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Lying and Poetry from Homer to Pindar

Falsehood and Deception in Archaic Greek Poetics

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Odysseus, well-known as a master liar and deceiver.[1] More recently, Susan Shelmerdine (1984) has called our attention to a similar close relationship between the bard and the character of the trickster god Hermes in the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*.[2] The association of poetry with two figures so renowned for their ability to lie and deceive suggests that the early poets shared Nabokov's perceptions, at least in part. Moreover, in the hands of both characters, lying loses its exclusively negative connotations, so that it seems to serve, as it does in the Nabokov passage, as a token of imaginative power and inventiveness, as a representation of artfulness, even perhaps as an early model of fiction. In this notion of the lie as a form of art that reveals the creative and intellectual capacities of its creator, we might hope to find an explanation of the Muses' enigmatic statement in the proem of Hesiod's *Theogony*, in which the patron goddesses of poetry claim the ability to speak both lies like true things and the truth:

> We know how to speak many falsehoods that are like true things,
> But we know, when we wish, how to speak forth truths.
>
> (*Th.* 27–28)

Though classicists have frequently and increasingly been drawn to this material and to other material with similar implications,[3] the emphasis of modern scholarship on archaic Greek poetics suggests that Nabokov could not have been more wrong. That work has repeatedly stressed archaic poetry's commitment to truth. Far from thinking of the poet as a liar, archaic culture, according to the prevailing view, regarded the poet as a speaker of truth.[4] Though scholars have differed widely in interpreting the significance of this claim, it presents certain difficulties for a Nabokovian

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The epigraph is taken from Nabokov 1973, 11.

1. See, e.g., Goldhill 1991, chap. 1; Pucci 1987, esp. 98–109, 226–27; Murnaghan 1987, 148–75; Thalmann 1984, 170–73, and passim; Segal 1983; and numerous others beginning with Pindar in *Nemean* 7 (see chap. 4). I have tried to be conscientious in documenting my dependence on other scholars. Nonetheless, the huge body of material on this subject ensures that I have failed to record many similarities of thought between my work and that of other scholars. I apologize to those whom I have overlooked.

2. See also Thalmann 1984, 173–74.

3. In addition to the work cited in note 1, see Martin 1989, 77–78; Detienne 1973, 51–80; Redfield 1975, 37–68; De Romilly 1973; Stroh 1976.

4. Particularly important to this argument are Detienne 1973 and Luther 1935, 124–26. See also Accame 1963; Setti 1958; Sikes 1931, 4; Maehler 1963, 19–20, 32, 41 and passim.

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Literary "Truth" and "Lies": Some Preliminary Issues

Even to speak of truth and lies in an artistic context is a dangerous enterprise. Both terms, never easy, become particularly unstable in such a context, so that *true*, for example, has been used to mean, among other possibilities, "nonfictional," "genuine," "verisimiliar," "psychologically valid," "internally consistent," or even "true within a given fictional world." *Lying* may mean simply "fictional," or it may mean "not verisimilar," "ideologically harmful," "insincere," even "slanderous." The shifting terms of the debate make discussion difficult, so even critics with similar notions of how poetic representation works (or does not work) may use the terms *truth* and *lying* in very different ways. Nonetheless, despite the obvious difficulty in using the terms intelligibly, a difficulty so great that some theorists have recommended that the terms *truth* and *lie* should not be applied in a literary context at all, critics and poets alike have continually discussed the relationship between poetry or fiction and truth, and that between poetry or fiction and lies. This suggests that, whatever our reservations about the appropriateness of these words in an absolute sense, *truth* and *lie* function as powerful metaphors for talking about certain aspects of poetic or fictional discourse.

Nonetheless, because the two words have been so variously applied, it is essential to recognize that neither *truth* nor *lie* has a fixed significance when applied to literature, and to distinguish carefully among the possibilities. Thus, a theorist may wish to distinguish a lie from a fiction as two quite distinct kinds of speech-act, but in another context, as in the Nabokov passage above, the lie may serve to represent certain qualities popularly associated with fiction. In yet another context, an individual work of fiction may be accused of lying, because the critic thinks it supports a position that is ideologically harmful, or possibly because it is not verisimilar (it does not "ring true"). Such a critique can not be taken to imply that the critic objects to all fiction as a mode of discourse. It is primarily the inability to keep the various possibilities distinct that has led scholars to conclude that archaic culture had no appreciation of fictionality.

The issues become further complicated in discussing the Greek material, because the Greek vocabulary of truth and falsehood does not correspond precisely to our own, and certain modern assumptions about the words *truth* and *lie* are inappropriate to the archaic material. I have tried, throughout my discussion, to be as clear as I can both about the range of

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Chapter 1

Aletheia and Poetry: *Iliad* 2.484–87 and *Odyssey* 8.487–91 as Models of Archaic Narrative

Do you think that such an intense power of memory as yours has inhibited your desire to invent in your books?
No, I don't think so.

