18

Unfixing Epic

Homeric Orality and Contemporary Performance

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Almost a century ago, Milman Parry began to formulate a radical response to the so-called 'Homeric Question'.[1] Identifying a series of recurring formulas operating within the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, he argued that these were markers of in-performance composition, a process by which pre-existing units of metrical phrasing could be combined and recombined in the moment of an epic's live performance. This work was enriched by fieldwork among South Slavic epic-singers operating within living traditions, research which (following Parry's early death) resulted in the seminal text *The Singer of Tales* (1960) written by his student Albert Lord.[2] Parry and Lord's major innovation was to identify Homer as 'a poet singer among poet singers'.[3] Their Homer was an oral artist, making new songs on old themes, integrating traditional elements of poetic composition with the individual singer's invention.[4] According to this model, ancient epic songs were repeatedly and flexibly remade by generations of such poet-singers, rather than being the products of individual literary artists. Lord argues that 'The songs were ever in flux and were crystalized by each singer only when he sat before an audience and told them the tale'.[5] Since their first publication, all of these claims have been extensively contested and refined.[6] But the central thesis of oral-poetic scholarship, that Homeric epic emerged out of oral traditions capable of generating works of great complexity and power, rooted in a shared corpus of heroic songs flexibly composed and recomposed during their live performance, has proved a major

[1] On the range of issues covered by the 'Homeric Question', see Turner (1996).
[2] For a summary of this work, see Foley (2002), 109–13. [3] Lord (2000), 150.
[4] How far Parry and Lord saw the use of formulas as mechanical, and how much emphasis they gave to the singer's individual creativity, is an area of ongoing debate. See Sale (1996), 377.
[5] Lord (2000), 151.
[6] For reflections on this process, see Foley (1996), Russo (1996), and Edwards (1996).

stimulus both to scholars and to artists. This chapter examines the impact of these ideas upon the work of recent performance-makers, considering what a putative oral Homer means to contemporary artists, and how such ideas can inform or inspire the creation of new responses to ancient epic. Adaptations of epic are fast becoming part of the common currency of arts programming, and an increasingly visible component of classical reception studies. However, the influence of oral-poetic theories upon contemporary performance-makers is (as yet) an under-explored area of study, neglected by scholars whose literary expertise leads them to focus on dramatic texts and production histories, with each revisionary text or production regarded as a single, stable, and repeatable entity. The field of classical reception studies at present lacks the conceptual and theoretical means to engage effectively with works which deliberately exploit elements of 'in-performance' composition, and which positively value the qualities of fluidity and flexibility evoked by oral-poetic interpretations of ancient epic.

Responding to this lacuna, this chapter uses the terminology of 'fixed' and 'unfixed' in order to identify a range of approaches to the modern reperformance of epic narratives. These terms are adapted from director Tim Carroll's model of 'fixed' and 'flowing' elements within The Factory's version of *The Odyssey* (discussed in more detail below). In a text which clearly echoes elements of Parry and Lord's oral-poetic scholarship, Carroll writes:

> This principle of the *fixed* and the *flowing* is manifested in every part of the poem. Just as the formulas are *fixed* while their use is *flowing*, so Odysseus' journeys *flow* around the Mediterranean while Penelope remains *fixed* on Ithaca. And this, I hope, is how it will be with our performance. The events of the story we have to tell are fixed; the circumstances in which we tell them will flow unpredictably.[7]

Carroll's discussion does not imply a hierarchy between the 'fixed' and the 'flowing', but positions them as complementary and mutually constitutive elements of a single process of epic creativity. Similarly, this chapter's proposed terminology aspires to highlight some of the ways in which 'fixed' and 'unfixed' elements can interact in order to create engaging reperformances, revisions, and recreations of ancient epic. For the purposes of the present discussion, the term 'fixed' denotes a text or production (or a part of a production) which, once made, remains relatively stable and consistent. In contrast, the term 'unfixed' describes performance structures designed to evolve, adapt, and respond to circumstance, their resulting unpredictability becoming a defining characteristic of the emerging work. But this is never a straightforward either/or situation.

As Michael Wilson argues in *Storytelling and Theatre* (2006), the assumption that a performance is either wholly 'learned' ('fixed') or entirely 'improvised'

[7] Carroll (2010).

