

## BOOK REVIEW

*The Epic Rhapsode and his Craft: Homeric Performance in a Diachronic Perspective.* By JOSÉ M. GONZÁLEZ. Washington, D.C.: Center for Hellenic Studies, 2013. Pp. xii+821. Paper, \$27.50. ISBN 9780674055896.

As with other productions from the Center for Hellenic Studies, this book resides freely accessible online (<http://chs.harvard.edu/CHS/article/display/6127>). But all Homerists should own a copy of González's learned achievement, as should anyone interested in the performance of ancient Greek poetry. Those working on Greek rhetoric will wish to study Part V and should poke around elsewhere as well: in exploring the interactions between rhapsodes, actors, and orators, González's book intersects with David Sansone's (2012) treatment of the interactions between drama and rhetoric.

The book aggregates and analyzes material scattered in publications of varying degrees of accessibility. For instance, Part I brings together all the strands in the writing poet vs. dictating poet vs. evolutionary model debate. Part IV brings us up to speed on who the *homēristai* were and what the *tekhnitai* and the *epōn poiētēs* did and includes a catalogue of all references to historically attested rhapsodes. González presents a diachronic study of the rhapsode and examines the changing nature of rhapsodic performance over several centuries. If the book ranges far and wide, it is also a product of a specific time and place: it defends and builds on the work of Gregory Nagy.<sup>1</sup> Readers skeptical of Nagy's work should not think they can skip this book. As these opening paragraphs have aimed to make clear, the book's utility is extensive.

I will first summarize the book and then single out a few sections for further comment. Coming in at 821 pages, this book is three or four monographs in one. The following summary of its contents, especially of Parts II through V, will take some time, but the reader will benefit from knowing not just what González talks about but what he thinks of the subjects he addresses.

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Nagy 2003: 1; cf. Watkins 1995: 173.

Part I, “The ‘Homeric Question,’” defends Nagy’s evolutionary model for the gradual fixation of the Homeric poems by going after popular alternatives: a dictated text that served as an archetype already in the archaic period; a writing oral poet who wrote out a text that became an archetype already in the archaic period. Chapter 1 argues that one cannot invoke the literature of either the ancient Near East or of the Phoenicians to support the theory that an archetypal dictated text emerged in the archaic period. Chapter 2 declares that not a single painting on a vase points to the fixation of a standard text in the archaic period, and Chapter 3 that technological obstacles militate against the production of a written text at that time. Chapter 4 suggests that linguistic analysis does not support the notion of Euboea as the site of an early-archaic fixation of the poems, and Chapter 5 makes the same point as Chapter 4 but focuses on inscriptions and on the notion of an eighth-century book hand behind the inscription on the Nestor Cup. Chapter 6 rounds out Part I: neither references to the dispute between Athens and Megara over Salamis nor references to the work of Theagenes of Rhegion back up the idea that a standard written text emerged in the (early) sixth century BCE.

Part II, “Rhapsodic Performance in Pre-Classical Greece,” begins with Chapter 7’s discussion of “Homer the Rhapsode.” Here González attends to the phenomenon of notional fixity.<sup>2</sup> Oral poets and their audiences believe that every time a poet performs he generates the same oral text as he has and his peers have in the past and will in the future. In the Homeric case, “this fixity derived from the well-known kinship between poetry and prophecy that has its most immediate expression in the bard’s claim to divine authority” (177). Faith in notional fixity comes from a belief in the poet’s divine source (186), and, accordingly, “the epic tradition, notionally spoken by the Muse or Apollo, could not possibly change from one divine telling to another” (201). This sense of the sameness of each performance plays an important role in the ultimate assignation of the poems to a single author and in the gradual textualization of the poetry. It also indicates the truth-value of the song.