—From an interview with Vladimir Nabokov

Before we can begin to discuss the issue of lying and deception in archaic poetry, it is necessary to look at the archaic evidence for a connection between poetry and truth. Modern scholarship's persistent emphasis on this material has created the impression that archaic poetry is fundamentally committed to truth (aletheia), and this has become an underlying assumption in much recent work on archaic poetics. This assumption has led many scholars to believe that the archaic poets and their audiences could see no natural affinity between poetry and lying or falsehood, such as that created by modern reflection on fiction and invention, and it has led some to doubt that the archaic Greeks even recognized poetic fiction as a legitimate category of discourse.

But the evidence for a general poetic commitment to truth, to aletheia in particular, is not nearly as certain as it has come to seem. It does not suggest a shared notion of poetic truth that can be universally applied to all archaic poetry, so as to exclude an appreciation of the false and deceptive aspects of fiction and invention. Claims to truth in archaic poetry are better treated as individual claims applicable only to specific circumstances within particular poems, rather than as evidence for a widespread belief that all poetry was, or ought to be, in all senses true. Such claims are by no means uniform in their language, nor in the variety of truth they embrace. We therefore need to carefully examine both the language and the implications of the essential passages before we can draw final conclusions.

Epigraph from Nabokov 1973, 13.

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accurate perceptions about human nature or apt observations about their society, but that does not mean that we believe they accurately commemorate past events. This strange property of fiction, its ability to make falsehood credible so that it may induce belief in its underlying precepts, confounds the categories true and false, belief and disbelief, so that they can not be seen as mutually exclusive.

I do not dispute that the archaic poets were supposed to possess a general sort of wisdom (*sophia*), and that their audiences and critics treated their advice and opinions as authoritative. But this position is different from their supposing that all archaic narrative was intended to be an accurate account of the past, different from their failing to appreciate that narrative may be fictional. We must strongly resist the temptation to use passages that suggest an interest in other varieties of truths as evidence for a commitment to a nonfictional variety of truth in poetic narrative, and vice versa. For the moment, I am interested only in archaic awareness of fiction in narrative, particularly in the kind of narrative represented by Homeric poetry (the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, and the Hymns), that is, narrative about events far removed in time. I therefore set aside discussion of poetic statements that make claims to validity that are not immediately relevant to archaic awareness of narrative fiction (e.g., victor praise in epinician and advice on how to live one's life in Hesiodic poetry). Since such claims have sometimes shaped scholarship's interpretation of Hesiodic and Pindaric attitudes toward narrative fiction, I discuss the issue of narrative fiction in Hesiod and Pindar separately in later chapters.

If we use the *Iliad* 2 and *Odyssey* 8 passages alone to establish the poetics of archaic narrative, we are forced to concede that the archaic poets had no awareness of fiction or poetic invention. Poetic narrative is divine revelation, and the ancient poet and his audience had the faith of fundamentalists. If the *Iliad* 2 and *Odyssey* 8 passages represent archaic notions of poetic narrative, all narrative becomes an account given to the poet by all-knowing and entirely reliable eyewitnesses of past events, that is, an account of "what really happened."

It might be argued that this interpretation of the *Iliad* 2 passage is too strict, that the poet is only asking for the full account according to the traditional story, which suggests no commitment to the factuality of the events reported, no suggestion that they actually happened this way (as if, for example, the poet had said, "Tell me the names of the three bears who scared Goldilocks"). The poet is interested exclusively in what is preserved in the tradition and has no interest in the reality of the past.

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> And he sent forth as an eyewitness
> the godlike Phoenix, the companion of his father,
> that he might remember the chariots and speak forth the truth.
> (*Il.* 23.359–61)

Memory is mentioned in the passage as a necessary condition of Phoenix's speaking aletheia. But this does not mean that memory alone guarantees aletheia. Achilles wishes Phoenix not only to retain in his mind what he sees (to remember it) but also to report what he sees without hiding or distorting it. The request is more than a request for memory; it is a request for a frank and reliable report of what is remembered. It excludes deliberate falsification or suppression of information as much as it excludes forgetfulness.

The etymology of *aletheia* creates confusion if we dwell too much on a simple meaning of the noun *lethe*, "forgetfulness."[10] If we look at the verb *letho* (= *lanthano*), used much more frequently in Homer than the related noun *lethe* (used only once in Homer), it becomes clear that the lethe excluded from *aletheia* can not be associated exclusively, or even primarily, with the semantic field of memory and forgetting.[11]

The verb *letho* occurs in a wide range of contexts, all of which share a common feature; all entail an absence of awareness. Forgetfulness is one example of such an absence, but it is by no means the only type of lapse created by the action of the verb *letho*. For example, when Helen goes through the city of Troy unperceived by the Trojan women, wrapped in her shining cloak and her silence, Homer comments that she escapes their notice (*lathe*) (πάσας δὲ Τρῳὰς λάθεν *Il.* 3.420). The point is not that Helen has induced the Trojan women to forget her, but that by her silence and her cloak she has managed to go unperceived by them. Likewise, when Hera questions Zeus closely and all too perspicuously about his meeting with Thetis, Zeus responds in some frustration, "Always you know, and not at all can I escape your observation [*letho*]." (αἰεὶ μὲν ὀΐεαι, οὐδέ σε λήθω *Il.* 1.561). Again, it is not that Hera is able to

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10. Even the noun *lethe* may mean something broader than mere forgetfulness. See *Th.* 227, where Lethe appears as the offspring of Eris alongside a whole range of things, notably lies, error, and oath. As a negative effect of *eris*, lethe would seem to be the equivalent of deception (apate). Indeed, lethe and apate are often linked as related psychological effects. See chap. 2.

