, but that these constituent materials little resemble the formulas and typical scenes in Homer’s compositional repertoire. The paper-singer – and each of his counterparts in proximate, related epic traditions – is *sui generis* in more ways than one.

The *Mwindo Epic* of the Banyanga and the *Son-Jara* from Mali provide us with additional points of discrimination on the international spectrum of epic. The former of these long African narratives recounts the mythical history of its focal character, Mwindo, from his family background and miraculous birth through celestial and subterranean journeys and a dragon hunt. The version collected and translated by Daniel Biebuyck (1969) was performed by Shé-Kárisi Candi Rureke, fifty years old at the time and the last great local bard in a tradition that stems from three cultural traditions – the Pygmies, Bahimbi and Nyanga. According to conventional practice, bards perform with the assistance of relatives who provide musical instrumentation and who themselves know extensive passages from the epic in question (13): ‘Episode by episode, the epic is first sung, then narrated. While singing and narrating, the bard dances, mimes, and dramatically represents the main peripeties of the story. In this dramatic representation, the bard takes the role of the hero.’ The multimedia presentation also incorporates most of the smaller genres of verbal art in the Nyanga repertoire, and reflects in its content the major institutions, values, behaviour patterns and cultural artefacts of the society.

The epic of *Son-Jara*, as performed by the Mande bard Fa-Digi Sisòkò, offers a complementary perspective on heroic epic from this continent.¹¹ Narrated entirely in poetic verse through three subsidiary channels – the narrative, song and praise-poetry modes – it demonstrates a number of familiar characteristics: substantial length (thousands of lines), heroic content, multi-generic makeup and social embedding. Interestingly, the epic also ‘plays a

¹⁰ This point also bears on the nature of the shadowy remains of now-lost Homeric-era poems we call the Epic Cycle. See further Dowden in this volume; also Holmberg (1998), Foley (1999b) and Burgess (2001).

¹¹ See Johnson (1992).

definitive role in building a sense of national identity, in spite of the fact that political boundaries drawn by French and British colonial powers persist in dividing these peoples' (Johnson (1992) 11). Bards or *jeli* serve a complex set of social functions, including chronicler and analyser of the group's history, entertainer, preserver of social customs, and seer or mediator. Their performances employ a specialised language of episodes, typical scenes and smaller increments, a metrically complex idiom that requires years to master. At origin a historical figure whose actual reign predated modern collection by seven centuries and more, the focal character Son-Jara has attracted to himself a whole constellation of heroic deeds and become a composite culture hero.

By themselves these two vital and multidimensional traditions settle the once-debated question of whether epic exists in Africa, and numerous publications over the last two decades have closed the case.¹² But the vast panorama of African epic holds some surprises for Homeric scholarship. For example, Mr Rureke, narrator of the *Mwindo Epic*, was mystified by fieldworkers' requests that he perform the entire epic, claiming that bards always told a part or parts of the whole; indeed, Biebuyck reports, he 'repeatedly asserted that never before had he performed the whole story within a continuous span of days' ((1969) 14). Were we to conduct a thorough survey of the world's epic traditions, we would find that this 'immanent' approach to epic performance – letting the part stand for the implied whole – is in fact a very common strategy that reflects the traditional, non-textual nature of composition and reception.¹³ Likewise, the variety among published versions of the Son-Jara story – some of them telegraphically told with a great deal left implicit and others augmented by their translators with the kind of detail that makes outsiders' reading easier – shows the same dependence on understood, inexplicit context.¹⁴ Among many other things, the African narratives teach us that 'the epic' lives beyond the borders of any single performance or text, although it idiomatically informs each one of them. Audiences are crucial partners in the transaction of epic.

Because of Milman Parry's and Albert Lord's comparative research,¹⁵ South Slavic epic may be more familiar than the other traditions so far cited,

¹² See n. 2 above. ¹³ See esp. Foley (1991) chs. 1–2; (2002a) Fifth Word.

¹⁴ For example, compare Johnson's (1992) translation of an actual performance, which depends upon an implicit context, with the reconstructed, filled-out version published by Niane (1989). The latter is easier (for the outsider) to follow, but at what cost?