Chapter 8, “Hesiod the Rhapsode,” argues “that the archaic traditions of hexameter poetry were imbued with notions of quoted divine speech” (285). González focuses first on the poet as a *mantis*. Like the divinely inspired seer, the poet explicates the past, present, and future. Like the seer, the poet reveals the divine will: the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were each “viewed by its audience from beginning to end as the explication of Zeus’ will” (231). We must attend to “the religious character

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Nagy 1990a: 55, 1990b: 27, and esp. 2002: 142–2003: 22 on “notional sameness.”

of the singing of the bard" (233). González then shifts to a discussion of *Theogony* 26–28, wherein the Muses claim the ability to speak lies like the truth (local poetry) and the truth. Previously a performer of local lies (one subject to the "punitive pleasure of the Muses" [258]), Hesiod becomes a Panhellenic truth teller.

The chapter's third section fleshes out the poet's stance as a prophet. González explains what "ecstasy" means in the Homeric case (Homeric poets remain "self-possessed" [269]) and then turns to the Delphic oracle in a subsection that soon morphs into an analysis of Plato's *Ion* ("Even from the late, fourth-century perspective of Plato's *Ion*, the role of the rhapsode vis-à-vis the epic poet remains analogous to the prophet's relationship to the Pythia" [276]). Here we get for the first time the important point that "Ion's 'adorning' Homer does entail a compositional facet" (281). The final subsection looks at the choice of hexameters to render oracular verse. The chapter ends with a glance at the rhapsode's stance as an interpreter (*hypokritēs*). Operating at a time when the performances of Homeric poetry exhibited more rigidity, the rhapsode still engaged in recomposition of relatively more fluid portions of the tale. In recomposing, the rhapsode functions as an interpreter both of the Muse and of the poet. As the tradition became even more rigid, the rhapsode's interpreting likely took the form of "prose" commentary akin to the lecturing of sophists.

Part III, "Rhapsodic Performance in High-Classical Athens," comprises chapters 9 and 10. Chapter 9 begins with a discussion of Nagy's model of transcripts and scripts. (Transcript: a record of a performance; one can use a transcript as guide or aid when performing, but one does not need a transcript to perform and a transcript cannot take the place of a performance. Script: one has to memorize the script to perform, or, at the very least, a script controls a performance.) González wants to know what triggered the shift from transcript to script in the performance of Homeric poetry. To begin analyzing this shift, he discusses in more detail the matter raised at the end of Chapter 8: the "rhapsodic exposition of Homer" (299). This task at first would have required the rhapsode to compose in performance but eventually would have prompted the rhapsode to offer "explanatory prose" (304). Critically, this move aligns the rhapsode with the sophist, as does the rhapsode's praising (*epain-*) Homer. The relationship between rhapsode and stage actor is just as close and mutually reinforcing.

González introduces here an essential element in his argument: by Aristotle's time, rhapsodes used "written texts (first in the character of transcripts, then of

scripts) to prepare for and secure a successful performance" (311), and in their reliance on written texts they resembled not only actors but orators (sophists) as well. Alkidamas's *On the Sophists* reflects the author's dismay at public speakers' use of written texts. González takes inspiration from Alkidamas's discussion of improvisation versus scripted delivery and his coupling of *hypokrisis* and *rhapsōidia*. He sees aspiring rhapsodes turning to scripts when (314)

competitive rules minimized the unexpected and put the emphasis on the stylistic finish of the delivery, ... The transition from transcripts to scripts was facilitated by competitive rules at the Panathenaia that enforced an increasingly fixed thematic sequence. This sequence must have been predictable enough before the actual performance to give a competitive advantage to rhapsodes who chose to draft their recital in advance and commit it to memory.

At the same time, the growing number of Athenians who wanted to try their hand at performing at the Panathenaia if for no other reason than the liquid and cultural capital that accrued to the winner would memorize texts: they would treat texts as scripts. Returning at the end of the chapter to the notion that rhapsodes both declaimed poetry and commented on it and relied on scripts to do so, González finds evidence for this argument in Isokrates's and Plato's use of the verb *rhapsōideō*.