11. Chantraine (1983) traces the etymology of the noun *aletheia* through the adjective *alethes* (true) from the verbs *letho*, *lanthano*, thus there is no reason to take the noun's meaning as the primary one.

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nonfictional truth about the past. Because the Muses are also invoked at the very beginning of both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, and thus are seemingly made responsible for the entire poems, must we conclude that the model of narrative created in our two model passages was assumed by both audience and poet to apply to the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* in their entireties? That the poet and audience accepted these poems as eyewitness reports conveyed verbally through the poet by the consistently reliable Muses? That the function of the Homeric poems was therefore primarily the accurate preservation of the past (aletheia), a function that excludes the poet's invention and an appreciation of poetic fictionality?

So scholars have frequently concluded, compelled by the force of these few passages. Thus, the archaic narrator was no more supposed to invent than is an eyewitness in a court of law. In fact, the poet must be considered a much more reliable reporter than your standard eyewitness, because the poet has the Muses to help should any gaps in his memory arise. This turns the archaic poets and their audiences into fundamentalist interpreters of Homer and other early poets, intolerant of any kind of falsity, convinced that Homeric and other early narrative accurately represented the past. Homeric narrative is equivalent to nonfiction, to history, insofar as it is taken to represent accurately the events of the past.

Such a view of poetry seems hard to reconcile with the archaic narrative that survives. To our literate minds, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are full of patent inventions, the products of a great imagination (or imaginations). We may believe that these stories originated in real events, but the representation of these events has been so transformed by the artists' imaginations as to become fictional. The works are no longer reliable accounts of the past but seem to have an entirely different function, a distinct one that we recognize as artistic. How can we explain archaic culture's failure to recognize the imaginative and fictional qualities of the accounts? How could the poets who were engaged in this inventive enterprise, an enterprise that so clearly seems to involve making things up, have been so entirely self-conscious?

For the scholars working in this area, the answer lies in the fundamentally oral nature of archaic culture. Even though oral poets may invent, they have no awareness of their invention; their dependence on the formulae and traditional themes of oral narrative give them the impression that they are reciting the traditional tales as they have always been told.[18] The

18. For an example of this kind of argument, see Walsh 1984, 11–16.

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The reception of the poet's implicit claim to know the true version may in this sense be comparable to our reception of similar claims in modern fiction. Though obviously not comparable in all respects, the following passage from *The Pickwick Papers* provides a particularly elaborate and entertaining example:

> We are merely endeavouring to discharge in an upright manner, the responsible duties of our editorial functions; and whatever ambition we might have felt under other circumstances, to lay claim to the authorship of these adventures, a regard for truth forbids us to do more, than claim the merit of their judicious arrangement, and impartial narration. The Pickwick papers are our New River Head; and we may be compared to the New River Company. The labours of others, have raised for us an immense reservoir of important facts. We merely lay them on, and communicate them, in a clear and gentle stream, through the medium of these numbers, to a world thirsting for Pickwickian knowledge. (Charles Dickens, *The Pickwick Papers* [Oxford, Clarendon Press; 1986], chap. 4; 53)

Because we are familiar with the conventions of fiction, we are unlikely to apply such a claim outside the fiction, to misread it as a claim that the events depicted within the fiction actually occurred in the world of our own experience. The claim is itself part of the fiction. The notion of truth represented by such passages is not different from the notion we use in everyday language. Dickens speaks of "facts" and "impartiality," denies authorship of the adventures, just as a historian might. His claim is not to a separate and distinct fictional "truth" but is itself what Austin has called "parasitic" on serious (nonfictional) discourse.[24] Though it resembles in its external features a sincere claim to nonfictional truth, it is intended only in play, is part of a shared game of make-believe, and is not taken outside the fiction as an assertion about the world external to the fiction, the world in which the audience lives and acts.

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24. Austin 1960. As Pavel has pointed out (1986, 18–27), Austin's characterization of this opposition between ordinary and fictional discourse as "serious" and "nonserious" does not work consistently, because there can be no question that some fictions may be taken very seriously by their culture. One of the problems, I suspect, in modern reading of archaic poetry is in understanding how they possibly could have taken poetry as seriously as they did. This "seriousness" of Greek response seems to indicate for modern scholars the nonfictionality of poetic discourse for the culture. But perhaps we simply do not take fiction seriously enough.