¹⁵ See Parry (1971), Lord (2000), and Foley (1988) (history of the method), (1985) (bibliography with updates available online at www.oraltradition.org). The first fruits of their collecting are published in *SCHS*; for a digest of South Slavic epic in the Milman Parry Collection, see Kay (1995).

although most readers are probably better acquainted with structural profiles and measurements than with the epics themselves. Two major subgenres comprise this tradition: the longer Moslem epic, which can reach tens of thousands of lines and stems chiefly from present-day Bosnia and Croatia, and the much shorter Christian epic found largely in Serbia. Parry and Lord concentrated on recording the Moslem songs because of their similarity to Homer's works in length and elaboration, and they especially favoured those with story patterns like Return (strikingly similar to the *Odyssey*), Wedding and Siege of a City. Their analyses turned up units of expression that seemed cognate with Homeric formulas, typical scenes and larger narrative sequences, and on that basis they posited an oral tradition for Homer. Moreover, South Slavic epic's apparent congruency with the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* suggested the hypothesis of oral epic as an archetypal form, a sweeping concept that both promoted and hindered further research.

Addressed on its own terms, the extremely well collected tradition of the *guslari* offers a great deal more than tangible ballast for hypotheses drawn from the Homeric texts. Through the systemic variety of songs and song-types with overlapping and interlocking heroes and events, we can begin to see how epic lives and develops on a grand scale. Of course, we can manufacture well ordered cycles from what is actually a loose confederation of stories by aggressive and selective textualising, by converting a living organism into a museum exhibit. But in reality every performance samples an implied whole, a context that supplies 'missing' content as part of the idiomatic process of composition and reception. South Slavic epic also furnishes us with a helpful perspective on the identity of legendary singers, those larger-than-life figures who bear such a close resemblance to the mysterious Homer.¹⁶

Authorship presents a different set of issues for the Finnish *Kalevala*. This massive epic poem, collected and assembled from Karelian oral fragments by the physician-scholar Elias Lönnrot, stands as one prominent and far-reaching instance of the nineteenth-century European quest for ethnic identity in the verbal arts of the folk. In this ideological respect it mirrors the Christian subgenre of epic collected from Serbian singers during the same period by Vuk Stefanović Karadžić.¹⁷ Scholarship has established the dimensions of the *Kalevala*'s specialised language, from its recurrent phraseology

¹⁶ See further part two, 'Homer's epics', below.

¹⁷ On the *Kalevala*, see esp. DuBois (1995), Honko (1998) 169–76, Branch (1994) and Harvi-lahti (1994). On the Christian subgenre of South Slavic epic, see, e.g. the selected translations by Holton and Mihailovich (1997) and commentary in Foley (1991) ch. 4 and (2002a) Eighth Word.

through larger scenic patterns. Additionally, there is no doubt that the poem reflects social realities and acts as a mythological digest, and we would be hard pressed to find an epic anywhere in the world that has had a greater effect on the literary and visual arts, music and group identity of its inheritors. As far as the measure of mere size (the 1849 edition contains 22,795 lines), the presence of features such as catalogues, and the inclusion of other genres (especially charms), the *Kalevala* certainly qualifies as epic and furnishes numerous parallels to Homer.

But, like the other works and traditions surveyed here, the Finnish epic also presents us with some idiosyncratic qualities and features. Foremost is the role of Lönnrot, who, in addition to having served as collector and editor, was also an active contributor to the poem as we have it. A series of field trips provided 'real' materials, to be sure, but he reshaped the rather short poems he recorded by arranging them into a long narrative and creating his own lines (about 3 per cent of the entire poem) to fill out individual passages and interstices. The result is effectively an invented epic, or at least a composite form for which no separate, bona fide evidence survives.¹⁸ And this in turn begs the question of genesis and transmission more generally. In how many other cases worldwide and throughout time have editors learned the language of composition well and thoroughly enough to intercede in the making and remaking of epic? What is to prevent this kind of 'traditional editing' as part of the process of transmission, even after an oral epic reaches written form, and how does that possibility affect our understanding of ancient works (like the Homeric poems) whose early history is shrouded in doubt?¹⁹ As we have seen with other epics, the *Kalevala* demands that we open up the genre of 'the epic' even further, that we continue to pluralise the model.