Chapter 10 studies the word *rhapsōidos*. González begins by rejecting the dichotomy between a creative *aoidos* and a replicating rhapsode.<sup>3</sup> Noting that the rhapsode sews/stitches (*rhaptō*) the song in a creative fashion, González pursues the distinctive features of rhapsodic performance. First, the terms *aoidos* and *rhapsōidos* "were concurrent designations for the performer of epic" (344). We cannot use the presence or absence of musical accompaniment or the presence or absence of singing to distinguish the two: "the title 'rhapsode' focuses attention on features of his craft that are largely indifferent to the use of an instrument and the presence of melody" (345). Instead, as Callimachus's *Hymn to Zeus* 78–79 shows, the word "focuses attention upon the rhapsodic craft of recomposition of traditional epic themes and diction in performance" (348).

Second, González looks at the use of the verb *rhaptō* and cognate forms in Homeric poetry. The verb *rhaptō* parallels *hyphainō*: both verbs belong "among the traditional Indo-European metaphors for poetic composition" (356) and both are "metaphors of composition and performance" (364), not just composition. The Homeric poet avoids calling poets in his story "rhapsodes" because, whereas

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Nagy 2003: 6–7.

that term highlights the poet's "compositional technique, performance practice, and role in the construction and delivery of the poems" (357), the poet wants to stress his inspiration by the Muses. By contrast, "the deceptiveness of self-interested telling" (360) prompts craft metaphors within the epics.

Third, González turns to "rhapsodic sequencing and relay poetics" (367) (see his 371, note 138 for references to Nagy's work on the topic). He explores the ways in which rhapsodes perform "in uninterrupted sequence" (368), including at the Panathenaia where rhapsodes performed competitively in a relay-type format. A rhapsode would continue the tale from the exact point at which the previous performer left off, an idea articulated in the use of the verb *dekhomai* to describe this fusion. This simultaneously cooperative and competitive endeavor, illuminated by scholion 1d to Pindar's *Nemean* 2 and the *Contest of Homer and Hesiod*, "is at the heart of the Panhellenic process that drove the textual fixation of the Homeric poems" (377). There may or may not have been an actual Panathenaic Rule, but talk of it in ancient sources—and the attendant phrases *ex hypolēpseōs*, *ephexēs*, and *ex hypobolēs*—highlights "the thematic sequencing fundamental to rhapsodic practice and responsible for the artistic unity of the Homeric poems" (384). Similarly, the terms *oimē* and *oimos*, both to be translated "band, cord, or thread of song" (393), "underlined the tight performance sequencing and narrative connection that is at the heart of rhapsodic singing" (392). For its part, the term *hymnos* "reifies the performance of epic song as a 'membrane' or, alternatively, as a product manufactured by tying or sewing" (397); this word, too, "makes the formal and thematic sequencing of traditional epic poetry metaphorically emphatic."

The fourth section of this chapter explicates Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex* 391 wherein the Sphinx is called a rhapsode: "her repertoire ... her manner of performance ... her sources" and "the terminology applied to her performance" are rhapsodic (401). In the fifth section, González defines the rhapsode as one who stitched together not only a series of episodes but also a series of individual hexameter lines. The chapter's final portion interrogates the Hesiodic fragment 357 MW, which contains the enigmatic "stitching together our songs with new hymns." The verse suggests that "the rhapsode ... stitches the song of his epic performance out of smaller compositional and performance units, the ὕμνοι" (427). González closes the section by insisting on stitching, not weaving, as the operative metaphor for the rhapsode's craft.

Chapter 11 begins Part IV, "Rhapsodic Performance in the Late Classical and Post-Classical Periods." González continues tracing a connection between acting

and rhapsodizing. The Athenian statesman Lykourgos enters the picture. The story goes that he saw to the creation of standard editions of the works of the three great tragedians; the Homeric epics may have been standardized in the same way. We next meet with Demetrios of Phaleron, who, Athenaios tells us (14.620b-d), “first brought the ones now called *homēristai* into the theaters.” Our attention then shifts momentarily to these enigmatic *homēristai*, “the most theatrical of all performers of Homer” (451). González first juxtaposes them to rhapsodes: “to the degree that the rhapsode still composed any of his material in performance, it is right to see him at one end, and the average *homēristēs* at the other, in a spectrum that spans the variable degree to which slavish memorization and reproduction—and hence the strict adherence to a performance script—and a measure of extempore recomposition were combined in each individual professional declaimer of Homer” (451). He then presents in full the slim evidence, all from the Imperial period, concerning these practitioners, concluding the following: the *homēristēs* would have frequently performed solo, meaning that his recitation was just as important as his histrionics. Back we go to Demetrios and to his bringing the *homēristai* into the theaters. Perhaps he transferred rhapsodic performances from Perikles’s Odeon to the theater of Dionysus. This move matters for the transition from transcript to script by encouraging rehearsal to “maximize the dramatic impact of the performance” (476).