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ness.[31] The giving of pleasure (*terpsis*), in particular, is frequently named as the proper function of the poet.[32] Thus, for example, Alcinous describes the poet Demodocus' function: "to give pleasure, in whatever way his impulse (*thumos*) urges him to sing" (*Od.* 8.45). In contrast, truth (aletheia) is never actually named in connection with poetry in Homeric poetry, not in the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, nor in any of the Homeric Hymns. The association of poetry with truth in Homeric poetry is almost entirely dependent on our interpretations of certain claims, in which notions that we identify as truth lurk unnamed by any specific Greek term.[33]

Even the Muses, who are the guarantors of a truthful account in the *Iliad* 2 passage, have different associations and functions elsewhere. For example, the names Hesiod gives to his nine Muses in the *Theogony* (77–79) more closely call to mind the realm of beauty and pleasure than truth and accuracy: Melpomene (Singing/dancing one), Kalliope (Beautiful voice), Erato (Desire), Euterpe (Well-pleasing), Terpsichore (Dance-delighting), Thaleia (Festivity), Polyhymnia (Many-hymns), Kleio

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31. The epithets for song (ὕμνος or ἀοιδή), for example, reflect its sweetness, its beauty, its divinity, and the piercing quality of its sound—γλυκερός: *H.* vii 59, *H.* xix 18; ἡδύς: *Od.* 8.64; μελίγηρυς: *H.Apollo* 519; καλός: *H.Apollo* 164, *Th.* 22; ἱμερόεις: *Od.* 1.421, 18.304, *H.* x 5, *Th.* 104; χαρίεις: *Od.* 24.197–98; ἀθέσφατος: *Th.* 22, *WD* 662; θεσπέσιος: *Il.* 2.599–600; θέσπις: *Od.* 8.498, *H.Hermes* 442; λιγυρός: *Od.* 12.44, 12.183, *WD* 583, 659. The adjectives καλός, ἱμερόεις, and ἐρατός/ἐρατεινός also frequently qualify other words that occur in the context of music and song. See, e.g., *Il.* 1.473, 18.570; *H.Hermes* 423, 426, 455; *Th.* 65, 70; *H.Apollo* 515. See also *Theognidea* 15–17. Less frequently, an epithet may refer to the emotion roused or expressed in song—λυγρός: *Od.* 1.340–41; στονόεσσα: *Il.* 24.721; στυγερή: *Od.*24.200.

32. *Il.* 1.472–74, 9.186, 9.189; *Od.* 1.421–23 = 18.304–6, 8.429, 17.605–6, 12.188; *Th.* 37, 51, 917; *H.Apollo* 149–59, 204.

33. This is not a minor point, given that the word *aletheia* specifically, and its etymological relationship with *lethe*, rather than a familiar concept of truth, has frequently shaped discussion of truth in Homeric poetics. But *aletheia* specifically is actually named in connection with poetry in only two places in all of archaic poetry: in Hesiod's proem to the *Theogony*, hardly an unambiguous context (see chap. 3) and in connection with victor praise in epinician. But surely victor praise has a very different status from mythical narrative (on truth in epinician, see chap. 4). All other evidence for truth in archaic poetry uses a different vocabulary, the words *etumos* or *etetumos*, for example. Or such passages may condemn poetic lying or seem simply to *imply* truth (as do the *Il.* 2 and *Od.* 8 passages). If we are to argue that aletheia is not the same as our notion of truth and even that the opposition of aletheia and pseudos is not relevant in archaic thought, as Detienne does, we can not use this kind of evidence to support a widespread connection between poetry and aletheia. That poetry does have a connection with memory and therefore may be opposed to one variety of lethe, forgetfulness, is an important point, but though memory and truth are certainly categories that are related in important ways, this does not make them perfectly homologous in Greek any more than it does in English. Agamemnon's not forgetting the words of the lying dream in *Il.* 2 does not make the dream itself alethes.

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them emotionally so that the pathos does not become laughable. After discussing his own emotional involvement as he performs particularly moving sections of the poems, Ion describes audience reaction to his performance:

> Ion: If I make them weep, I myself will laugh, as I take their money, but if I make them laugh, I myself will weep, because I'll lose my fee. (*Ion* 535e)

Though the interests of the rhapsode's audience are entirely different from those of the two historians, both types of audience response are compatible as responses to an account of the past that was widely accepted as a fictional representation of real events. The historians seek to sort out the facts from an amalgam of fact and fiction. The rhapsode's audience enjoys its emotional involvement in the world of the past without attempting to define the borders between real and unreal, true and false, actual and fictive. Such distinctions are not relevant to their experience of the performance. The latter attitude of mind seems to be characteristic of audiences to fiction when immersed in the fiction, for we can not follow the logic of the narrative if we attempt to make distinctions in the status of the various statements we are asked to entertain.[38] This does not mean that such an audience can not step back from the fiction and analyze it more critically in the same sorts of terms advanced by the historians, at least to the extent that they may recognize it as a mixture of true and false.

But this seems to me to be based on a misunderstanding of the types of argument Socrates employs. Ion himself concedes that the rhapsode has no special expertise in these areas. Ion's inability to define where precisely the rhapsode's special area of expertise lies contributes to the misunderstanding. Socrates uses the arguments only to establish that the rhapsode does not possess any identifiable body of knowledge or skill (*techne*), such as that represented by medicine, fishing, charioteering, and the like; without a defined body of knowledge, there can be no special rhapsodic *techne*. His arguments can not be used to establish popular notions of what poetry was supposed to do. See chap. 5 for further discussion of the *Ion*.

