

TEACHING ANCIENT FOLKLORE

Cyclops, do you ask me about my glorious name? I will tell
you it; but you give me a guest-gift, as you promised.
My name is Noman; Noman is what my mother
and my father, and all my comrades as well, call me.
(Hom. *Od.* 9.364–7)

Finely wrought pieces of storytelling, pithy sayings and clever riddles constituting oral traditions often labelled “verbal art” abound in ancient texts. Yet while it has long been recognised that such traditions—*folklore*—can be found in the Homeric poems, it is less well known that they have also been incorporated into many other types of texts. This paper aims to offer a concise description of how a course in ancient folklore highlighting the wealth of oral traditions available to us can be structured, focusing on how these traditions reflect ancient societies.¹

What is ancient folklore?

Since we know the Greco-Roman world primarily through written texts, art and archaeological material, and because literate culture was highly developed in this period, it is easy to forget the immense importance of the spoken word and oral traditions in ancient societies. These oral traditions have been included in the works of authors—either consciously as a literary device, or unconsciously—and have thus been preserved for posterity. It is not only ancient literary texts that incorporate elements of such traditions, but also a wide range of other texts: medical works, encyclopedias, legal texts, papyri, epigraphic material, etc.; and these traditions reflect the beliefs, customs and world views of common people.

The nature of the survival of these traditions constitutes a source-critical problem for the study of ancient folklore. Yet oral traditions can be identified in written texts in a number of ways. Folkloristic genres, such as urban legends, tales and tall tales, collected in the past few centuries can be compared with similar stories of ancient date. Through close reading, detailed analysis of their structure and comparison with these later oral stories, the likelihood of the oral origin of the corresponding ancient

¹ We wish to express our thanks to Dr. Pär Sandin, Department of Classics, University of Gothenburg, and to the editor of *CJ*, S. Douglas Olson, and the anonymous referee for valuable comments on an earlier draft of this article.

stories can be established. Moreover, the argument that these stories constitute an oral tradition is in many cases reinforced by the fact that the author states that he has heard them himself, i.e. orally. In other cases, the author depicts a storytelling situation, after which a story bearing a close resemblance to typical oral traditions is narrated. Other folkloristic genres—riddles, proverbs and sayings, for example—are easily recognisable through their characteristic forms.² In addition, literary and linguistic methods have been used to identify oral traditions in ancient texts, the best known no doubt being the Oral Formulaic Theory introduced by Milman Parry.

In preparing this course, we chose to highlight some typical traits of oral traditions. First, due to their oral character, there is no authoritative version of a story struggling for attention amidst a plethora of more or less defective variants. Authoritative versions evolve when stories are committed to writing; while they are in oral circulation, all variants are equally “correct” and valuable, though not always equally well narrated. Second, it is common for variations of the same story to be found in different sources, or for the same story to be narrated within the context of different folklore genres. As for the former trait, the time and setting of the story, as well as the characters appearing in it, can be changed without affecting its overall structure or the possibility of assigning it to a traditional narrative type. As for the latter—scholars refer to this phenomenon as “genre variance”—it is fairly common, for example, for a story told as a folktale in the modern era to have been narrated as a legend in antiquity. Hence, stories can easily move from one folklore genre to another, and this has implications for the interpretation of the narratives.

Why study ancient folklore?

When we offered this course, it was very popular among the students. One reason for this was doubtless that many students had themselves heard and passed on oral traditions of contemporary society such as urban legends, and they found it fascinating to learn that similar stories could be heard in the bars and baths of ancient Rome. These stories also continue to form a vital part of our cultural heritage, as they have entered the domains of literature, art and popular culture—which the students are acquainted with—although few believe in their truthfulness any longer. In our experience, students feel the course relates to *them*.

Since oral traditions have been incorporated into ancient literary texts, it might be useful to complement traditional methods of analysis with folkloristic ones and thereby gain a deeper understanding of the past. Passages likely to have an oral origin

² For definitions of the different types of folklore genres, see Hansen (1988).

have sometimes been difficult to come to grips with when not treated as oral traditions with all this might entail. Taking the oral traditions constituting ancient folklore as a point of departure, it is also possible to approach the social reality and mentality of the period from a slightly different angle, which is why we chose to emphasise these aspects in the present course.

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Unit 1. Folklore and Folklore Studies

1.1 What is folklore? An introduction to folklore studies³

- In this introductory lecture we recommend a focus on the characteristics of folklore as orally transmitted tradition, providing basic definitions of folklore and of the genres of folklore covered in the course.