Chapter 12 first examines rhapsodes’ (not *homēristai*’s) membership in the synods of Dionysian artists (*tekhnitai*)—officials worked with these guilds when staging a festival—and the extent to which these artists specialized. We have six instances in which the same individual performed as both a rhapsode and an actor and so yet more evidence for “the kinship between rhapsody and acting” (487). González next tackles the issues raised by the emergence of a figure labeled “a poet of epics” (*epōn poiētēs*). Did the rhapsode perform this poet’s poems? Unlikely. The poet of epics “probably composed and performed new epic poetry, whereas the rhapsode must have concerned himself predominantly, if not solely, with the traditional repertoire” (488). This poet performed his own “compositions in honor of the cities, rulers, heroes, or gods connected with the” festival (489). The chapter next offers a detailed prosopography of rhapsodes from the sixth century BCE to the third century CE: the data come from inscriptions as well as from “literary references” to rhapsodes “whose existence we have no compelling reason to doubt” (491).

Part V is entitled “Aristotle on Performance.” Chapter 13 starts from Aristotle’s comment that “the matter of *hypokrisis*” “has also come late to tragedy and

rhapsodic delivery” (*Rhetoric* 1403b23) (521). Aristotle here refers to “the *study* and *formal instruction* of delivery” (522, emphasis in original), delivery being for the philosopher not only a matter of “dress, gestures, and emotive vocal delivery” but also a mechanism of persuasion that is “an essential part of the oratorical task” (523). We should be able to extrapolate from what Aristotle says on *hypokrisis* as it relates to rhetoric to “the thought and practice of rhapsodes concerning their training and delivery” (523). In particular, we can attend to Aristotle’s comments at 1404a18-19 on “writing as an element of rhetorical practice with a role in delivery” (523). In defense of these ideas, González argues in this and the following chapter that *lexis* (style) and *hypokrisis* go hand in glove in Aristotle’s model; that *phantasia* at 1404a11 “is not ‘outward show,’ but the soul’s [re]presentational device that mediates between sense perception and man’s critical faculties” (524); and that the written speeches Aristotle mentions refer to “a technique only recently introduced and used *with a view to delivery*” (524, emphasis in original). These texts were “scripts, ancillary and derivative, mere aids to train for the all-important moment of actual delivery” (595). In the book’s Conclusion, we learn how this chapter’s findings connect back to the rhapsode. With *hypokrisis*, Aristotle offers a concept “that focuses on the voice, its expression of *ēthos* and arousal of pathos, and that depends for its effect on the sensory aspects of diction (especially the auditory). This was surely the case with rhapsodic performance too” (643). Moreover, the orators’ use of written scripts “illustrated the gradual introduction of writing among rhapsodes” (644).

The book ends with an appendix devoted to the assignation of the term *hypokritēs* to the actor of Attic drama. Borrowed from its application to the rhapsode, it marks the actor as a performer.

I turn to an analysis of some of these arguments. To begin with, the attacks launched against non-Nagyian explanations for the fixation of the Homeric poems make for stimulating reading, but they do not account for the evolutionary model’s own problems. For instance, the model still awaits a parallel in modern-day oral traditions. González follows Nagy in claiming that the epic traditions of India offer a parallel for an essential component of the evolutionary model: namely, the gradual fixation of an oral tradition as it spreads (17). Incorrect, as Minna Skafte Jensen notes:

In Nagy’s model a basic argument is that the increasing proliferation of the two epics led to a gradually more and more rigid transmission, but there is nothing

to indicate that proliferation works that way. Nagy refers to experience from India, but while his main authorities, Stuart Blackburn and Joyce Flueckiger, actually describe a development toward Pan-Indian traditions comparable to the evolution towards Panhellenism Nagy argues for, they offer nothing to compare with the process of gradually increasing rigidity he posits. On the contrary, Blackburn points out that textual fixity impedes diffusion because it does not allow for the kind of changes that make the story more relevant and acceptable to a diversity of groups and thus encourage geographical diffusion of a tradition.<sup>4</sup>

If González's does not devote the same amount of energy to defending the evolutionary model as he does to attacking alternative models, he does aim at various points to answer another question about the evolutionary model: how does it work on the ground? What does text-fixation without a single, normative written text look like?

Discussing the "rhapsode's freedom to shift his performance forward and backward along the thematic thread" (395), González opines,

This freedom was gradually constrained to the point of eventual elimination, as the dynamic of accretion characteristic of Homeric poetry forced the explicit inclusion within the performance of the very stretches of narrative erstwhile bracketed (and only notionally incorporated) by these performative shifts.

Above all, González merits our thanks for his attempts to explain the shift from transcript to script that the evolutionary model posits. He aligns this shift with the introduction of writing and written texts into the practice of oratory and with their use in the craft of acting. I would have liked to see González do more than just tip his hat in passing to the differences between these endeavors (e.g. 295): for one, orators and actors are not producing tradition-oriented oral poetry. González rightly distinguishes between the performance of traditional oral epic and the performance of choral poetry not rooted in oral tradition (335-36), but he jettisons that sort of distinction in linking rhapsodic performance with oratory and acting.

The specifics González offers about this shift do not always convince. For instance, González argues that rhapsodes turned to scripts when (314)

competitive rules minimized the unexpected and put the emphasis on the stylistic finish of the delivery, with the corresponding depreciation of the skills that

<sup>4</sup>Jensen 2011: 236; cf. Hildebeitel 1999: 22n24.



must have been the guarantee of victory at the ἀγῶνες among the more traditionally schooled singers: responding to audience feedback and interruptions, thematic contraction and expansion to adjust to the available time and the interests of the hearers, .... [T]he transition from transcripts to scripts was facilitated by competitive rules at the Panathenaia that enforced an increasingly fixed thematic sequence. This sequence must have been predictable enough before the actual performance to give a competitive advantage to rhapsodes who chose to draft their recital in advance and commit it to memory.

At best, the argument is incomplete. This scenario requires a situation in which the performer does not feel compelled to respond to his audience's demands. After all, a performer who relies on a script cannot respond as well to his audience's demands as a performer who does not rely on a script. González's vision only holds if we believe with Nagy that "such a tradition is in the process of losing the immediacy of the performer-audience interaction expected in the context of ongoing re-composition in performance."<sup>5</sup> Other difficulties emerge. Just because there were rules in place about "thematic sequence" does not mean that the performer could not also respond to his audience's demands. Indeed, I do not understand why some person or group would invent rules that compel performers to stop doing what they usually do.

González's argument here also grates against his discussion a bit later of the Classical-era audience's "expectation of, or tolerance for, *mouvance*" when it came to the performance of Homeric poetry (336). I take "expect" to include "appreciate" or "value." I have difficulties as well with González's reconstruction of what happened once rhapsodes started performing in the theater of Dionysus: "the new theater setting must have encouraged the tendency to dramatize the delivery of Homeric poetry, and encouraged even further the dependence of rhapsodes on a carefully rehearsed script such as would maximize the dramatic impact of the performance" (476). A nice idea, but that is all. No evidence supports this supposition: hence the author resorts to "must have."

Despite these stumbling blocks, this book teaches us a fair amount about the evolutionary model. What it does not, and cannot, do is acknowledge the overlap between the evolutionary model and the dictation model. González favors the evolutionary model because it does not require "the implausible historical accident of dictation" (20) (cf. 16, 46n18). In truth, the dispute between proponents of the

<sup>5</sup> Nagy 1990a: 54.

evolutionary model and proponents of the so-called “dictation theories” is not about the plausibility of dictation.