38. See, e.g., Pavel's characterization of the reader's response to modern fiction: "During the reading of *The Pickwick Papers* does Mr. Pickwick appear less real than the sun over Goswell Street? In *War and Peace* is Natasha less actual than Napoleon? Fictional texts enjoy a certain discursive unity; for their readers, the worlds they describe are not necessarily fractured along a fictive/actual line" (Pavel 1986, 16). This does not mean that we do not draw a distinction outside the fiction between Napoleon as a historical figure and Natasha as a fictional one, but that as we are engaged in reading the text, we may not find such distinctions pertinent. To follow the narrative, to entertain the fictional propositions, we must pretend that it is all real, even though we may know perfectly well that it is not. This double perspective of the audience to fiction has been nicely described by Newsom 1988, see esp. 127–28.

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in chapters to come.) Such inventions unquestionably interfere with both poets' and audiences' ability to reconstruct "what really happened," but if reconstruction is not the primary goal of the narrative, invention does not have to invalidate the narrative for its audience.

The difference between this sort of fiction and history is that the former asks us to entertain a possible construction of these events, a hypothetical construction, and the latter asks us to believe such a construction. Commemorative fiction says "imagine that it happened this way." History argues that it did happen this way.[45] The author of commemorative fiction consequently need not attempt to prove the truth-value of the individual statements he or she makes, and the audience need not weigh the individual claims of each of the author's statements. Both accept that the author may invent if that will help the imaginative process. In contrast, however much able writers of nonfiction may appeal to the imagination, they are supposed to keep that appeal subordinated to their own commitment to their facts. That their facts may be mistaken does not alter the nonfictional status of their work, but should they abandon their commitment to their facts in favor of a more purely imaginative account—in favor of deliberate invention—they deserve the epithet liar, at least as much as do poets. Herodotus is accused of lying, I believe, not because he made more errors than other historians, but because he is suspected of deliberately abandoning what he himself believed to be fact in order to report an entertaining story.

Nonfictional writers may make use of fictions from time to time to illustrate a point, but they typically draw clear boundaries around that fiction to distinguish it from factual narrative: "let us imagine," "suppose," "some tell this story." Writers of fiction tend to create a more integrated account. Once within a fiction, there is rarely a need to distinguish fact and invention; the work is typically experienced as a whole. Thus, we may read of the burning of Atlanta and Scarlett O'Hara's reaction to it on the same page without the author's distinguishing her invention from historical fact. History must draw its boundaries more carefully,

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journalism," and other fictional representations of the presumed-to-be-real (e.g., a film version of the life of Jesus) can run very high, and there are apt to be strong differences of opinion.

45. Aristotle draws a related distinction between poetry and history in the *Poetics* when he says that history deals in "what happened" (τὰ γενόμενα) and poetry deals with "what could happen" (*Poetics* 1451a.36–b.7). Aristotle's distinction is broader than mine. The sorts of things that could happen include not only "what could have happened" in the past but the sorts of things that might happen in the present or even in the future. But I am talking only about one particular type of fiction, historical fiction, a subcategory of all the various types of fiction that there are.

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klea andrōn is typically translated "glories of men." This quite accurately conveys its functional meaning; the traditional stories are important because they preserve the glory of the dead heroes. Nonetheless, like the Latin word *fama*, which originates in the notion of "what is said" (from the Latin *for, fari*, "say") about a person and therefore extends to idle gossip as well as to truthful report, *kleos* has an ambiguous status with respect to truth. We have already seen the singular of *kleos* used in the *Iliad* 2 passage to contrast with the Muses' knowledge. Elsewhere in archaic poetry, characters express a similar skepticism about the truth-value of *kleos*.[47] Klea includes "all that is heard" about a person, both true and false. Therefore, in telling klea, the poets take no responsibility for the factuality of their accounts, as they would if they claimed to be masters of aletheia. They might nonetheless insist on the validity of these representations, insofar as they preserve intact the established reputations of the heroes they depict.

Distance and Self-interest

The *Iliad* 2 and *Odyssey* 8 passages exemplify in their interest in truth one function that archaic narrative does play: a commemorative one. To this function it may sometimes be useful to claim that the poet does have access to knowledge about the past, particularly if there is a likelihood of giving offense. But elsewhere the poet may be more concerned with creating certain effects that have nothing to do with the truth-value of the narrative, and sometimes he may even wish to call attention to his own inventiveness, as the author to the *Hymn to Dionysus* seems to do. It is therefore neither necessary nor entirely desirable to take the *Iliad* 2 and *Odyssey* 8 passages as programmatic for all of Homeric narrative, certainly not for all of archaic narrative.

In fact, the circumstances of the two passages are not precisely typical of Homeric narrative. Odysseus, unlike the typical audience of Homeric narrative, was actually present at the events that Demodocus narrates. He is therefore in the unusual position of being able to judge the truth of the poet's narrative. The audience of the Homeric bard, in contrast, could not have presumed to judge the accuracy of the events recited. If we were to put Odysseus' words in the mouth of such an audience, they would have

47. See, e.g., *Il.* 17.142–43, where Glaucus suggests that Hector has a false kleos; *H. Hermes* 276–77 = 310–11 where Hermes denies all knowledge of cows, claiming that he has only heard kleos.

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not discount the importance of pleasure but suggests that the poet is free to please as he wishes.