1.2 Overview of Greek and Roman folklore⁴

- This lecture can be a continuation of the first, introducing the specifics of ancient folklore as a field of study. A good starting point might be a discussion of the kinds of folklore attested in antiquity and the inherent differences between the sources available for study; modern folklore has often been systematically collected, whereas ancient folklore survives mostly in literary texts. A brief history of research might also be useful, stressing for example the divergent aims of scholarship on ancient folklore: the founding fathers of folklore searched for the ultimate origins of individual items, whereas scholars today want to relate folklore to its social and cultural context and explore the meanings it acquires in different situations.

1.3 Stories and storytelling: tracing oral traditions in the written sources⁵

- The contexts of storytelling in the ancient world might be a good point of departure for this lecture, as well as the problems encountered in studying the topic, such as determining the degree of resemblance between ancient and later folklore, especially if the examples belong to different genres, which is common.

³ Several handbooks on folklore are available; Oring (1986), esp. Chapter 1, is concise and easy to follow, and gives many further references.

⁴ Very few overviews of ancient folklore exist, but Hansen (1988) is a good start; Hansen (2002) is an excellent complement, as it deals with the history of research on ancient folklore, beginning with the Grimm brothers. For a broader survey of the disciplines of history and folklore and their relationship, see Burke (2004).

⁵ On this topic, see Scobie (1979); Stadter (1997).

Unit 2. Ancient Humor

2.1 Sources and ancient views on wit⁶

- Here we suggest an emphasis on appropriate and inappropriate uses of humor as described by ancient authors; their remarks pertain to the social repercussions of oral traditions in the ancient world, as several authors highlight the social and anti-social tendencies of joking and humor.

2.2 Greek humor⁷

- In this, as well as the following lecture, we opted to downplay literary humor and turn to forms of humor more in tune with the oral traditions of the period. *Philogelos*, the ancient Greek joke-book, is one of the few extant examples of systematically collected folklore from antiquity, and as such is extremely valuable for scholars. We recommend relating these jokes to various aspects of ancient Greek society and daily life.

2.3 Roman humor⁸

- Here the Roman oral forms of humor as preserved in graffiti and gravestone verses can serve as a subject for discussion, exploring the link to Roman social life.

Unit 3. Tales, Tall Tales, *Märchen*, Novellas, Urban Legends and Legends

3.1 Tales I⁹

- The oral origins of Homer's works have long been recognised, as has the fact that they contain many internationally widespread folk narratives, one of the most famous being the story of Polyphemus. This narrative is particularly apt for discussion in class, since it illustrates the basic problems that emerge in a comparison of ancient and later sources: the story in its Homeric version is a combination of two—in later traditions usually distinct—tale types, "Ogre Blinded" and "Nobody," and it is interesting to ponder how we should conceive the relationship between the ancient and later stories.

⁶ Arist. *EN* 4.8.1–10 (1128^a); Cic. *de Orat.* 2.236–9; Quint. *Inst.* 6.3.7–112; Halliwell (1991). Luck (2000) discusses the ancient Greek and Roman terminologies and theories of humor.

⁷ For a translation of the *Philogelos*, see Baldwin (1983); Hansen (1998) 272–82. See also Bremmer (1997).

⁸ *CIL* 4.1877, 4533, 7065, 10150; 9.2689: graffiti and gravestone verses. Helttula (1995) discusses popular humor as expressed in graffiti. For a broader perspective on Roman humor, see Graf (1997). Roman humor was often aggressive and sexually oriented, see Richlin (1983), esp. Chapter 4.

⁹ Hom. *Od.* 9.180–505: the Polyphemus story. For a discussion of the Polyphemus tale, see Page (1955) Chapter 1; Hansen (2002) 289–301. For a more general overview of folktales in Homer, see Hansen (1997). For Homer as an oral poet, see Foley (1991) xi–xvi and Chapters 1–2; Janko (1998), esp. 4–6.

3.2 Tales II¹⁰

- The oral origin of some of Herodotus' material has come to the fore in recent debates on this author, and we suggest focusing on one of the best-known stories, the Ring of Polycrates, which is a typical and widespread folk narrative found in ancient, medieval and later sources.

3.3 Tall tales¹¹

- The sources for ancient tall tales are scarce, but Lucian, who loved to ridicule superstition and naïve beliefs, furnishes us with the closest we can come to an ancient tall tale: a parody of such a tale. This is thus not in itself a tall tale proper, but it gives us an idea of what ancient tall tales might have been like. The Schlaraffenland motif can be traced in ancient, medieval and later texts.

3.4 *Märchen*¹²

- Only one example of a *Märchen*, or wonder tale, survives from antiquity in its own distinctive form, i.e., as a multi-episode narrative with fantastic elements, and that is Apuleius' tale of Cupid and Psyche. It is likely that the wonder tale was a popular form of narrative among the common people of the ancient world, but the stories have not been included as wonder tales in the literary texts that have come down to us. Instead, many have taken the form of legends. Since the tale of Cupid and Psyche is long, we recommended concentrating on some aspects of it, for example the traits that mark it as a wonder tale.

