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The Great Teller of Tales, or πολύμητις :

Problematizing the Metonymy of Singing in the Epic Tradition and Shakespeare's *Sonnets*

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Introduction

In Shakespeare's sonnet sequence the poet laments from time to time that he cannot sing while he is obviously writing the poem itself at that moment:

> O how thy worth with manners may I sing,
> When thou art all the better part of me?[1] (Sonnet 39.1-2)

In such contradictory remarks, he is appropriating the vagueness that is inherent in the metonymic use of the word "sing" for a near but different notion of "write or compose poetry." Such shrewd appropriation of the trope of metonymy seems to be very old in its origin. For example, it is already found in Homer's epics, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. The purpose of the current essay is to show that Shakespeare was conscious of the vagueness and unreliability of metonymic expressions, and also how he criticized and appropriated them to ironically maintain the uniqueness of his poetic art in his *Sonnets*. Although Shakespeare, as well as Homer, has often been celebrated as "the bard" in both literary and non-literary traditions, it seems that he insisted on the difference between the art of poets and that of singers.

1

In the tradition of European literature, the term "song" has been used frequently as a trope for "poem." Since the association of the two is not especially striking and their nearness or contiguity is manifest, the former is considered to be a metonym for the latter.[2] In the same way, "sing a song" is often used as a metonymic phrase meaning either "write/compose a poem" or "recite a poem." Yet, although this association seemed always apparent, it was also made questionable in some of the earliest works of the poetic tradition. Homer's *Iliad*, for example, starts with a line that invokes Muse, asking the divinity to "sing Achilles' wrath" for the poet. Presumably because of the oral nature of the early epic tradition, the poem is supposed to "be sung by Muse" when it should be in fact composed or recited by the poet:

μῆνιν ἄειδε θεὰ Πηληϊάδεω Ἀχιλῆος
οὐλομένην, ἣ μυρί᾽ Ἀχαιοῖς ἄλγε᾽ ἔθηκε,[3] (*Iliad*, 1.1-2)
IRAM cane dea musa Pelidae Achilis,
Pernificiosam, quae infinitos Achiuis dolores imposuit,[4]
[Sing, Muse, the wrath of Peleus' son, Achilles,
that was destructive and imposed millions of sorrows on the Greeks,][5]

The act of singing the story is understood as something external and divine, and the poet assumes the position of a quasi-oral bard who recites the divine song. This vagueness in the distinction between "divine singing" and "poetic composition" is partly due to the nearness or contiguity that we feel exists between the two actions.

In the *Odyssey*, which is regarded as Homer's later, and therefore more mature, epic, such a metonymic relation between the two ideas comes to be problematized, however. The *Odyssey* begins with a line that invokes Muse, too:

ἄνδρα μοι ἔννεπε, μοῦσα, πολύτροπον, ὃς μάλα πολλὰ
πλάγχθη, ἐπεὶ Τροίης ἱερὸν πτολίεθρον ἔπερσεν :
πολλῶν δ᾽ ἀνθρώπων ἴδεν ἄστεα καὶ νόον ἔγνω,
πολλὰ δ᾽ ὅ γ᾽ ἐν πόντῳ πάθεν ἄλγεα ὃν κατὰ θυμόν,
ἀρνύμενος ἥν τε ψυχὴν καὶ νόστον ἑταίρων. (*Odyssey*, 1.1-5)
Virum dic mihi Musa versutum, qui valde multum
Errauit, postquam Troiae sacrum oppidum diripuit :
Multorum autem hominum vidit urbes, & mores nouit.
Plurimos vero ille in mari passus est dolores suo in animo,
Magna cura- servans suamque animam & reditum sociorum : [6]
[Sing in me, Muse, of the man of twists and turns, who was driven time and again
off course, once he had plundered the hallowed heights of Troy.
Many cities of men he saw and learned their minds,
many pains he suffered, heartsick on the open sea,
fighting to save his life and bring his comrades home.][7]