The *Odyssey* indeed seems to warn of a certain danger in hearing poetry under conditions that permit one to judge the accuracy of the account. Those who have firsthand knowledge of the events experience pain rather than pleasure in hearing them recounted, as do both Odysseus and Penelope in the accounts above. The dangerous Sirens promise Odysseus a song in which he would have to play a prominent role. Such a song may be enticing, but it ultimately destroys the listener (seemingly because it is a little too engrossing). The poem proposes that when one is too intimate with the facts of a story, the story brings pain or even destruction, (though it may be destruction attended by pleasure), and this pain is not treated as desirable in the *Odyssey*. The poem therefore seems to recommend that stories of uncertain truth are to be preferred. Even Odysseus' lies have a more positive function in the story (see chapter 2). Athenian reaction to Phrynichus' tragedy on the capture of Miletus (Herodotus 6.21) likewise suggests that audiences preferred a certain detachment from the events depicted, that too much reality made the emotions created by the drama intolerable. Our pleasure in fiction comes at least in part from its being part of a world that is removed from our own.

The Muses and Poetic Truth

What then of the Muses? Does their omniscience not ensure the truth of all narrative? As the daughters of Memory, do they not ensure that poetry preserves the past perfectly? I suspect that the archaic poets would have looked at it somewhat differently. The omniscience of the Muses was available when the poet needed to claim accuracy for his account, but because an accurate account is not consistently of primary importance, the Muses are at other times present in a less specific way, helping the poet to give pleasure or to create a beautiful song, without necessitating that the narrative be felt as truthful. The Muses' association with knowledge and memory does not mandate that all poetry be true in the sense implied in the model passages. Knowledge is essential to any plausible narrative, to fiction as well as to history; memory to the recounting of any traditional tale, to fairy tale as well as to saga. Though they are prerequisites of truth, knowledge and memory do not guarantee nonfictional truthfulness, because they do not guarantee the speaker's desire to speak this kind of truth. The efficacy of the invocation to the Muses in the *Iliad* 2 passage depends

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their lies, their speeches, or their song, or that the god exercises complete control over the recipient's deployment of that gift. Though Alcinous attributes Demodocus' ability to please to the god, he can in the same passage speak of the poet's own spirit (*thumos*), which apparently exercises choice and control over the direction of the song:

> For the god gave to him song beyond others—
> [the ability] to give pleasure in whatever way his spirit urges him to sing
>
> (*Od.* 8.44–45)

Likewise, at *Odyssey* 1.347, the poet's mind (*noos*) directs the song, a further indication that the poet had some responsibility for its creation.

That there is no clear distinction drawn in archaic poetry between a god's giving a mortal a gift and a god's teaching a mortal a skill further suggests that the notion of a divine gift does not make the recipient of the gift entirely passive. The recipient is given a skill, not made into a mouthpiece. The incident with the poet Thamyris reported in the Catalogue of Ships (*Il.* 2.594–600) suggests the complexity of the bard's dependence on the Muses. Thamyris feels himself able to compete against the Muses, which would certainly not be possible if he believed that the song came directly from the Muses and that he was not its creator. But his attempt to compete with the Muses leads to his being deprived of their gift altogether. He can no longer sing. The tension here suggests that the bard possesses a general dependence on the Muses, but not necessarily a completely passive role in creating a song on any given occasion. The whole notion of poets competing among one another—mentioned, for example, at *Works and Days* 26—strongly suggests a conception of poetry as a skill possessed by different individuals to different degrees.

Alongside passages that suggest in their phrasing the poet's passivity (like *Il.* 1.1) appear other passages that give the poet a greater responsibility for the song and a more active role in its creation. Only a few lines after the poet first asks the Muse to sing, he again speaks in his own voice, asking who of the gods set the two heroes to fighting. Elsewhere the poet asks the Muse to tell *him*, not the audience ("tell me now Muses"), a given piece of information that the poet will then presumably report in his song. In this formulation, the poet appears more explicitly as a mediator between Muse and audience. At still other points, the poet makes the

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A Word on *Pseudos*

The Greek word *pseudos*, the closest equivalent to our own word lie, is applied in Greek to all varieties of falsehood, from a merely accidental misstatement to an elaborate fabrication. The noun *pseudos* and the related verbs and adjectives do not necessarily imply that the speaker deliberately seeks to deceive the hearer; they denote only the objective falsity of what is said.[2] Thus, in Plato's *Hippias Minor*, Socrates and Hippias debate which are better, unintentional or intentional pseudea (370c–73c).[3] Consequently, there can be no clear verbal distinction in Greek that parallels a distinction in English between "lie" and "fiction" based purely on a difference in intent. Later Greek authors use the word *pseudos* in contexts that seem to imply what we mean by fiction (see, for example, that used by Aristotle below; see also Plutarch *Quomodo Aud. Poet.* 2.16a–d, where poets are said to produce both unintentional and intentional pseudea). Therefore, questions of authorial intention play a relatively slight role in the defining of a speech-act as pseudos.

Some Preliminary Ethical Issues

Many scholars have been uncomfortable with the suggestion that the archaic poet claims an Odyssean or Hermetic license to lie, because they have quite naturally assumed that lying must always be negative. There are certainly statements in archaic literature that strongly suggest that truth-telling is normally assumed to be good and lying bad.[4] Nonetheless, if we look at archaic depictions of lying and deceiving, we find that archaic narrative presents a far more complex view, one that tends to undermine our assumption that all lies and acts of deception are equally reprehensible.