('unfixed') seriously underplays the complexity of both the processes by which creative works are produced, and the (always, to some degree, variable) conditions of their live performance.[8] The contemporary discipline of performance storytelling represents an important site for 'unfixed' reperformances of Homeric epic, perhaps the most prominent example being the work of Hugh Lupton and Daniel Morden, whose celebrated *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad* have toured both nationally and internationally, and who were awarded the Classical Association prize in 2005. The storytelling formats *Pandvani 108* (a fast-paced series of extracts from world myth and epic, created in 2011 by Ben Haggarty of the Crick Crack Club) and *Myth Off* (a high-octane, slam-style competitive event, introduced to the UK by Clare Murphy in 2013) also offer fascinating examples of how oral traditions of epic- and myth-telling can inspire new fusions of ancient and modern performance practices. Contemporary storytelling practitioners, often explicitly drawing inspiration from oral-poetic traditions, emphasize the liveness of their craft, and the ways in which the in-performance recomposition of an old tale can give rise to new versions of inherited stories. However, current debates within UK storytelling also highlight the potential difficulties of any attempt to establish a rigid distinction between 'fixed' and 'unfixed' performances. Veteran storyteller Taffy Thomas offers a note of caution, describing how his own unscripted stories tend to 'settle' after repeated retellings, becoming more or less consistent, and only liable to change when 'the performer is feeling especially creative'.[9] In the light of such complexities, the 'fixed'/'unfixed' continuum proposed within this chapter is best conceptualized not as a rigid binary, but as a sliding scale, with different performance works, and even different iterations of a single work, displaying 'fixed' and 'unfixed' characteristics to varying degrees, and at different moments.

A brief survey of some recent remakings of Greek epic might help to indicate how reference to this 'fixed'/'unfixed' continuum can promote a more nuanced understanding of the variety of ways in which current performance-makers respond to and adapt ideas of ancient orality. At the 'fixed' end of the scale are dramatic revisions of epic which are themselves scripted, stable, and repeatable, often associated with a famous modern author. Such play-texts frequently contest the events and meanings of ancient epic, sometimes explicitly citing the idea of an oral tradition, and the ability of poet-singers within such a context to generate multiple versions of an epic narrative, as authorizing their own revisionist strategies. For example, in the Author's Introduction to *The Penelopiad: A Play* (2007) Margaret Atwood locates the drama as 'an echo' of an originating mythic event, already filtered through 'the

[8] Wilson (2006), 46. See also Foley's arguments concerning the limitations of dichotomous thinking: Foley (2002), 36–8.

[9] Wilson (2006), 192–3. Wilson's use of the term 'fixed' in his interview with Thomas informs my own usage throughout this discussion.

motherlode of mythic and legendary and therefore originally oral Trojan War material—fluid in nature, with different stories told in different ways in different places'.[10] In the play, like the novel upon which it is based, Penelope challenges the 'official version' of the *Odyssey*,[11] complaining: 'they turned me into a story; though not the kind of story I would have preferred to hear'.[12] 'I'll spin a thread of my own' this Penelope announces, her respinning of the epic's 'official' narrative drawing on a corpus of alternative myths which Atwood characterizes as those not selected for inclusion when the earliest, oral *Odysseys* became the singular epic poem familiar to modern readers.[13] In this way, the *Odyssey's* oral roots authorize the modern writer's project of returning to a mythic 'motherlode', reselecting and recombining narrative elements which were once freely available to all performers of Odysseus' homecoming, and which provide the twenty-first-century artist with a potent means of critiquing the ancient poem's misogyny and violence.