The lines quoted above give us an impression that the poet is extremely conscious of his art and profession, and that he is earnestly endeavoring to give an exact account of the hero's personality and deeds. The poet reveals his anxiety and pride about the position of his art while he is making use of the traditional metonymy of "singing" for "poetic composition" in spite of the vagueness and instability in its meaning.[8]

In Book 8 of the *Odyssey*, before he starts his long narrative, Odysseus listens to some songs that are sung by the bard Demodocus at King Alcinous' court. The latter, inspired by Muse, sings of the famous deeds of the fighting heroes at Troy, and Odysseus' reaction to it is conspicuous:

ταῦτ᾽ ἄρ᾽ ἀοιδὸς ἄειδε περικλυτός: αὐτὰρ Ὀδυσσεὺς
πορφύρεον μέγα φᾶρος ἑλὼν χερσὶ στιβαρῇσι
κὰκ κεφαλῆς εἴρυσσε, κάλυψε δὲ καλὰ πρόσωπα:
αἴδετο γὰρ Φαίηκας ὑπ᾽ ὀφρύσι δάκρυα λείβων. (*Odyssey*, 8.83-86)
Ista sane cantor cantabat inclytus. coeterum Ulysses
Purpuream ingentem vestem acceptam manibus fortibus,
Et in caput traxit, obtexit autem pulchram faciem.
Reverebatur enim Phaeacas sub superciliis lacrymas stillans.
[That was the song the famous harper sang, but Odysseus,
clutching his flaring sea-blue cape in both hands,
drew it over his head and buried his handsome face,
ashamed his hosts might see him shedding tears.]

Although Odysseus is evidently moved by the divinely inspired bard's song and secretly sheds tears, his role is to further narrate his deeds and sufferings precisely. Soon after this, the hero discloses his name and identity to his host, and starts telling his story for himself:

τὸν δ᾽ ἀπαμειβόμενος προσέφη πολύμητις Ὀδυσσεύς:
'Ἀλκίνοε κρεῖον, πάντων ἀριδείκετε λαῶν,
ἦ τοι μὲν τόδε καλὸν ἀκουέμεν ἐστὶν ἀοιδοῦ
τοιοῦδ᾽ οἷος ὅδ᾽ ἐστί, θεοῖς ἐναλίγκιος αὐδήν.
οὐ γὰρ ἐγώ γέ τί φημι τέλος χαριέστερον εἶναι
ἢ ὅτ᾽ ἐυφροσύνη μὲν ἔχῃ κάτα δῆμον ἅπαντα,
δαιτυμόνες δ᾽ ἀνὰ δώματ᾽ ἀκουάζωνται ἀοιδοῦ
ἥμενοι ἑξείης, παρὰ δὲ πλήθωσι τράπεζαι
σίτου καὶ κρειῶν, μέθυ δ᾽ ἐκ κρητῆρος ἀφύσσων
οἰνοχόος φορέῃσι καὶ ἐγχείῃ δεπάεσσι:
τοῦτό τί μοι κάλλιστον ἐνὶ φρεσὶν εἴδεται εἶναι.
σοὶ δ᾽ ἐμὰ κήδεα θυμὸς ἐπετράπετο στονόεντα
εἴρεσθ᾽, ὄφρ᾽ ἔτι μᾶλλον ὀδυρόμενος στεναχίζω: (*Odyssey*, 9.1-13)
Hunc excipiens alloquutus est versutus Ulysses,
Alcinoe imperator omnium iustissime populorum,
Atqui hoc honestum est audire cantorem
Talem, qualis ille est diis adsimilis voce.
Non enim ego quippiam puto tandem magis gratum esse,
Quam quoties laetitiae quidem detinet populum uniuersum,
Conuiuantes autem per domum audiunt cantorem
Sedentes ordine, iuxta autem impleantur mensae
Pane & carnibus: vinum autem ex cratere hauriens

