

THE ROLE OF ORAL POETRY IN ANCIENT GREEK SOCIETY.

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INTRODUCTION

In Ancient Greece, poetry was predominantly an oral art form. Poets, such as Homer and Hesiod, composed their works in a society where literacy was limited and written texts were not the primary mode of communication. Instead, oral poets would perform their works in front of audiences, using formulas, repetition, and mnemonic devices to aid in memorization and ensure the transmission of complex stories and ideas. This oral tradition not only played a central role in the social and cultural life of ancient Greeks but also provided a medium for the exploration of myth, religion, and political identity. By examining the role of oral poetry in Greek society, it becomes clear that it was a powerful tool for cultural continuity and communal engagement.

Oral Poetry as a Means of Historical and Mythological Transmission

One of the primary functions of oral poetry in Ancient Greek society was the preservation and transmission of history and mythology. The Homeric epics, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, are prime examples of how oral poets recorded and communicated the myths, legends, and historical events that shaped Greek civilization. In these works, oral tradition preserved not only heroic narratives but also the moral and cultural values that governed Greek society. For example, the Trojan War in *The Iliad* and the adventures of Odysseus in *The Odyssey* were central to Greek identity, providing models of virtue, honor, and the complexities of human nature.

Historians like Herodotus and Thucydides would later draw on these oral traditions, transforming them into written forms, but the foundation of much of Greek historical thought remained rooted in the oral past. Additionally, the works of Hesiod, particularly *Theogony* and *Works and Days*, provided an essential cosmogony and moral framework for Greek life. These epic poems were deeply intertwined with the religious and ethical foundations of society, making them invaluable for understanding both history and belief systems in Ancient Greece. Key words: Oral Poetry, Ancient Greek, Historical, Greek life.

ORAL POETRY IN EDUCATION AND CIVIC LIFE

In a society where literacy was not widespread, oral poetry served as a primary tool for education, especially in the context of oral transmission of knowledge. It was through performances of epic and lyric poetry that young men learned the values and ideals of their society, including the codes of heroism, justice, and civic duty. The works of Homer and Hesiod, recited by rhapsodes at festivals or in educational settings, were central to this process of socialization. For example, in *The Iliad*, the hero Achilles embodies the heroic ideal, displaying both noble qualities and the tragic flaws that come with them. His actions provided an ethical and moral framework for young men in the Greek polis, who were

expected to emulate the virtues of bravery, honor, and loyalty to their comrades. Similarly, the Works and Days offered practical wisdom for daily life, addressing topics like hard work, justice, and the importance of piety, reinforcing societal norms and values.

In addition to formal education, oral poetry also played a crucial role in public rituals and civic events. The recitation of epic poems at festivals, such as the Panathenaic Festival in Athens, was a communal activity that reinforced the cultural unity of the Greek city-state. These performances helped foster a shared identity among citizens, uniting them through common myths, historical events, and values.

THE ROLE OF ORAL POETRY IN RELIGION AND RITUAL

Oral poetry was intrinsically linked to religious practices and rituals in Ancient Greece. Hymns, invocations, and prayers to gods were often composed and performed orally, with poets acting as intermediaries between the divine and human worlds. These religious performances were integral to festivals honoring gods like Apollo, Athena, and Zeus, and they helped to reinforce the spiritual and societal order.

The Homeric Hymns, a collection of ancient Greek religious poems attributed to Homer (though likely composed by various poets), are prime examples of how oral poetry was used in religious contexts. These hymns not only celebrated the gods but also invoked their protection and favor for the community. They were often recited at public rituals, helping to solidify the relationship between the gods and the polis. Additionally, the oral recitation of poetry was tied to rituals surrounding birth, marriage, and death, where specific types of poetry marked key transitions in life. For instance, funeral dirges and epitaphs were often composed and performed to honor the deceased, linking poetry directly to personal and communal rites of passage.

THE TECHNIQUES OF ORAL POETRY AND THEIR CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

The structure of oral poetry itself was shaped by the demands of oral performance. Poets relied on a variety of mnemonic devices, including repetition, fixed epithets, and formulaic expressions, to facilitate memorization and ensure the smooth transmission of the poem. These techniques were essential for both the performance and preservation of the poetry over time, as they allowed for flexibility and improvisation within a consistent framework.

For instance, in *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, many characters are described using fixed epithets, such as "swift-footed Achilles" or "rosy-fingered Dawn." These epithets, while repetitive, served both to reinforce key qualities of characters and to aid the poet in maintaining the rhythm and flow of the verse during performance. This formulaic nature of oral poetry is a key feature of its structure, allowing the poet to improvise around these familiar patterns while ensuring consistency in the narrative. Moreover, the presence of choral and lyric poetry in Greek society, often performed in festivals, emphasized the role of oral poetry in public life. The works of lyric poets like Sappho, Pindar, and Anacreon, composed to be sung or chanted, highlighted the integration of poetry into the musical and social fabric of Greek culture.

Decline of Oral Poetry and the Rise of Written Culture

The decline of oral poetry in Greek society began around the 5th century BCE, coinciding with the rise of literacy and the development of written texts. As Greek culture became more literate, especially following the spread of the alphabet and the establishment of formal education systems, the role of oral poetry gradually diminished. Written texts, while still often based on oral traditions, provided a more permanent and accessible medium for preserving knowledge. However, even as written culture grew, the influence of oral tradition remained strong. Works like those of Plato, Aristotle, and the historians of the Classical period were often informed by the myths, themes, and values transmitted through oral poetry. Moreover, the performance of poetry continued to play an important role in Greek society through the Hellenistic and Roman periods, showing that the oral tradition was never fully replaced.

CONCLUSION

Oral poetry in Ancient Greek society was far more than just a form of artistic expression. It was a vital tool for preserving history, transmitting cultural values, educating citizens, and reinforcing social bonds. From the grand narratives of Homeric epics to the lyric poetry of the individual voice, oral poetry was the backbone of Greek civilization. The techniques of oral composition, including formulaic structures and mnemonic devices, ensured that these traditions could endure and adapt over time. Although the rise of literacy and written culture marked the decline of oral poetry as the primary means of cultural transmission, its impact on Greek society is still evident in the literary and philosophical works that followed.

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