When we talk about the dictation theory, we think of the work of a Richard Janko or a Minna Skafte Jensen. For those scholars, an act of dictation at some point in the archaic period produced a written text that served as an archetype for the subsequent textual tradition. But the evolutionary model also makes use of dictation. I quote from page 4 of Nagy’s 2003 *Homeric Responses* a passage that includes his own quotation of page 100 of his 1996 *Homeric Questions*: “In principle, my own model explicitly allows for a variety of historical contexts in which dictation could indeed have taken place, resulting in ‘a transcript, or a variety of transcripts, at various possible stages of the performance tradition of Homer [at the Panathenaia].’” For Nagy, this transcript is not a “script” nor is it “scripture”: it has no effect on the performance tradition. So in the end dictation itself is not the sticking point: it is the date and the status of the resulting text. Unless you believe in a writing oral poet as envisioned by Martin West, you do believe, as it were, in dictation.

I return to the word “transcript.” The word pops up for the first time on page 8 of González’s book when he summarizes his idea of how Athenian rhapsodes of the classical era learned their material: “any effort made towards the mastery of the traditional language and thematic material would have depended to some degree on the memorization of transcripts of performances that had already proved successful before a festival audience” (cf. 163). A page later we find the word again: “rhapsodes ... used transcripts of earlier performances as scripts for future recitals.” These sentences obscure a great deal. These transcripts are not “transcripts of (earlier) performances” if we understand by such a “performance” a presentation “before a festival audience.” It is impossible to record such a performance. They are rather, as we saw in the previous paragraph, transcripts of a dictating poet, dictation being a species of performance, but not the same as a performance before a festival audience. These transcripts are dictated texts. When you see the word transcript, then, remember how a transcript comes into being. The evolutionary model denies the feasibility of an early archetypal dictated text but ends up with a bunch of dictated texts (“a variety of transcripts”). Pick your preference then: one early archetypal dictated text or a plethora of dictated texts some time later.

González does much more than discuss the evolutionary model. Whether or not one grants the model’s validity, much of what González says about what rhapsodes did makes good sense. I found especially helpful the explorations of how rhapsodes served as mediators and interpreters. The discussions of the *homēristai*,

*tekhnitai*, and the *epōn poiētēs* are masterful. Scholars will rely on the prosopography of rhapsodes for years to come.

Other arguments give one pause. For instance, González contends that the poet represents himself as quoting the Muse (183–86, 201, 208, 358).<sup>6</sup> On the one hand, if we see the poet as quoting the Muse, we can set aside the idea that the poet functions as a mouthpiece of the Muse.<sup>7</sup> The Muse does not possess the poet. On the other hand, the quotation theory does not account for the several passages in which the narrating voice is that of a mortal: “at certain points he gives expression to his admiration for divine objects or apologizes for his human limitations.”<sup>8</sup> One struggles to imagine the Muse saying, “But others were fighting in battle about the other gates, and hard would it be for me, as though I were a god (*theos hōs*), to tell the tale of all these things” (*Il.* 12.175–76; trans. Wyatt [Loeb]).<sup>9</sup> Qualifying González’s argument, we can assert that the poet sometimes represents himself as quoting the Muse. Indeed, when the poet demands of the Muse, “Sing, goddess, the wrath of Peleus’ son Achilles” (*Il.* 1.1), he seems to imply that he will pass on precisely what the Muse herself performs.

In the sections of linguistic analysis, González kindly repeats his main points throughout (e.g. 105), but the technical details of these arguments will be accessible only to those competent in linguistics and will be lost on many as they were on me. Chapter 14 promises to illuminate the rhapsode’s use of a script by looking at Aristotle’s discussion of *hypokrisis* but never gets around to doing so: only in the Conclusion do we stumble upon the connection. Setting aside these portions, I note that González writes with clarity and verve, two qualities that aid the reader on the months-long journey through this book.

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Nagy 1990b: 26–27, 1996b: 61.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. de Jong 2004: 46.

<sup>8</sup> de Jong 2004: 49.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. de Jong 2004: 47.

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