

Using AI to Generate Homeric Poetry

Abstract

What happens when the newest technology meets the oldest literature? This talk explores the potential of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) to produce texts in the style of Homeric epic. The presentation describes an OpenAI workspace, Sing O Muse, which provides proof-of-concept that GenAI can produce “Homeric” poetry with human guidance. Sing O Muse offers, further, a useful perspective for refreshing concepts of classical reception. GenAI’s intractably hybrid (human/machine) nature means that Sing O Muse both *is* and *is not* classical reception, helping us to map the difference. Developing a “feel” for this seam between automation and artistry is vital if AI is to mean a humanities-led approach to the digital, rather than a triumph of data over the arts.

Format

This twenty-minute presentation will review the aims, methods, and findings of Sing O Muse, accompanied by textual examples and visual aids. The talk will have these parts:

Introduction

The Homeric depiction of *automata*, machines moving like living beings with internal energy (*Iliad* 5.749), offers an avenue for exploring *tekhnē* in classical reception. Sing O Muse provides in turn a useful focus for interrogating the sub-topic of interplay between *tekhnē* and *poiēsis* in receptions of Homer. Using GenAI to emulate Homeric *poiēsis* is a promising prospect because the two enterprises are inherently similar: Homeric *poiēsis* uses text-generating formulae, while GenAI does not “author” works so much as “perform” within a traditional context (Cole 2023). Where previous experiments tasked GenAI to create “new” Homeric content, however, Sing O Muse aims to replicate the tradition-based literary production of epic bards, who wove material from *preexisting* folktales and myths as a form of poetic reception.

Experimental Design

Without going into technical detail, the presentation will describe the creation of an OpenAI workspace to generate supplication and feast type-scenes from the *Cypria*, a lost poem of the Homeric Cycle. The process involves templating language-model text not only from the *Iliad*, *Odyssey* and *Homeric Hymns*, but from epic-cycle fragments and from Euripides, Ovid, and others engaged in reception of the *Cypria*.

Results

Three rounds of testing are undertaken to generate Homeric English in the mode of Lattimore (1951). The first round generates a supplication type-scene which is not convincingly Homeric, but the AI shows improvement through training. The second round, using enhanced data structuring and model selection, generates a feast type-scene that is judged passably

Homeric. A third round tests Sing O Muse against OpenAI’s most powerful chatbot, GPT-4o, and produces text demonstrably more Homeric than GPT-4o’s responses to the same prompts.

Conclusions

Sing O Muse juxtaposes the potential and limitations of most AI. It is a kind of toddler god. The final generated verses show that GenAI can produce “Homeric” poetry. Yet while Sing O Muse can emulate Homeric hexameter, training it requires iterative refinements to scrape out non-Homeric language and ideas. Human inputs and edits are crucial.

The human/machine dynamic of Sing O Muse has implications for the philosophy of AI. The intractably collaborative nature of GenAI poetry-production suggests a more-than-casual connection between human creative input and artificial creative output. The experiments confirm that GPTs are “weak” rather than “strong” AI, lacking real consciousness.

Sing O Muse offers, further, a useful perspective for refreshing our concepts of classical reception. If we define reception broadly, to include all transmission, interpretation, and reimagining of classical texts (Martindale 2006, Hardwick and Stray 2008), then using AI to (re)generate Homeric poetry meets this criterion. Yet if reception requires reader-mediation (Jauss 1967, Iser 1974) or political relevance (Broder 2013, Greenwood 2016), then Sing O Muse may fall short. Additionally, since GenAI lacks the consciousness necessary for true interpretation and engagement, using it to generate Homeric poetry may satisfy the *letter* of broad reception-definitions while violating their *spirit*. At the same time, the *human* role in Sing O Muse is inherently creative, refractive, and scholarly, aligning with the ancient-Greek concept of reception as *hupolambanein* or engaged continuation (Nagy 2002). To the extent that Sing O Muse requires human input, training, and guidance, it *does* mediate classical content, *is* implicitly political, and *can* meet even the strictest criteria for reception.

We are left, finally, to reflect on what I propose to call Cole’s Paradox. The more advanced the AI, the less creative the outputs (Cole 2023). This paradox is really a parable. In Greek terms, all *poiēsis* is *tekhnē*, but not all *tekhnē* is *poiēsis*. In modern terms, all art is craft, but not all craft is art. In Turing-terms, all intelligence is artificial, but not all artifice is intelligent. Understanding the persistently inverse relationship between automation and artistry is important if AI is to mean a humanities-led approach to the digital, rather than “a triumph of data over the arts” (Cole 2024).

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