However, despite their frequent allusions to Homeric epic's oral roots, it is also important to recognize that such works present their revisions of epic within formats which are themselves largely 'fixed'. Even where a play-script (like *The Penelopiad*) takes up a subversive posture towards its own literary antecedents, the performance of such work most frequently aspires to be a skilful repetition of an agreed and unchanging 'fixed' text. *An Iliad* (2010),[14] by Lisa Peterson and Denis O'Hare, highlights the very limited degree to which later reperformers might be expected (or permitted) to 'unfix' elements of this kind of authored play-text. The drama's central figure is called 'The Poet', a world-weary witness of war, whose battered presence invokes notions of an ancient, oral bard. He is, according to the Authors' Note, 'a man (or woman) who ekes out a living by begging a crowd to stop, listen, and imagine for a while'. In this sense, he perhaps recalls Derek Walcott's singer 'Blind' Billy Blue in his 1992 stage adaptation of *The Odyssey*.[15] But, at key moments of the play, The Poet's recollections of Troy become entangled with his remembrance of other, later wars. Concerned that the Homeric Catalogue of Ships is meaningless to his current audience, he explains:

> The point is, on all these ships, are boys from every small town in Ohio [. . .] the boys of Nebraska and South Dakota . . . the twangy boys of Memphis . . . the boys of San Diego, Palo Alto, Berkeley, Antelope Valley . . .[16]

[10] Atwood (2007), v.

[11] The eponymous heroine of the stage version is a more trustworthy narrator than her counterpart in the novel, which repeatedly implies that Penelope's narrative may be concealing, rather than revealing, truths. See e.g. Atwood (2005), 150, 169, 180.

[12] Atwood (2007), 4–5. [13] Atwood (2007), 5, v.

[14] On *An Iliad*, see also Rankine, Ch. 27 in this volume.

[15] Peterson and O'Hare (2014), 11. See further McConnell, Ch. 28 in this volume.

[16] Peterson and O'Hare (2014), 27.

And the list goes on. An authorial footnote explains that the play's later producers should 'pick a couple of nearby places that produce enlisted men and women, and insert them',[17] in order to find an equivalence for the play's address to local communities in proximity to its earliest performance spaces. A comparable moment occurs towards the drama's close, when the death of Hector sets The Poet seeking a comparison through a five-page litany of the world's major conflicts, beginning with the Peloponnesian War and finishing with:

Iraq
Pakistan
Afghanistan
Libya
Syria . . .[18]

The authors' final ellipsis again cues an advisory footnote for future directors/performers:

> As time goes on, it may be necessary to add a war or wars at the end of the list to reflect current events. This should be done with great restraint and include only major conflicts.[19]

This is a relatively rare instance of a 'fixed' dramatic text authorizing its later performers to introduce their own additions, based on future global events.[20] However, Peterson and O'Hare's tone is markedly cautious. Such alterations should be made with 'great restraint', and only in response to 'major' armed conflicts. The play's writers explicitly evoke the importance of 'ancient oral tradition' in shaping their understanding of an epic story 'spoken out loud and passed from storyteller to storyteller for centuries before it was ever written down', and their footnotes do potentially allow later artists some small degree of flexibility, aimed at ensuring that The Poet's song will 'stay current'.[21] However, these limited concessions do not seriously challenge the authoritative status of the play's 'fixed', authored text. Rather, in their delineation of the precise moments at which textual flexibility might, under certain circumstances, be permitted, their concessions may actually serve to enhance the customary authority of the 'fixed' dramatic script.

By contrast, the 'unfixed' end of the continuum is characterized by works which have significant elements of performer autonomy deliberately built into their format and structure. For example, The Factory's version

[17] Peterson and O'Hare (2014), 27.
[18] Peterson and O'Hare (2014), 80–4.
[19] Peterson and O'Hare (2014), 84.
[20] Compare Atwood (2007), 28, which authorizes the reinstatement of an excised passage, rather than the introduction of new text.
[21] Peterson and O'Hare (2014), 13.

of *The Odyssey* (first performed in 2012) locates its own 'unfixed' status at the heart of the work's identity. The company made its name devising irregular pop-up performances of *Hamlet* and *The Seagull* in which revolving casts of actors had their roles decided via pre-show games of chance, and incorporated random props (brought along by the audience) into each one-off restaging of these classic texts. The company's version of *The Odyssey* goes even further, abandoning the 'fixed' scripts which structured its previous shows to create almost wholly 'unfixed' performances. In The Factory's *The Odyssey*, the twenty-four books of the ancient epic are improvised in response to a series of challenges and constraints generated by audience members pulling shards of pottery (each inscribed with an instruction) out of a passed-around hat.[22] The notion of an oral Homer is central to this structure, as Carroll explains:

> We have learnt some fixed elements, especially of song and dance; but how these 'formulas' combine to tell the story will change from one performance to the next. Like 'Homer', we will have to decide in the moment which stories to tell and which to leave out; and, like 'Homer', we will have to adapt the telling of our stories to many different circumstances.[23]

Depending on the particular audience(s) involved, and their degree of knowledge (or concern) regarding 'correct' responses to classical epic narrative, these interactions can lead to some striking revisions of familiar Homeric episodes. For example, at a performance of *The Odyssey* at The Nursery, London (July 2013), when Menelaus asked the audience for advice regarding the Old Man of the Sea, he was instructed 'bite him'. He did, and the resulting scene diverged significantly, and with splendid absurdity, from its model in standard editions of the epic.

The results of The Factory's working methods may sometimes be chaotic, but such 'unfixed' performances should not be written off as mere undisciplined anarchy. As Carroll's account of the group's preparation (with its embedded appeal to Homeric 'formulas') reveals, a significant degree of training is required for a company to be able to improvise together effectively, and their 'in-performance' creative decisions are often underpinned by a shared repertoire of exercises, games, and songs. Storytelling practitioners, such as Morden and Lupton, similarly undertake rigorous and extensive training processes in order to be able to improvise fluently and engagingly before, and in response to, their changing live audiences. In *Audience Participation in Theatre* (2013) Gareth White borrows the term 'procedural authorship' from computer game designers to designate the process of establishing a

[22] Sapsford, Ch. 14 in this volume, discusses another *Odyssey* in which audience members make decisions about the route taken through epic material, collaboratively created by New Movement Collective.
[23] Carroll (2010). See also Harrop (2013*a*).

series of rules, practices, and protocols, which allow a performer to respond skilfully, in the moment of live encounter, to unpredictable interactions with an actively participating audience.[24] This term offers a useful way of conceptualizing the task of the performer within 'unfixed' performance works. Rather than learning the lines of a 'fixed' script,[25] the performer of 'unfixed' epic is more likely to be engaged in developing a deep personal knowledge and understanding of a given story, learning to improvise fluently within a group of collaborating artists, or mastering a series of skills, competencies, and creative procedures which may be called upon at any moment of their performance.[26] The resulting 'unfixed' works may benefit (as does The Factory's *The Odyssey*) from an overt sense of jeopardy, with the audience wondering how (and, indeed, whether) performers will manage the feat of reperforming an epic narrative without the support of a 'fixed' text. However, they are also predicated upon what John Miles Foley calls 'rule-governed flexibility',[27] their characteristic combination of meticulous preparation and in-performance spontaneity serving as a profound imaginative link with practices of ancient epic as evoked by oral-poetic scholarship.

There are also performances which occupy a middle ground, developing a complex, shifting fusion of the 'fixed' and the 'unfixed' within a single event. Kate Tempest's *Brand New Ancients* offers a striking recent example of a performance work containing a significant degree of interplay between 'fixed' and 'unfixed' elements. The remainder of this chapter will analyse this example in detail, not only identifying the presence, but also beginning to analyse the potential value, of 'unfixed' elements within contemporary performances responding to ancient epic.[28]

Brand New Ancients was developed by and first performed at the Battersea Arts Centre (London) in 2012, and is an extended poetic text following the lives of two brothers growing up in South London. The 'Brand New Ancients' of the title are our modern selves, trapped in daily drudgery and deprived of a sense of mythic context that might lend meaning and even grandeur to our struggles.[29] The piece passionately argues that

[24] White (2013), 31.

[25] In the Authors' Note to *An Iliad*, line-learning is represented as a crucial virtue for any potential performer of The Poet's role. Peterson and O'Hare (2014), 13.

[26] Bird's discussion of jazz improvisation, Ch. 16 in this volume, offers an illuminating parallel.

[27] Foley (2002), 132.

[28] The following discussion is based on my observations of four different performances of *Brand New Ancients*, in four different spaces: at the Battersea Arts Centre (Council Chamber) in September 2012, at the Royal Court Theatre in November 2013, at the Lyric, Hammersmith in January 2014, and at the Battersea Arts Centre (Grand Hall) in April 2014. This last was the work's final performance.

[29] Tempest (2013), 3.

