

Yale Classical Studies edited for the Department of Classics by G.S.Kirk and Adam Parry. Vol. 20. Homeric Studies (New Haven and London, Yale University Press) 1966

p. 181 Lord has been less austere in relation to these points. Dating has not engaged his efforts, but he has generally, though without argument, assumed that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* have each one author or have the same author.<sup>10</sup> And on the matter of the formation of the written text and the date of composition he takes a clear, and original, stand. Two principles determine the answer to these problems: (1) an orally composed poem cannot be handed on by the tradition of oral song without fundamental change;<sup>11</sup> and (2) "the[oral] poet's powers are destroyed if he learns to read and write."<sup>12</sup>

Kirk rejects the first of these principles and accepts the second. It may be, as we shall consider later, that he has made the wrong choice. But first we must look at the consequences of

p. 182 Lord's principles; for it is disagreement with what follows from them that leads Kirk to his criticisms of detail.

p. 182 More important to our concept of what we have in the text of the *Iliad*, the application of Lord's first principle gives us the comforting sense that our *Iliad* is in its essentials a faithful transcript of the song the great poet sang. Admittedly there may be scribal errors and interpolations; but the thing must have been put into writing at the moment of composition, and there is good hope -- though neither Lord nor Bowra nor Whitman enters much into this phase of the problem -- that the written text survived at least two centuries or so until the Panathenaic Recension (if such existed<sup>15</sup>), and thence down through antiquity and at last to our own day. It almost seems, by one of the many paradoxes that greet us as the problem unravels itself, that the very fluidity of oral transmission is what guarantees us the *ipsissima verba* of Homer.

Lord's second principle enables him to explain how the unique transcription from improvised song to established text took place. The oral poet . . . is fundamentally a different kind of artist from the literary poet. The two kinds cannot mix, and when they seem to,<sup>17</sup> the apparent exception proves the rule. . . . Hence Homer dictated his text to a scribe, as the Yugoslav bards dictated theirs to Parry and Lord and their assistants twenty-eight centuries later. . . .

It is fairly obvious that this theory of the creation of our text involves some difficulties, although Lord presents it as what we are left with after the elimination of all impossible alternatives. Some of these difficulties have not been stated by Lord, who champions the theory, or by Kirk, who doubts it. But we must now look at Kirk's own position.

He is unimpressed by the dictation theory (*Songs*, pp.98 ff) but, as we indicated, he is "prepared to accept absolutely" the premise on which it is based: that literacy destroys the heroic singer's craft. Kirk can accept the premise but deny the conclusion because he holds that the other premise, Lord's first principle, "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" (*Poetry*, p. 279)

15. Cf. J. D. Davison in *Companion to Homer*, pp. 237 ff.