

A classical example of a man getting credit for what must have been a woman's work

Rediscovering Homer
January 12, 2007

It is ungracious to review a book for what it is not. So let me be ungracious at the start. Homer, defined as the author of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* as they come down to most readers today in the fine translations by Robert Fagles, Stanley Lombardo and Richmond Lattimore, gives us nearly everything we need to know about human beings experiencing the effects and aftereffects of war.

It is natural, therefore, to expect a general study of the epics - even one such as Andrew Dalby's *Rediscovering Homer*, which concentrates on how the epics came to be - to discuss their very *raison d'être* and why they have survived so long in the Western tradition.

This is not the case here. Dalby makes no reference to old or new classic studies of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* as war literature - for example, Jonathan Shay's *Achilles in Vietnam* and *Odysseus in America*; James Tatum's *The Mourner's Song: War and Remembrance from the Iliad to Vietnam* (reviewed in *The Times Higher* on June 13, 2003); and Simone Weil's *The Iliad or the Poem of Force* (critical edition by James P. Holoka 2003). Hans Van Wees's *Status Warriors: War, Violence, and Society in Homer and History* is the little used exception.

The poems for Dalby are unified as "poetic biographies" of Achilles and Odysseus. They were subverted into their present form to offer criticisms of aristocratic privilege and, in the *Odyssey*, praise for actions of "people much lower on the scale of recognised power". They reflect the cultural outlook and supposed democratic tendencies of the 7th-century Greek polis.

However, the examples cited in support of this thesis - the swineherd Eumaios, the housekeeper Eurykleia, the people of Ithaca - can be counterbalanced by similar class types who do not act justly, faithfully or in ways that bring about a happy ending. Furthermore, the people of Ithaca, whom Dalby praises for their restraint in not taking up a vendetta against Odysseus and his household, are not the demos of the classical polis. They are the aristocratic clans who largely controlled political power even in that paradigm of ancient democracy, classical Athens. Their sons were the suitors whom Odysseus and Telemachus slaughtered.

Otherwise, it is easy to be gracious, albeit somewhat sceptical, about Dalby's ideas and arguments. *Rediscovering Homer* enables the general reader to understand the art of oral poetics and how and when the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* might have been composed. These are big questions and they are discussed at length.

It is pleasant to see how modern theories about gendered language and about the role of women in oral poetry in traditional societies can be used to revive and go one better than Samuel Butler's century-old claim that the *Odyssey* was the work of a poetess. For Dalby, the *Iliad* is, too. In his view, only women in 650BC and 630BC, to which he speculatively dates the two poems, would have had the time, patience, lack of concern for a public audience and public praise, and the poetic tools - sharpened by their traditional role in lamentation song - to compose and edit songs of such enormous scale.

However, illiterate male folk and blues singers sang for the Lomax collections of field recordings transcribed by Ruth Crawford Seeger. Surely the same instinct for perpetuation affects public male singers whether they are singing into a primitive microphone or to someone ready to write on a prepared sheep or goatskin. Likewise, these singers demonstrate that, alongside the spirit of occasionally spiteful competition identified by Dalby among Ancient Greek and modern Slavic bards, there is a deep respect for the individual genius of others and for being part of the oral poetic continuum.

Dalby gives his readers a good practical sense of the historical background and cultural circumstances for the song traditions that produced the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. His writing is everywhere human and riveting, as when he uses Plato's *Symposium* to demonstrate how hard it is, in a predominately oral society, to get a fixed account of even relatively recent past events.

Dalby's deep passion for language and the creation of literature will carry readers through what would otherwise be forbiddingly dense arguments about dialects and folklorics.

As Dalby notes, the Muses can "tell many lies that are as if true". This applies to ancient songsters and the modern scholars who study them.

Tom Palaima is professor of classics, [University of Texas at Austin](#), US.

Rediscovering Homer: Inside the Origins of the Epic

Author - Andrew Dalby

Publisher - Norton

Pages - 320

Price - £17.99

ISBN - 0 393 05788