Pincerna adferat & infundat poculis :
Hoc quidem mihi pulcherrimum in mente videtur esse,
Tibi vero meos dolores animus instat lacrymosos
Dicere, ut iam magis lugens ingemiseam.
[Odysseus, the great teller of tales, launched out on his story:
"Alcinous, majesty, shining among your island people, what a fine thing
it is to listen to such a bard as we have here---the man sings like a god.
The crown of life, I'd say. There's nothing better than when deep joy holds sway throughout the realm and banqueters up and down the palace sit in ranks,
enthralled to hear the bard, and before them all, the tables heaped with bread and meats, and drawing wine from a mixing-bowl the steward makes his rounds and keeps winecups flowing. This, to my mind, is the best life can offer. But now
you're set on probing the bitter pains I've borne, so I'm to weep and grieve, it seems, still more.][9]

The epithet πολύμητις (9.1), which Fagles translates as "the great teller of tales," is variously interpreted, as is the case with πολύτροπον (*Odyssey,* 1.1). The Latin translation "versutus," which is also used for πολύτροπον in Vignon's 1574 edition, means "full of stratagems or shifts, wily, cunning, adroit." As the word *versutus* is etymologically a compound of *versus* and *-utus*, the idea of "being well-versed or skillful in language" is also implied. Either way, it is plain that eloquence or skillful speech is one of Odysseus' greatest shifts or stratagems. Here Odysseus, the most important inner narrator of Homer's epic, is challenged to make full use of his power of speech to express his own history of many sufferings and "bitter pains." It seems from this that the *Odyssey* was a new type of literary epic, in which the conventional metonymy of "song" for "poetry" was criticized and then shrewdly manipulated, the poet being aware that the latter should be clearly distinguished from the former.

It is known that Homer's two epic poems, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, were among those classical texts that were widely circulated in the late sixteenth century and afterwards, at least among university students, as Greek-Latin parallel editions in the format of *sextodecimo* or *octavo*.[10] The editions of the late-sixteenth-century, Genevan printers, Jean Crespin and his successor Eustathius Vignon, which I have quoted above, are representative examples of such low-price editions designed for university students. Although the number of skillful readers of Greek texts must have been limited, not a few educated Elizabethan readers were able to access Greek literary works through Latin translations.

2

As we have seen in the case of Homer's epic poems as the earliest examples, some poets showed quite serious interest in questioning the viability of certain conventional metonymies.

Since metonymy is a sort of verbal substitution based on the nearness or contiguity of two terms that are compared, the vagueness of its meaning is inevitable. On the other hand, the type of trope that is called "metaphor" is based on the difference and similarity of two terms that are being compared, and gives us quite clear, and sometimes surprisingly vivid, images.

Shakespeare was a poet who seems to have been extremely concerned about the vagueness of many conventional metonymies that were current at his time. Like the poet of the *Odyssey*, the poet of Shakespeare's *Sonnets* insists that his poetic art is different from that of his contemporary rival poets.

So oft have I invoked thee for my Muse,
And found such fair assistance in my verse,
As every alien pen hath got my use,
And under thee their poesy disperse.
Thine eyes, that taught the dumb on high to sing,
And heavy ignorance aloft to fly,
Have added feathers to learnèd's wing
And given grace to a double majesty.
Yet be most proud of that which I compile,
Whose influence is thine, and born of thee:
In others' works thou dost but mend the style,
And arts with thy sweet graces gracèd be;
But thou art all my art, and dost advance
As high as learning my rude ignorance.[11] (Sonnet 78)