3.5 Novellas¹³

- The novella is the more realistic sibling of the wonder tale. It is sometimes difficult to separate from legend; the story of the Matron of Ephesus has been identified as both a novella and a legend. We would suggest leaving this thorny question aside and focusing on what the narrative can tell us about attitudes toward widows in ancient Rome.

¹⁰ Hdt. 3.39–43: the Ring of Polycrates. A number of brief articles have been written on this topic, but none can be said to be appropriate in this context. There are, however, a number of papers on Herodotus' use of oral traditions and on Herodotus as a storyteller: Murray (1987/2001); Vignolo Munson (1993); Stadter (1997); Murray (2001).

¹¹ Lucian *VH* 2.11–16: Schlaraffenland, or the Land of Cockaigne. Hansen (2002) 378–92.

¹² Apul. *Met.* 4.28–6.24: Cupid & Psyche. Hansen (2002) 100–14.

¹³ Petr. 111–12: the Matron of Ephesus. Hansen (2002) 266–79; see also Walcott (1991).

3.6 Urban legends I¹⁴

- Imperial Rome can be said to have been an urban society, and it is therefore not surprising to find urban legends in sources of this period. For this and the following lecture, we have selected two modern urban legends with ancient counterparts. A suitable topic of discussion might be whether we can adduce a continuity from antiquity to the present, or whether the existence of similar stories is due to similar social conditions. There is probably no definitive answer to this question, but this does not detract from its import or interest.

3.7 Urban legends II¹⁵

- In addition to the issues raised in the previous class, the urban legend suggested for this lecture actualises the topic of new inventions posing a threat to larger economic interests and favorable employment rates. In the ancient world, one such legend concerned the invention of flexible or unbreakable glass, which, it was believed, might have plunged the Roman Empire into inexorable economic decline if it got on the market, by reducing the value of gold and other precious metals. In modern society, extremely fuel-efficient cars are among the inventions portrayed in such legends.

3.8 Legends I¹⁶

- A number of stories of werewolves and shape-shifters are preserved in ancient texts. The one singled out for this class is especially apt for discussing a basic function of folklore, which is as entertainment in social life. We recommend a focus on the context of the tale within the larger framework of Petronius' novel: who tells this story, and to what audience? How do his listeners react to his narrative, and why did he choose to tell it? Finally, how does the story reflect the folk beliefs at the time, as reflected in medical works such as Marcellus?

3.9 Legends II¹⁷

- One prime characteristic of oral tradition is variation. The same core narrative can be embellished with details that differ from one version to another: the characters can be changed, the setting may move from one locale to another, etc. These texts are instructive in this regard, as they furnish variants of the same story, making it

¹⁴ Ael. *NA* 13.6: octopuses and alligators in the sewers. Urban legends in antiquity have received a fair amount of scholarly attention, and much of the work on this subject is listed in Mayor (2000). The legend of the octopus in the sewers is a new discovery and will be published in a forthcoming paper by Camilla Asplund Ingemark. For the modern New York legend, see Brunvand (1981) 90–1.

¹⁵ Petr. 51; Plin. *Nat.* 36.57.195; D.C. 57.21.5–7: marvellous/suppressed inventions. Lassen (2001). For its modern counterpart, see Brunvand (1981) 175–8.

¹⁶ Petr. 61–2; Marc.Sid. *cit.*, Aët. 6.11: werewolf stories. Smith (1894); Ogden (2002) 175–8. For werewolves in Greek myth, see Buxton (1987).

¹⁷ Plin. *Ep.* 7.27.5–12; Lucian *Philops.* 30–2: haunted houses. Felton (1999); Ogden (2002) Chapter 8; see also Johnston (1999).

easy to identify similarities and dissimilarities, and thus to observe how oral traditions work. Lucian's story—and possibly also Pliny's—contains an element of entertainment, but it also emphasises the tremendous importance of receiving a proper burial in antiquity. Those who did not could not enter the kingdom of death but were doomed to remain as restless ghosts.

Unit 4. Anecdotes, Riddles, Proverbs and Sayings

4.1 Anecdotes¹⁸

- The anecdote was very popular in the ancient world, and here we propose bringing up the complex of anecdotes about Simonides. According to this tradition, Simonides was one of the first poets to accept payment for his services, and the stories about him revolve around this fact. In the course of time, the anecdotes change, and he is linked to various traditional legend motifs. Thus, the anecdotes can be used as a point of departure for discussing ancient views on wealth and the notion of the “mercenary muse,” i.e., poets who were paid.