> the plight of a people who have forgotten their myths
> and imagine that somehow now is all that there is
> is a sorry plight;[30]

Thus, the poem focuses on 'Small heroics. Everyday epics'.[31] Like Derek Walcott, Tempest (whose work as a writer and performer synthesizes spoken-word poetry and rap) claims never to have finished reading the *Odyssey*, and she has described parts of the *Iliad* as 'boring'.[32] And, despite a scatter of famous names (Pandora, Medea, etc.) used to point up the contrast between the world of myth and the modern mundane, this isn't a poem which directly follows the plot of any extant ancient epic. However, a closer consideration of *Brand New Ancients* onstage offers a clearer sense of how the idea of an oral Homer may be informing Tempest's performance strategies. *Brand New Ancients* is, in Tempest's own description, a poem 'written to be read aloud'.[33] But the stage set-up for the show goes some way beyond this modest prescription, with a four-piece band (cello, violin, drums/electrics, and tuba) ranged on a curved rostrum behind a central microphone. The positioning of this mic, downstage centre, would seem to fix the poet's position. But from the get-go, Tempest subverts the formality (and implicit hierarchy) of this spatial arrangement, popping into the space in front of the mic to talk to her audience before the poem proper begins, to (in her own words) 'say hi'. In November 2013, at the Royal Court Theatre, she used this moment to express her admiration for the building she found herself in, and for the writers who had worked in the space before her. She also talked about working with a 'brilliant fucking storyteller called Daniel Morden',[34] and gave a brief retelling of a fable she learned from him, about the need to clothe truth in the fabrics of story. She then introduced the band, and moved on to address the role of the audience in the event about to kick off: 'I don't want you to feel that you have to be invisible,' she said. (A few months later, at the Lyric, Hammersmith—another formal theatre setting—Tempest said something similar: 'I don't want you to feel like you have to pretend you're not here.' Then she adds, 'fourth wall . . . fuck that', chuckling gruffly at her own naughtiness.)

There is a lot going on in this low-key, off-the-cuff preamble. Tempest's referencing of the Royal Court's tradition of radical playwriting positions her as a (slightly overawed) successor to generations of literary artists, but her mention of Morden (a performance storyteller) also aligns her with orally inspired approaches to creating and transmitting narratives. The performing poet implicitly figures herself as poised between two traditions just as, spatially,

[30] Tempest (2013), 4. [31] Tempest (2013), 29.

[32] McConnell (2014), 200. Tempest has, however, spoken about her admiration for Christopher Logue, whose poetic responses to the *Iliad* inspired her own poem 'War Music'.

[33] Tempest (2013), prefatory material. [34] See further Wilson (2006), 166–70.

she locates herself between the upstage 'performance' space (delineated by the fixed mic and the stage's lighting state), and the more social, shared space of the auditorium. This positioning, like her invitation to the audience to resist 'invisibility',[35] runs counter to both the divisive architecture of the proscenium arch and the naturalist heritage of the Royal Court Theatre (famous for pioneering 'kitchen sink' dramas like John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*). This is a smart choice. Tempest's audience isn't necessarily the Royal Court's usual demographic. The evening after I was in the audience, David Jubb (Artistic Director of the Battersea Arts Centre) tweeted: 'In @royalcourt main theatre with audience full of 20 & 30 somethings. Beer has just poured off circle in to the stalls #brandnewancients.'[36] In addressing this audience directly, framing the 'fixed' text of *Brand New Ancients* with an 'unfixed' preamble rich in self-deprecating humour, Tempest establishes the 'rules' or (in Foley's phrase) 'the keys to performance', which will characterize the coming experience.[37] This 'unfixed' moment becomes an opportunity to subvert preconceptions about the status of writing, the hierarchies of the performance space, and the relationship between stage and auditorium.