Even within the same text, lying and deception may be at one moment condemned, at another moment condoned or even admired. Thus, for

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2. For an interesting discussion of the usage of the word "lie" in English that argues for a much fuzzier range of meanings that can include falsehoods that are not intentional, see Sweetser 1987.

3. For early examples, see *Il.* 10.534, *Od.* 4.140. See also Luther 1935, 80–90, for further discussion of Homeric material.

4. E.g., the bland aphorism attributed to Solon in Demetrius of Phalerum's collection of the sayings of the seven wise men: Do not lie, but tell the truth (*aletheue*) (10 B 6 Diels-Kranz). Achilles' comment at *Il.* 9.309–13 asserts a personal preference for truth, as do the comments of other characters in Homeric poetry.

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Principle 2

Everyone does not deserve to hear the truth; in fact, the inability to perceive the truth may itself be proof of one's not deserving to. Because of the close association of lying and deceiving with a certain kind of intelligence, the failure to recognize a lie or the succumbing to an act of deception may be seen as a failure of intelligence. Thus, the person deceived may bear the brunt of the blame for the deception, because his or her own blindness—either intellectual or, often, moral—leads to the deception. The deception may represent not so much the deceiver's attempt to win advantage as the deceived's ignorance and lack of subtlety. This is particularly the case when gods are depicted deceiving mortals. The mortal shows that he or she does not deserve to be treated better when the mortal fails to see through the deception. Zeus' deception of Ixion described in *Pythian* 2.21–43 is one particularly clear example. Ixion's lust for Hera permits Zeus to deceive him with a phantom image of Hera. The deception depends entirely on Ixion's own blind passion, a passion that he should not pursue. Therefore, though Zeus deliberately sets out to deceive the much weaker Ixion, Ixion and not Zeus is responsible for the punishment that results.

At certain places in archaic literature individual gods are said to be "unlying," but such passages should not be taken as reflections on the questionable morality of divine deception. The appellation is typically applied to gods in their role as prophets. It marks the unerring quality of their speech, its validity, rather than the gods' honesty and desire to reveal what they know. For example, when Archilochus speaks of Zeus as the most unlying prophet of the gods, this is apparently because Zeus of all the gods is most able to bring his words to fulfillment: "among the gods, he is the most unlying (*apseudestatos*) . . . he himself holds the outcome (*telos*)" (*IEG* 298). This remark suggests that the characterization has to do not so much with Zeus' kind intentions but with his ability to see and carry out the the prophecies he makes.[11] Likewise, the prophet Proteus,

11. The same is true of Zeus' oaths and promises. See, e.g., his promise to Thetis at *Il.* 1.524–27, where his promise is characterized as οὐδ' ἀτελεύτητον (not without fulfillment). Again his ability to bring oaths and promises to fulfillment is stressed. In *Il.* 19, Hera uses her cunning to force Zeus into a promise that he will not be able to keep and then boasts that he will be proven a liar (*Il.* 19.107). Hera seems to suggest that she has undermined some of Zeus' power by causing him to speak words that are not efficacious. This kind of pseudos is a sign of weakness, but intentional lies may be a sign of power. Thus, there is already some early evidence

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lies as an example of Homer's particular skill at fictionalizing. In his discussion of Homer's particular merits as a poet, Aristotle comments, "But above all Homer has taught the other poets how to speak falsehoods (pseude), as they should" (*Poetics* 1460a). By adding "as they should" (ὡς δεῖ), Aristotle seems both to give his approval to Homeric falsifying and to accept it as a natural element of poetry, an element without which poetry could scarcely exist. Scholars have therefore, rightly I think, taken the passage as a clear recognition of poetic fiction under the designation pseudos. After discussing the proper way to construct such a poetic pseudos, Aristotle gives Odysseus' lie at *Odyssey* 19.220–48[16] as an example of this kind of skill. In so doing, Aristotle does not distinguish between the poetic skill at fictionalizing possessed by the author and the verbal skill at lying possessed by the author's character.[17] Viewed purely as skills, lying and fictionalizing become remarkably similar, both dependent, in Aristotle's estimation, on constructing a narrative so plausible, so compelling by the force of the conclusions it draws from its fictional hypotheses, that the hypotheses themselves become believable. Thus, the disguised Odysseus' knowledge of the brooch worn by the real Odysseus and his ability to recreate it in detail make credible his lie about his identity and his claim to have entertained the real Odysseus. The artist's knowledge of certain things—the terrain of Troy, for example, or the way different types of characters express themselves—presumably contributes to a similar plausibility for his fiction. This creates for Aristotle a natural affinity between Odysseus the liar and Homer the poet.