4.2 Riddles¹⁹

- Riddles were an important part of the oral traditions of antiquity, and for this class we recommend making a selection from Symphosius' collection of riddles. A suitable topic of discussion might be their relation to objects and phenomena in Roman daily life.

4.3 Proverbs and sayings²⁰

- Proverbs and sayings are often closely related to the concrete social situation in which they are uttered; because of this, they have an intimate connection with social values. In this lecture, we suggest linking the proverbs chosen to ancient Greek social history.

¹⁸ Arist. *Rh.* 3.2.14 (1405b); Cic. *Div.* 1.56.28; Phaed. 4.22, 25; *AP* 7.77: anecdotes about the lyric poet Simonides of Ceos. The abundance of Simonides anecdotes have been thoroughly treated by Bell (1978). These and many other quotations from ancient authors on Simonides are collected in Campbell (1991). For a specific discussion of Simonides' miraculous rescue from an earthquake, see Slater (1972). For a discussion of anecdotes in Roman context, see Haight (1940).

¹⁹ Symphosius (selected passages). For a translation of Symphosius' riddles, see Ohl (1928). Pavlovskis (1988) explores Symphosius' world view as evidenced in his riddles, and relates his collection to medieval riddle collections. Teachers will have to recruit their own knowledge of Roman society and daily life to flesh out the contents of the lecture. For Greek riddles, Forster (1945) is mainly typological, but not much else is available in English.

²⁰ Hdt. 1.8–12; Men. *Dysc.* 570, 634; Shapiro (2000) provides excellent examples of the practical use of proverbs and their place in social interaction. Tzifopoulos (1995) relates some proverbs in Menander to the social values of ancient Greece, illustrating the importance of folklore in research on social history (good when used in tandem with Shapiro). See also Russo (1997), a good introduction to proverbs and related genres, with an emphasis on their oral character; this can be read in conjunction with Lardinois (2001), which explores the orality of proverbial expressions in the archaic Greek poets. Kindstrand (1978) discusses ancient theories of proverbs.

Unit 5. Folk Beliefs and the Family in the Greco-Roman World

5.1 Child-devouring demons in the Greek world²¹

- A suitable issue to raise in this class might be the importance of the family, and children in particular, in ancient Greek society, with these stories of child-killing demons—demons that function as scapegoats in cases of sudden illness and death—as points of departure.

5.2 Man-eating demons and bibulous witches in the Roman world²²

- In the Roman era, the family was of tremendous importance, both to the individual and to society as a whole, and in this lecture we suggest a focus on a widespread type of oral tradition which expressed and reinforced traditional family values by warning men of the dire consequences if they did not marry young, fertile women. From antiquity until well into the 19th century, stories about young men snared by sex and lured into relationships by creatures that appeared to be attractive women but turned out to be hideous hags, bibulous witches or even man-eating demons, circulated in the Mediterranean area.

Unit 6. Group Discussions

6.1 Orality and literacy: are they opposites?²³

- As has been shown in these lectures, traces of oral traditions have been incorporated in ancient texts, demonstrating the interdependence between orality and literacy in the ancient world. Nevertheless, a number of scholars have come to emphasise the differences in style, structure, contents and underlying mentality between oral traditions and written works, arguing for the existence of a dichotomy between orality and literacy. Using the course material as a point of departure to identify differences and similarities, do the students agree or disagree with this argument?

6.2 Does a folkloristic approach change our view of the classical texts?

- This discussion is intended to give the students the opportunity to verbalise what they have learned during the course and how it can complement and develop their prior knowledge. We suggest asking them to review the texts covered in class, and to ask themselves whether applying a folkloristic perspective has prompted a

²¹ *Ar. V.* 1034–5; *Duris FGrH* 76 F 17; *D.S.* 20.41; *Ant.Lib. Met.* 8; Johnston (1995) and (1999).

²² *Philostr. VA* 4.25; *Apul. Met.* 1.2–20; Lawson (1910) 182–3; Leinweber (1994); Ogden (2002) Chapter 7.

²³ Ong's (1982, and later editions) classic work on orality and literacy constitutes a good starting point for any discussion on this topic; see also Foley (1991).

reconsideration of the meanings of the texts and, if so, why. Attention might be paid to the influence of the notions of an original master-text vs. variation in the interpretation of ancient texts, and to the potential moulding of our perception of historical truth in the light of oral traditions.

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Conclusion

Not only did our students find this course interesting, but it gave them an opportunity to study a wide range of ancient texts and aspects of ancient social history and mentality. But the most immediate gain was the introduction of a new key to the understanding of the classical texts—*folklore*—functioning as a complement to established linguistic, literary and historical perspectives.

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