Passages of 'unfixed' playfulness also emerge later in the evening, often arising as moments of interplay between the formal text of *Brand New Ancients*, the poet's commentary on her own work, and her developing perceptions of how each gig is going. For example, at the Royal Court Theatre, Tempest followed up the phrase 'like mime artists in France' (describing the overdone insistence of drunk executives) with a comic aside: that's 'one for the theatre crowd' she says. The 'mime artists' line isn't improvised—it is present in the poem's published text.[38] But the choice to highlight it in this particular way is a direct response to the current situation and location. Tempest's voice is both cocky and crooning, she is deep in the narrative moment and mood, yet also able to glance out at our real, shared situation. Tempest's urban th-fronting, which means that she pronounces the initial 'th' of 'theatre' as an 'f', adds a note of double-edged self-deprecation to the aside, cheekily alert to the class dynamics of her own presence within the artfully distressed environs of the Jerwood Theatre Downstairs.

There is a characteristic piece of physical business that sometimes accompanies such moments: an open-palmed shrug (usually off-balance, with a horizontal twist to the shoulders), which is part sheepishness and part sheer chutzpah. This gesture can be fluid in its meanings: sometimes it starts out looking like an apology for a moment of bathos, or for an uneasy rhyme

[35] This invitation is supported by a lighting plot which subtly raises the house lights at a series of key moments, especially those when the poet-performer moves outside the world of the emerging story, for passages of reflection, interpretation, and direct exhortation.

[36] David Jubb (@davidjubb), 16 November 2013.

[37] Foley (2002), 164.

[38] Tempest (2013), 33.

('shoulders'/'soldiers'), but often it ends up looking like a celebration of Tempest's own daring and dexterous swooping between linguistic registers. In a wordless gesture of self-commentary, the poet can slide from rueful to gleeful in an instant, acknowledging and manipulating her audience's reactions to her words, before slipping back into the rhythms of the show's rehearsed and scored text. At moments like this, the poet's 'unfixed' commentary on her scripted performance draws her audience into an intense feedback loop of mutual observation and reciprocal pleasure.[39]

Comic banter also plays a key role in Tempest's 'unfixed' interactions with her audience. Onstage at the Lyric, Hammersmith (January 2014), she follows up her unflattering depiction of graphic artist Tommy's colleagues ('arseholes everywhere'[40]) by looking out and asking (in a phrase we would more usually expect to hear during a stand-up comedy set): 'Any advertising executives in tonight?' There's laughter from the crowd, the odd cry of 'yeah'. 'This one's for you' the poet mutters darkly, only to stop herself a couple of lines later, to modify the abrasiveness of this exchange, and insist she was only joking. Then she picks up her 'fixed' text again, or tries to, but hesitates, pauses, and loses her thread. She consults with the band about her next line. They confer with each other. They laugh. Shrug. Tempest turns back to the audience: 'That's how live this shit is' she says. Again, the poet strays beyond her fixed text, developing free vocal interactions with her audience, and embracing the unpredictable consequences of these (even when disruptive).[41] Tempest's ability to create such moments of 'unfixed' communication with her audience plays a key role in creating a mood which is more akin to the comedy or the storytelling club, the poetry slam or the music gig, than it is to formal, fourth-wall 'theatre'. Theatre critic Lyn Gardner describes Tempest as an artist who is 'acutely responsive to her audience': 'It matters that we are there; it matters that these stories are told. It matters that we listen.'[42] In the case of *Brand New Ancients*, it is often the moments of 'unfixed' comedy and self-commentary—playful, cheeky, scathing, endearing—which facilitate this trademark responsiveness, guaranteeing that each show develops into a unique iteration of the poet's epic narrative of ordinary people finding heroism in their everyday lives.

The published text of *Brand New Ancients* may be 'fixed', but live performance allows for the creation and elaboration of a series of 'unfixed' elements and exchanges. Tempest has described how, over the course of making and performing the show, she progressed from feeling like the author of a text to

[39] On the 'feedback loop' in modern performances inspired by ancient epic, see Harrop (2013*b*), 84–6.

[40] Tempest (2013), 29.

[41] Compare Jensen (2005), 46–7.

[42] Gardner (2012). The first drafts of *Brand New Ancients* were written as part of a scratch process supported by the Battersea Arts Centre so that, from the outset (as Tempest observes): 'I knew that it was a piece that was going to be performed for audiences.' Kate Tempest in conversation with Justine McConnell, APGRD (University of Oxford), 24 February 2014.