In this sonnet the poet likens his lover to Muse, who moves the poet in two ways. First his eyes, or his beauty, excites the tacit poet to sing aloud or in high strain. But above all, the poet tells his lover or Muse to "be most proud" of the poetry that he composes. The action of singing and that of composing poetry is differentiated, and the latter is regarded as a far more important job of the poet. What is interesting in this sonnet is the way the poet finally addresses his lover, or his Muse, in the couplet: "thou art all my art." The adjective "all" emphasizes the wholeness or comprehensiveness of his poetic art. If the lover is a learned, omnipotent Muse, the poet inspired by his divine influence will be mature and skillful in art in various ways. This reminds us of the Homeric πολύτροπος or πολύμητις, the famous epithets of Odysseus.[12] Πολύτροπος and πολύμητις are, as we have seen above, both translated as *versutus* in Vignon's 1574 edition of the *Odyssey*, and can mean either "skillful in everything " or "mature in the art of poetry."

The verb "sing" in the second quatrain of the sonnet above is traditionally a metonym for "write poetry," but here the vagueness of the metonymy is ironically manipulated by the poet of the sonnet. The metonymy is based on the notion of the ancient oral bard as a prototype of the poet. Both the Homeric poet of the *Odyssey* and the Shakespearean sonneteer are skeptical about the

viability of those conventional associations. They insist that they are no longer old-type bards.

3

Let us look at some other examples in Shakespeare's *Sonnets*.

That time of year thou mayst in me behold
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.
In me thou seest the twilight of such day
As after sunset fadeth in the west,
Which by and by black night doth take away,
Death's second self, that seals up all in rest.
In me thou seest the glowing of such fire
That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,
As the death-bed whereon it must expire,
Consumed with that which it was nourished by.
    This thou perceiv'st, which makes thy love more strong,
    To love that well which thou must leave ere long. [13] (Sonnet 73)

The octave of this sonnet owes its phrases and imagery to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Book 15, and gives a vivid picture of the transience of this world, and of man's life as well.[14] The word "sang" appears in the middle of these lines, helping to create an image of a desolate landscape of ruins. Whether the sonnet refers to "the despoiling and destruction of monasteries under Henry VIII" or not,[15] the action of singing is imagined as being of the past. On the other hand, what follows in the sestet is a fine example of what Shakespeare's poetic art can do. By referring to the self-consuming "glowing fire" of the poet's old age, the sonnet is in fact successful in creating a lively picture of intense emotion and anxiety about love and life.

The next sonnet is famous for its use of musical instrument imageries:

Music to hear, why hear'st thou music sadly?
[……………………………]
Mark how one string, sweet husband to another,
Strikes each in each by mutual ordering;
Resembling sire, and child, and happy mother,
Who all in one, one pleasing note do sing;
    Whose speechless song being many, seeming one,
    Sings this to thee, 'Thou single wilt prove none.'[16] (Sonnet 8.1,9-14)

In spite of the rich musical metaphors in this sonnet, the song/sing metonymies sound simply prosaic, and never poetic. Above all, the adjective "speechless" makes it impossible for this "song" to function as an appropriate trope for poetry.

Sonnet 97, on the other hand, represents the desolate, but at the same time rich, mental landscape of the poet who laments his lover's absence:

> And yet this time removed was summer's time,
> The teeming autumn big with rich increase,
> Bearing the wanton burthen of the prime,
> Like widowed wombs after their lords' decease:
> Yet this abundant issue seem'd to me
> But hope of orphans, and unfathered fruit,
> For summer and his pleasures wait on thee,
> And thou away, <u>the very birds are mute</u>;
> <u>Or if they sing, 'tis with so dull a cheer</u>
> That leaves look pale, dreading the winter's near. [17] (Sonnet 97.5-14)

After the paradoxically fertile imagery of the second quatrain, the poet refers to the birds that "are mute" or sing "with so dull a cheer" in the remaining sestet. In spite of these negative representations of the birds, the sonnet itself is powerfully eloquent and sounds problematic at the same time. Here again we find a poet who denies the conventional viability of "singing" as a metonymy for "composing poetry." Shakespeare instead demonstrates his superb handling of poetic imageries in this problematic sonnet.