At first sight *Beowulf* may appear to be a near-perfect generic fit with the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.²⁰ We recognise many familiar ingredients in this Anglo-Saxon poem: a tale of heroic accomplishment in the face of overwhelming odds, a specialised diction and narrative style, national character (though ultimately Danish and Swedish, rather than properly English), a prologue and catalogues, and multiple constituent genres. The fact that it reaches to only 3,182 lines, rather than the nearly 16,000 of the *Iliad* or the hundreds of thousands of *Gesar* or *Janggar* epic, still leaves it the longest poem in

¹⁸ As Honko puts it (1998) 176 'the patches may be identical with oral poems, but the patchwork as a whole is Lönnrot's vision of a long epic'.

¹⁹ Cf. the report of 'formulaic reading' by Anglo-Saxon scribes who recreated poetic works as they copied them (O'Keeffe (1990) esp. 23–46).

²⁰ For various perspectives on *Beowulf*, see Bjork and Niles (1997).

the surviving canon of Old English poetry. Once we make adjustments for the idiosyncratic metrical makeup of Anglo-Saxon verse, the units of formula and typical scene reveal their presence and function. Even the internal descriptions of bards or *scopas* – Hrothgar’s court singer and the minstrel-on-horseback are two – resemble the idealised portraits of the Ithacan Phemios and Phaeacian Demodokos. Small wonder, then, that *Beowulf* has often been summoned as an analogy for the Homeric poems.

Even this close-kin European epic, however, strains the first impression of close equivalence. For one thing, *Beowulf* is unique: we have just one epic, just one version, just one manuscript. No alternative tellings or even alternative readings survive; we know of no tradition of scholia or other textual commentary from pre-modern times. The 32,000 lines of Old English poetry harbour saints’ lives, elegies and other lyrics, biblical paraphrases, riddles, maxims, charms and other genres, and many of these smaller forms help to constitute *Beowulf* itself.²¹ But there is no other epic (besides the fragmentary *Waldere*), and this fact alone leaves us at somewhat of a loss in formulating a secure generic classification that would help us understand *Beowulf* in relation to other Old English poetry as well as to comparative epic. Fortunately, however, the uniform system of language and implication across the Anglo-Saxon poetic spectrum – qualified only by the different roles of individual genres in the overall ecology – means that the implied context we have seen as a characteristic of other epic traditions also plays a part here. Phrases that occur in *Beowulf* echo against recurrences in the hagiographic *Andreas*, for example, while typical scenes like Exile and the Beasts of Battle ramify throughout the corpus.²² Complementarily, within *Beowulf* itself we can glimpse the poet’s immanent art in the telegraphic references made to other tales from the Germanic story-hoard. As with other epic traditions, mere intelligibility can hinge on information or perspectives that the composing poet assumes to be available to the audience and thus does not explicitly rehearse in the present performance or text. As with so many other epics, but of course in its own fashion, *Beowulf* is much more than the sum of its (literal) parts.

If these few examples illustrate anything, they reveal the necessity for an open-ended model of ‘the epic’. Although strategic choice of a few different traditions can lend credence to a more restricted concept of the genre, a fair evaluation of evidence from international sources and throughout history points in the other direction. This larger world in which Homeric epic

²¹ On the composite generic nature of *Beowulf*, see esp. Harris (1982).

