

Kirk, G.S., "Homer and Modern Oral Poetry: Some Confusions" (Class. Quarterly, N.S. 10, 1960, 271-281)

p. 135 " . . . Sir Maurice Bowra in his useful book Heroic Poetry (London, 1952) proposed that Homer was a brilliant oral poet who subsequently learned the new technique of writing and thus was able to compose a poem of the size and richness of the Iliad. . . .

Therefore Bowra's suggestion was pertinently criticized by Parry's able helper and continuator, A.B. Lord. . . . Therefore, Homer, whose verse was not like this, cannot have taken to writing.

This contention, which was restated by E. R. Dodds in his well-balanced survey in Fifty Years of Classical Scholarship (Oxford, 1954), at p.14, I am prepared to accept absolutely. It seems unlikely that Bowra's theory is tenable.

a p. 87 The conclusion is that we must withhold credence from generalizations like the following: 'We may therefore speak of the transmission of poems, though it is not actual poems which are transmitted but their substance and technique' (Bowra, Heroic Poetry, p. 368). This may be true, up to a point, of the South-Slavic epic, but it is not certainly or even probably true of the Homeric epic. There is no compelling reason from the point of view of transmission why the Iliad and Odyssey, once they gained wide repute, as they presumably did in the lifetime of their monumental composers, should not have been handed down from singer to singer with only comparatively minor deviations. The first official written version of the poems was probably made in Athens in the sixth century B.C. If this is true, and if the Iliad was composed, as most of the evidence suggests, in the course of the eighth century, then we are required to accept that the poems survived for about six generations mainly in the oral tradition. I do not see why this should be impossible or improbable: nobody in his senses thinks that the poems did not undergo some degree of rearrangement, omission, and elaboration during this period, and that is precisely what we should expect from oral transmission even in the comparatively rigid conditions of the Greek tradition. The argument put forward by Lord and enthusiastically accepted by Dow, that the poems must have been written down as soon as they were composed because otherwise they could not have been transmitted, is fallacious and must be absolutely rejected as it stands.