Conclusion

We have seen that both the Homeric poet of the *Odyssey* and Shakespeare of *The Sonnets* are skeptical about the poetic validity of conventional songs or singing, and that, while metonymies of singing are constantly used, they are never left unscrutinized by either of the two poets. If we assume that Homer was the first literary poet at the very end of the long tradition of the art of the oral bard, his carefully moderate attitude toward conventional metonymies may thus be explained. In Shakespeare's case, on the other hand, the poet may have been concerned about his contemporaries' uses and abuses of the English language, especially about those of metonymy with its vagueness and unreliability.

Sonnet 105 can be supposed, indeed, to offer more evidence that Shakespeare the poet was highly concerned about the prevalence of metonymic expressions in his time:

> 'Fair, kind, and true' is all my argument,
> 'Fair, kind, and true,' <u>varying to other words</u>,

And in this change is my invention spent, [18] (Sonnet 105.9-11)

The phrase “varying to other words” is almost exactly the definition of “metonymy” (Greek *μετωνυμία* / Latin *metonymia*) , or “the replacement of the name of a thing by the name of its attribute or similarity.”[19] Although paraphrasing or renaming is what every poet will do, Shakespeare’s line here sounds self-mockingly ironic since he must be well aware that simply replacing the name of a thing with the name of its attribute or similarity is never a correct way to reach the truth. The vagueness that is inherent in metonymy is the problem. We cannot escape from the use of metonymy since it is one of our basic cognitive processes, but our poet captures the anxiety that we feel when it is employed because of the vagueness or uncertainty that its use entails.

Shakespeare, and presumably the Homeric poet of the *Odyssey* as well, was a poet of metaphor, and not of metonymy. Although in this essay I have only discussed the metonymy of singing/song, and how it was dealt with by two poets, I am of course aware that it is necessary to study other cases of poetic dealing with conventional and customary metonymies. [20]

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Perseus Digital Library (http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/)[accessed September 20, 2019].

1) The texts of Shakespeare's sonnets are taken from G. Blakemore Evans, ed., *The Sonnets*, The New Cambridge Shakespeare (Cambridge University Press, 2013) Kindle.

2) For the definition of "metonymy," see Jeannette Littlemore, *Metonymy: Hidden Shortcuts in Language, Thought and Communication* (Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp.4-18.

3) The Greek texts of Homer in the present article are taken from *Perseus Digital Library* (http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/)[accessed September 20, 2019].

4) The Latin translation is taken from the Greek-Latin parallel text of the *Iliad* printed by Jean Crespin (Geneva, 1570).

5) My translation.

6) The Latin translation of the *Odyssey* is taken from the Greek-Latin parallel text printed by Eustatius Vignon (Geneva, 1574).

7) Adapted from Robert Fagles' English translation of the *Odyssey* (Penguin Books, 2006). The epithet πολύτροπον is variously interpreted. Kubo interprets it as "whose greatness is celebrated in a lot of legends and stories" (Kubo 369f. My translation).

8) Regarding the issue of vagueness and metonymy, see Littlemore, pp.96-99.

9) My underlining.

10) Regarding the small-size printed editions of classical texts that were meant to be sold to university students in the late sixteenth century, see Tetsuro Shimizu, "Making 'blind Homer sing to me': 16th-Century Student Editions of Greek Poems and Marlowe's Art of Imitation," *Shakespeare Studies*, vol. 50 (2012), pp.16-39.

11) My underlining.

12) πολύτροπος: *Odyssey* 1.1; πολύμητις: *Odyssey* 9.1.

13) My underlining.

14) *Metamorphoses*, 15.199-216.

15) Evans' commentary on Sonnet 73.4.

16) My underlining.

17) My underlining.

18) My underlining.

19) *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, ed. by P. G. Glare (Oxford University Press, 1984): "metonymia."

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