'being a performer of something that exists'. The latter state, she said, means that 'you are able to perform without the fact that you wrote it getting in the way, so you can change it if you want to',[43] bringing her performance of *Brand New Ancients* close to Foley's category of 'Voiced Text', a 'type of oral poetry that begins life as a written composition only to modulate to oral performance before a live audience'.[44] This category shift makes possible the off-the-cuff riffs and remakings of extant material which promote such a powerful sense of liveness, reciprocity, and 'unfixedness' in performances of *Brand New Ancients*.

So what's the place of a (notional) oral Homer in this performance? Justine McConnell has described Tempest as a 'brand new Homer', arguing that 'performance poetry is the modern descendant of the oral poetry scene which gave us the Homeric *Iliad* and *Odyssey*'.[45] However, such confident alignments of a contemporary artist with 'Homeric' performances can be problematic, since there is no direct lineage of surviving practices for the modern reperformer of ancient Greek epic to inherit.[46] Contemporary performers can only reactivate classical epic using their own, distinctively modern, skill sets,[47] engaging their listeners through performance contexts which are meaningful to twenty-first-century audiences (and often significantly unlike the kinds of environments in which an archaic, oral Homer might have sung).

Positioning a work like *Brand New Ancients* within a direct Homeric lineage overstates the degree to which the archaic compositional and performance techniques proposed by oral-poetic scholarship might (practically) be available to the present-day artist. It simultaneously downplays the vital role played by some distinctly modern performance disciplines, and their creative communities, in developing environments within which ancient epic poems, and their associated oral practices, can be explored, adapted, and appropriated by new generations of performing artists. Tempest herself has described how her sense of ancient poetic practices was first stimulated as a result of her embeddedness within contemporary genres of public poetic speech. It was through 'rap artists that I knew', she says, 'that's how I found out about Homer'.[48] Like jazz at the beginning of the twentieth century, contemporary spoken-word practices have created a generation of artists who display virtuosic skill in the

[43] McConnell (2014), 199. [44] Foley (2002), 43. [45] McConnell (2014), 195, 198.

[46] Performance storytelling offers a comparable situation. Ben Haggarty is accurate in his assertion that present-day, Western, urban storytellers have 'no living masters', and little (if any) access to authentic, indigenous, epic traditions (2005), 14. On the modern, 'revival' storyteller as 'orphaned to tradition' (a phrase first used by French storyteller Muriel Bloch), see also Heywood (1998), 16.

[47] For a discussion of parallels between ancient epic and contemporary rap and hip-hop, see Hall (2008), 21–2.

[48] Kate Tempest in conversation with Justine McConnell, APGRD (University of Oxford), 24 February 2014.

creation of (wholly or partially) 'unfixed' performances. To modify one of John Miles Foley's 'proverbs' describing oral performance, it is the current genres of rap and spoken-word poetry, and not a revived or recovered 'Homeric' orality, which 'enable' the emergence of *Brand New Ancients*,[49] and which fuel the 'unfixed' reciprocity of the show's performance dynamics.

And yet, Tempest's fusion of contemporary techniques with mythic archetypes is profoundly informed by an underlying sense of ancient epic as a genre of performance within which a poet stands up in front of a co-present, live audience, reaching for and finding eloquent words to address shared experiences. 'In the old days,' the text of *Brand New Ancients* begins, 'the myths were the stories we used to explain ourselves.'[50] Homer as evoked by Tempest is not a literary artist, but an in-performance maker of rhymes. As the poet says: 'People have been rapping words since Homer, and before.'[51] In this way, Tempest positions her own modern practices within a quasi-mythic heritage of performed poetry stretching back to ancient epic. Historical authenticity (modern artists literally doing what 'Homer' did) isn't the issue here. What matters in this formulation is an urgent sense of an imagined oral Homer as authorizing the present-day public speech of poets and rappers and rhymers of all kinds, each bringing their own improvised, provisional eloquence to bear upon the age-old struggles of living. This Homer is a legend, a myth; perhaps best understood as an enabling fantasy. But what Barbara Graziosi has described as the 'fictionality' of this ancestral presence does not diminish the impact of an oral Homer upon a whole range of contemporary artists who invoke the ancient epic-singer, an 'imaginary and multiform figure',[52] to authorize their own projects of devising, improvising, and generally 'unfixing' ancient epic narratives.