²² On this phenomenon of ‘leakage’ among genres in Old English, ancient Greek, and South Slavic oral and oral-derived poetry, see Foley (2002b).

exists is more diverse than we have usually acknowledged. For such reasons Lauri Honko proposed a functional definition, claiming that ‘epics are great narratives about exemplars, originally performed by specialised singers as superstories which excel in length, power of expression and significance of content over other narratives and function as a source of identity representations in the traditional community or group receiving the epic’ ((1998) 28). This perspective fits the witnesses examined above rather comfortably, from the *Siri Epic* and North Asian cycles of Gesar and Janggar through the African masterworks celebrating Mwindo and Son-Jara and the songs of the South Slavic *guslar* and Anglo-Saxon *scop*; even the *Kalevala*, refracted through its collector-editor-‘singer’ Lönnrot, squares with this idea, at least to a degree. But that after all is the point – even so wide-ranging a definition as Honko’s cannot ever perfectly capture the manysidedness of ‘the epic’. In the end, I advocate a two-part procedure: first, giving each epic its due by adopting Penelope’s non-parochial concept of ‘those things that the singers memorialise’; and, second, providing realistic comparisons by placing Homer’s epics against the background of as informed and diverse a model as we can muster.

Homer’s epics

In this second section we reverse our procedure, working outward from features customarily cited as characteristics of Homeric epic toward the wider international context sketched in part one. Our purpose here is twofold: to identify often-cited generic symptoms of Homeric epic (even if they are derived only or primarily from that source) and to inquire whether a comparative perspective sheds any light on their centrality and function. Towards that end we will be considering – very briefly, due to limitations of space – the parameters of length, omnibus genre, diction and narrative pattern, the role of prologues, catalogues, and similes, national character, heroic attitudes and action, and the ‘author’ Homer.

As the North Asian epics have taught us, the *Iliad* and *Odyseey* are actually of middling length on an international scale. The epics of *Janggar* and *Manas* can run to ten times their size, while the *Siri Epic* from southern India about matches the *Iliad* and the South Slavic songs vary from a few hundred to many thousands of verses. Given this range, we may conclude that length is a property of the individual tradition. Relatively few epics are smaller in extent than the Homeric poems – *Beowulf* at 3,182 lines and the hundred-odd medieval French *chansons de geste* at about the same or lesser length are examples – but many are far longer. A more dependable characteristic of epic across cultures is the often-cited feature of ‘omnibus genre’, that is,

the extent to which the epic absorbs or is in conversation with other poetic genres in the cultural repertoire. Critics have identified prayers, laments, proverbs, catalogues and inset stories within the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, though of course the generic inventory is hard to assess from the shards of ancient poetry that survive to us. What we can say, however, is that all of these forms and more are found in living, well-documented traditions, and further that they act as cues with special indexical force. Thus, whether we are speaking of the elegiac passages in *Beowulf* or the catalogues of the *Kalevala* or the proverbs embedded in South Slavic epic, the general theorem is clear: the master-genre of epic uses the poetic resources of other genres as part of its overall expressive program.

Closely related to these issues is the trademark diction and narrative patterning of Homeric epic, about which an enormous amount of research has been published. The presence of formulas, such as ‘swift-footed Achilles’ or ‘wine-dark sea’, has often been cited as an indication of the Homeric poems’ debt to an ancient Greek oral tradition, as has the recurrence of typical scenes like Arming the Hero or Feasting. However we envision the relationship of our texts of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* to their origins, this special ‘register’ or way of speaking has long been counted as an important aspect of Homer’s epic style. In addition to their structural contribution, these strategies have expressive implications: formulas, typical scenes, and story patterns can contribute idiomatically as well as tectonically. The phrase ‘green fear’ (*chlōron deos*), for instance, constitutes a ‘large word’ in itself and means ‘supernatural fear’ in Homer, although neither of its elements has anything to do with divinity. When Andromache pleads with Hector in *Iliad* 6 to remain inside Troy with her and Astyanax, her use of the traditional scene of Lament – customarily a vehicle for actually mourning the dead – suggests the inevitability of her husband’s demise. The Return story pattern of the *Odyssey*, mirrored in a host of Indo-European epic traditions, accounts for the order and sequence of the poem (which starts not ‘in the middle’, but at the traditionally prescribed beginning), for Penelope’s trademark intransigence (ambiguity is a powerful weapon for this sort of heroine), and for the closure of the poem after Book XXIII, line 296. Homer’s specialised language is useful not only structurally but also idiomatically.²³