According to scholars that put heavy emphasis on archaic commitment to aletheia, Aristotle's interpretation of the affinity between poet and character must be anachronistic. The *Odyssey* poet never intended that the apparent affinity between his own craft and Odysseus' might suggest that the poet too was a falsifier, and no archaic audience, accustomed to the notion of the poet as a master of aletheia, would have so understood it. Odysseus, though he may resemble the bard in certain revealing ways, is not a bard, and though Odysseus shows himself an able enough liar, it

16. This is the most likely possibility. For discussion, see Lucas 1968, 229.

17. Aristotle, who is often credited with the invention of fictionality, here draws no distinction between fiction and lie based on a difference of intention or reception. He is interested in fictionalizing as a skill, not as a speech-act. It would be more helpful, Lucas suggests, if Aristotle had given an example of Homer's own fictionalizing tendencies, rather than Odysseus' lies (1968, 228). Although Aristotle knows that Homer fictionalizes, he may not be certain which parts of the poems are true and which are poetic fictions. Consequently, he turns to Odysseus' falsehoods, which are recognizable as such from the context of the poem.

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suggest that Odysseus' knowledgeable shaping of the story, his narrative skill and craftsmanship, creates a resemblance between Odysseus and the poet. We are not surprised to find these qualities used of Odyssean speech; this sort of practical wisdom characterizes Odysseus throughout the *Odyssey*. But Alcinous, by drawing the analogy, suggests that the poet too is an artisan, a master of carefully crafted speech.[22]

The social position of the bard supports this notion of the poet as an artisan, a practitioner of a learned skill. At *Odyssey* 17.382–87, Eumaeus lists the poet, "who pleases as he sings," alongside the prophet, doctor, and carpenter, as a *demiergos*, "a worker for the people," a practitioner of a useful skill whom one might invite into one's home. At the beginning of the *Works and Days*, the singer appears alongside the potter, carpenter, and beggar, as one who profits from competition. This passage implies that the element of competition compels poets to refine their art to better their competitors. All of this suggests that poetic composition is something one knows how to do, a skill one practices; the poet is not considered purely a passive mouthpiece of the Muses.[23]

But must this identification with craft, with techne and sophia, imply that the poet is, like Odysseus and Hermes, also a creator of fictions (pseudea)? We can certainly think of nonfictional authors composing their works with techne and sophia, skillfully shaping the true content of their song. Alcinous, in drawing the comparison between Odysseus and the poet, does not imply that either the poet or Odysseus is a manufacturer of falsehoods. He seems to accept Odysseus' stories as entirely true:

> Odysseus, not at all do we, as we look upon you, judge you
> to be a deceiver and a thief, like those many

22. Hesiod describes his own ability to construct a narrative using the phrase "well and knowledgeably" (εὖ καὶ ἐπισταμένως). The phrase occurs at the transition between the Pandora story and the story of the Ages (*WD* 107). This kind of skillful and knowledgeable narration is not incompatible with a notion of fictional narration (see chap. 3). Cf. also the poet's characterization of Hermes' deceptive speech as well and knowledgeably (εὖ καὶ ἐπισταμένως) denying his guilt (*H.Hermes* 390). There is no necessary connection between knowledgeably (ἐπισταμένως) told and truthfully told.

23. Svenbro (1976) and Walsh (1984) have argued strongly against Homeric recognition of poetry as a human skill, but see Murray 1981 for a well-reasoned critique of this point of view. Svenbro's contrast between divine inspiration and human techne seems a false dichotomy (see my arguments at the end of chap. 1). Eumaeus' list of divine singer alongside prophet, doctor, and carpenter suggests no division down secular/god-inspired lines. Prophets, doctors, carpenters, and poets would seem to be at once practitioners of human skills and dependent on the gods. See also Gentili 1988, 5–7.

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Lying as a Manifestation of *Metis*: One Model of Fiction

In book 13 of the *Odyssey*, Odysseus creates an elaborate lie in an attempt to disguise his true identity from Athene, who in turn is disguised like a shepherd boy. Though Athene is not for a minute deceived by Odysseus' lie, she is amused by it and even seems to admire it as evidence of Odysseus' verbal skills. Athene's reaction is an example of the admiration of lying purely as a manifestation of the kind of intelligence I have described above:

> Someone would have to be a cunning rogue and an archdeceiver
> to surpass you in deceits, even if a god were to oppose you.
> Incorrigible you are, with a shifty intelligence, creator of
> ploys, not even in your own land were you going to stop your
> deceptions and thievish words: these are your true friends.
> But come, let us no longer talk about these things, since both of us
> know
> the cunning arts: you are by far the best of all mortals
> at counsel and words, and I among all the gods
> am famed for my cunning and craft.
>
> (*Od.* 13.291–99)

Athene's response to Odysseus' lie provides one model for an intelligent response to fiction: a failure to believe it, but amusement and even pleasure at the cleverness of the author. Athene's appreciation of Odysseus' lie seems moreover to involve pleasure at her own skill at detection; for Athene, the pseudos becomes a game of unraveling that leads her to reflect happily not only on Odysseus' verbal dexterity but on her own cunning intelligence (metis).

In this passage, Athene is a model for the least involved type of audience to fiction, an audience that appreciates a work as the creation of the poet's intelligence but nonetheless sees through it entirely. We all have been this kind of reader of a fiction, and scholars and professors, I suspect, have this experience of fiction particularly often. No doubt one of the reasons we like to reveal to our students the artistry of the text, the author's metis, is that this is a useful way of reveling in our own metis. By so doing, we actually affirm our superior metis, because we are not seduced by the author's inventions, however much we may admire them. Athene-like, we regard the text from an elevated plane and never fail to

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