As this chapter has contended, a notional oral Homer informs a diverse array of contemporary theatre texts and performance practices,[53] and a full appreciation of the different ways in which oral-poetic theory can influence the creation of these depends upon an ability to identify and interpret the interplay between 'fixed' and 'unfixed' elements both within particular performances, and within different iterations of the same production or event. For the authors of play-texts, the example of an oral Homer is most often evoked in order to contextualize and facilitate their own revisionary literary

[49] See Foley (2002), 130–3. This 'proverb' asserts that '*Performance Is the Enabling Event, Tradition Is the Context for That Event*'.

[50] Tempest (2013), 1. [51] Quoted in McConnell (2014), 197.

[52] Graziosi (2002), 250. On the deployment of this figure by ancient rhapsodes, see Graziosi (2002), 48.

[53] This phenomenon can be located within a wider tendency, among contemporary theatre-makers and performers, towards the creation of works which question, subvert, or bypass conventional notions of dramatic authorship. See Radosavljević (2013), Rebellato (2013).

strategies, giving rise to a stimulating range of new epic dramas which, nevertheless, remain largely 'fixed' in their content.

However, for contemporary performers across (though not limited to) the genres of devised theatre, performance storytelling, and spoken-word poetry, an imagined oral Homer is just as likely to serve as inspiration for the creation of deliberately unpredictable 'unfixed' performances which strive to generate present-day equivalents for the flexibility and spontaneity attributed to the earliest, preliterary, performances of epic. Focusing on ancient epic as a set of performance practices, rather than a series of narrative or poetic tropes, such contemporary works require new modes of analysis and interpretation, capable of acknowledging performer training (like the practices of The Factory), 'procedural authorship' (creating flexible or interactive performance structures, rather than 'fixed' scripts), and performers' 'unfixed' interactions with their live audiences (like Tempest's metatextual commentaries on/in performances of *Brand New Ancients*) as critical sites for current receptions of Homer. There is also challenging work yet to be done in exploring the role played by contemporary performance practices in creating a rich variety of 'enabling' events for 'unfixed' re-makings of ancient epic. The oral-poetic Homer evoked (both explicitly and implicitly) by today's devising theatre companies, performance storytellers, and spoken-word poets may not, ultimately, be locatable as a historical personage, but despite (perhaps because of) this mythic elusiveness, the ancient epic-singer is inspiring a provocative new emphasis on epic orality and 'unfixed' modes of performance among twenty-first-century artists.

19

Multimodal Twenty-First-Century Bards

From Live Performance to Audiobook in the Homeric Adaptations of Simon Armitage and Alice Oswald

Emily Greenwood

The bard is both a fertile and a largely fictional presence in contemporary British poetry. Arguably this figment of the poetic imagination is nowhere more alive than in contemporary adaptations of Homer, which engage with the question of what it might mean to adapt Homeric orality into contemporary poetic idioms. Taking the 'Homeric' works of two high-profile contemporary British adapters of Homer, Simon Armitage and Alice Oswald, this chapter explores the way in which the absent/present, anachronistic figure of the bard is a foil for the poet's live voice. I suggest that, in both poets, the idea of the Homeric bard encapsulates the complex, inter-medial, multimodal, remediated status of contemporary Homeric adaptations.

Armitage and Oswald both evoke Homer as bard in their different ways. In Armitage's case, fascination with Homer-the-bard is spelled out most explicitly in his serio-comic travel journal *Walking Home: A Poet's Journey*, which narrates an experimental poetry tour of the Pennine Way undertaken in the summer of 2010.[1] The premise was that Armitage would walk the 256 miles of the Pennine Way as a 'penniless poet' earning his food and accommodation by giving poetry readings in each of the towns where he stopped for the night. In the preface to the travel journal he explains the project in terms of age-old poetic traditions, telling readers that 'Poetry has always wandered' and characterizing himself as 'a traveller-poet'.[2] At the end of the journal, Armitage concludes that the occupation of wandering poet is not economically viable as

[1] The English edition of this book, published by Faber and Faber in 2012, bears the subtitle 'Travels with a Troubadour on the Pennine Way'. All quotations from *Walking Home* are taken from the American paperback edition, published by Liveright in 2014.

[2] Armitage (2012), ix.