As reported in part one of the chapter, traditional phraseology and narrative patterning seem to be characteristic of oral and oral-derived epics around the world and throughout history, with one crucial caveat. Each tradition moulds its register according to a different set of rules, which are in

²³ For discussion of these and dozens more examples of what I call ‘traditional referentiality’ in Homer, see Foley (1991), (1999a).

turn based on the natural characteristics of the given language. That is, we will find formulas and typical scenes throughout the African *Son-Jara*, the medieval Spanish *Poema de mio Cid*, and other epics that bear some relation to oral tradition, but they will not match Homer's traditional units exactly. For instance, formulas in Mongolian epic, which must obey a complex regimen of head-rhyme and vowel harmony and can stretch to as many as six verses in length, will not answer the same definition as the Homeric formula, which takes shape within a hexameter medium and is usually limited to a line or part-line. Likewise, and predictably, the idiomatic yield of phrases, scenes and story patterns will always be a function of the particular tradition to which an epic belongs. Once again, the watchword is diversity, even in regard to parallel features.²⁴

Homeric epic has drawn definition from other stylistic features as well, very prominently from its prologues, catalogues and similes. The *Iliad* begins with an appeal to the Muse and a sketch of the mythic background to the action that follows, and the *Odyssey* starts similarly, with particular attention to Odysseus' striving and an exhortation to the Muse to 'speak also to us' (*eipe kai hēmin*). Correspondingly, the *Siri Epic* begins with an extensive series of invocations (not unlike the Hymns, which some scholars believe may have preceded ancient Greek epic performance²⁵), while South Slavic songs also make use of *pripjevi*, or prologues, to start up the narrative action. The difference is that neither the Tulu incantations nor the South Slavic proems have any direct, necessary connection to the subsequent action; in the latter case, a *guslar* can and does use the same initiatory passage with different stories. *Beowulf's* prologue, even briefer at only three lines, seems to fall between these poles in its relationship to the narrative that follows, attached in general to the story-hoard of Germanic heroic mythology. Unattached to either Beowulf or the eponymous hero Scyld Scefing, it sounds very much like proems to other Old English poems (of different genres) like the saint's life *Andreas* or even the lyric *Dream of the Rood*. The opening lines of *Son-Jara* create an arena for what follows with nested references to praise-names, cosmology and performance. Across the epic spectrum we usually find some sort of cue that announces what Dell Hymes has called a 'break-through into performance',²⁶ but once again the nature of the cue is tradition-dependent.

²⁴ Very importantly, other genres besides epic demonstrate this same characteristic of an expressive register, usually quite different from epic and from each other.

²⁵ See further Foley (1995) 144–9.

²⁶ See Hymes (1975) (1981). Note also that the Parry Collection abounds with South Slavic epic performances embedded in conversations with singers, who announce the change in speech-act – from interview to epic – via traditional *pripjevi*, or 'prologues'.

The same is true for catalogues and similes. The famous Catalogue of Ships and Men in Book 2 of the *Iliad* and the how-to manual for building a raft in Book v of the *Odyssey* have many analogues in international epic. African epics codify history, for example, and the *Kalevala* includes ethnobotanical and aetiological catalogues as part of its presentation. In the South Slavic Moslem epic, muster-lists of combatants for a great war are virtually required if the song is to be sung at any length, and *Beowulf* certainly presents us with genealogies that fit a similar expressive slot. Homeric similes, on the other hand, have fewer true analogues elsewhere. While many epics make use of elegant comparisons, often – like Homer’s poems – aligning the hurly-burly of the present narrative moment with quieter scenes from the untroubled world of nature, the multiline structure that stretches majestically from ‘As’ to ‘So’ seems uniquely Greek.²⁷ While Homer’s catalogues are of a sort and texture we find in other epic traditions, his similes seem to be distinctive.

National character – the epic as a charter of group identity, myth in the service of indigenous social history – is an aspect of many scholars’ concept of the genre. The two epics that survive from ancient Greece fit this idea clearly enough: the *Iliad* glorifies Achaean achievement in battle and the *Odyssey* memorialises the post-Troy return to one’s homeland with all the dangers and challenges such a journey and homecoming pose. In this respect the Mongolian and Tibetan *Janggar* epics offer an interesting lesson. Each group’s epic tradition is attuned to its ethnic history and serves as a sort of living heritage for its owners; in the Tibetan case the image of Janggar’s heroism is refracted through the lens of Buddhist values, while in Inner Mongolia the heritage lives even beyond the arena of epic, with people citing the actions of Janggar and other heroes and quoting famous singers’ words in everyday speech. Likewise, both Mwindo and Son-Jara function as culture heroes, as do Beowulf and the *Kalevala*’s Väinämöinen; the fact that these are larger-than-life or wholly invented characters only increases their power in the arena of epic. They embody ethnic and national values suprahistorically, by idealisation, and though their actions trace a culture’s self-concept in hyperbole and metaphor, they contain more than a grain of truth. Thus the South Slavic Prince Marko, famous for his outwitting of the Ottoman Turks who employ him as an unwilling mercenary, reflects the reality of what it was to be a Serb under the imposed control of the Ottoman Empire. Thus the hero-kings of *Beowulf* are praised for their ability to maintain political order in a world fraught with incursions by enemies and the accidents of fate. The relative transparency of modern tales and traditions makes it evident that the ‘epic ethos’ reaches far beyond its most immediate context, and well

²⁷ See further Buxton in this volume.

beyond where document-based history can go: the *Kalevala* has long fuelled the emergence of the Finns as an individual nation, as well as the discipline of folk-lore studies and the music of Sibelius. For national identity, epic is a foundational genre.

National character and group identity are often encoded in heroic actions, with a central focus on martial achievement, but there are other sorts of epic vehicles as well. Indeed, if we watch our generalisations carefully, we discover that heroism in the *Iliad* – the acts of war and winning of *kleos* on the battlefield, irrespective of whether one lives or dies – is not entirely coincident with heroism in the *Odyssey*, which consists of winning survival, return and re-establishment of the social order.²⁸ Just so, the *Siri Epic* portrays a long line of courageous women whose feats include surviving under difficult conditions, weaving together the social fabric and providing for succeeding generations. Simply because we find no battlefield glory in this remarkable epic narrative, we cannot refuse it membership in the larger international genre. Siri and her sisters are heroes of a different sort, as is the Finnish Lemminkäinen, whose very rashness and taste for wooing and adventure contribute to the *Kalevala*'s overall heroic and mythic dynamics. Even champions who in many ways parallel Achilles, Hector, Diomedes and Patroclus sometimes achieve their heroic ends by what we would call trickery, as when the South Slavic *junak* ('hero') Tale of Orašac wins the day when all others fail. Never mind that with his swayback horse, tattered peasant clothes and backwards-mounted standardbearer he looks the part of a foolish impostor; the fact is, as the epic itself puts it, 'Tamo bez njeg' hoda neimade' ('There's no going there [to war] without him').²⁹ Heroism can usually stand as a dependable indicator of epic, but only if we adjust its nature to each tradition's values and perspectives.

Finally, we reach the long-disputed question of Homer's identity as the epic poet of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Whatever perspective we select must deal with the often contradictory ancient testimony on his place of origin, parentage, historical provenance, repertoire and the like.³⁰ The nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Analysts imagined one or more master-editors who assembled our texts from constituent shorter songs, while the Unitarians insisted on a single genius author for both works. As a matter of habit we continue to refer to 'Homer' as if we could be confident of a historical bard

²⁸ See further Clarke in this volume.

²⁹ On this fascinating trickster figure, see Foley (1995) 32–41. On epic heroes more generally, see Miller (2000).

³⁰ See further the Introduction to this volume. For a full presentation of the argument made here, see Foley (1999a) 51–62.

at least chiefly responsible for the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* that have survived to us. But what if the Homeric question, as it is commonly called, amounted to a misconstrual of epic authorship? What if the terms in which we frame our investigation of his identity have imposed a false menu of possibilities?

The very multiformity of ‘Homer the epic poet’ as represented in the ancient sources – from the various lives of Homer through accounts from Herodotus, Plutarch and Proclus – argues for a legendary rather than a real, documentary figure. Instead of seeking to determine which of the disparate histories is true, or trying to reduce their obvious inconsistencies to one archetypal story from which others must have evolved, we would do better to understand Homer as an anthropomorphisation of the epic tradition, a name for the art and practice of epic poetry. Comparative evidence for this phenomenon is abundant. Interviews with South Slavic *guslari*, for example, turned up recurrent reference to a master-bard (called Isak, Huso, or Ćor Huso, among other names) who lived for decades beyond the normal life cycle, was born in many different locales, plied his trade over an extremely wide region (uncharacteristically for this tradition), accomplished heroic feats of epic performance, and was credited with an impossibly large repertoire (its specific contents varying from witness to witness, but always including ‘the best songs’). Most telling of all, none of the singers who describe this paragon ever actually met him: he was always one or two villages too far away or lived one too many generations back or in some other fashion existed just beyond the reach of time and place. Singers of Mongolian epic tell a similar kind of tale about the famous Choibang, again best understood as a legendary bard, a figure who far exceeded conventional human abilities in language, athletics, longevity, miraculous feats of performance and so forth. Even if a real figure stands somewhere behind one or more of these idealisations, the process of legend-making – so closely akin to the morphology and transmission of a traditional epic – has had its way with that historical kernel. Given the fit between the diverse ancient evidence on Homer and this model of the multiform epic bard, we should keep in mind that the most realistic answer to the Homeric question is not an individual *aoidos* but the collective epic tradition.

Conclusion

In summary, the early twenty-first century is an exciting time for epic studies, most immediately for the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* but also for their ever-widening international context. As the world continues to open up its treasure-house of long narrative forms, we will come to appreciate both the overall genre and the Homeric poems even more deeply. Epics from six continents already

illustrate how much the ancient Greek tradition shares with various other traditions, how parallels and analogues from other times and places can help us grasp the excellence of Homer. Complementarily, the comparative perspective also clarifies the uniqueness of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, the ways in which they are finally their own poems, with their own distinct, inimitable genius. Let me close, then, with Homer's own definition of epic poets, which we can profitably extend to all bards who practice the genre of epic (VIII.479–81):

πᾶσι γὰρ ἀνθρώποισιν ἐπιχθονίοισιν ἄοιδοι
 τιμῆς ἔμμοροι εἰσι καὶ αἰδοῦς, οὐνεκ' ἄρα σφέας
 οἴμας Μοῦσ' ἐδίδαξε, φίλησε δὲ φῦλον ἄοιδῶν.

For among all people of the earth the singers
 are due honor and reverence, because it is them
 the Muse has taught the pathways, for she loves the tribe of singers.

FURTHER READING

The special nature of Homeric epic is best appreciated by consulting as wide a variety of international analogues as possible. Strong comparisons and contrasts include, for example, the epic traditions of Africa (Johnson (1992) on the *Son-Jara* from Mali, Biebuyck and Mateene (1969) on the *Mwindo Epic* from the Banyanga, and Johnson *et al.* (1997) with selections from many different African areas); Arabic regions (Connelly (1986), Reynolds (1995)); Asia (Honko *et al.* (1998a, b) on the *Siri Epic* from southern India, Richman (1991) on the *Ramayana*, Reichl (1992), (2000) on Turkic traditions of central Asia); the Former Yugoslavia (SCHS); and Finland (DuBois (1995)). Comparative perspectives on these and other epics are available in several overviews of the world's epic traditions (Oinas (1978), Hatto (1980), Beissinger *et al.* (1999), McCarthy (2001)), and a thorough history of collecting oral epic in modern cultures can be found in Honko (1998) 169–218. On structure and meaning in epics from oral tradition, see Foley (1990), (1991), (1995), (2002a); for direct comparison of Homer to South Slavic oral epic, see Foley (1999a).