

This paper offers an examination of the attitudes toward formulaic language implicit in Homeric poetry. Since Milman Parry, it has been customary to distinguish between “ornamental” and “particularized” epithets in the study of Homeric language. Although the extent to which these two categories are mutually exclusive is a matter of some debate (cf. Friedrich 2007:84-87), nevertheless it is a central tenet of many tradition-oriented approaches to Homer that epithets often bear a purely “ornamental” force, in the sense that they are used without regard to the appropriateness of their meaning in context. Crucial to this conception is the notion that audiences and readers are somehow indifferent to the meaning of ornamental language in relation to its specific application (cf. Parry 1971:131).

The *Iliad* itself, however, more than once calls into question the indifference presupposed by this conception of ornamental language. On several occasions, Iliadic characters speak of what we would characterize as formulaic epithets. Crucially, their awareness of formulaic language as such seems to be confined to instances in which it is the *inapplicability* of a formulaic epithet that is being emphasized. Thus, Hektor speaks of a conventional characterization of Troy as *polukhrusos* and *polukhalkos* (“rich in gold and bronze,” 18.289; the iterative *mutheskonto* indicates that Hektor understands this phraseology as conventional or, as we would say, formulaic)—only to point out (18.290) that this characterization is no longer accurate.

This paper will focus on two cases in which Homeric speakers draw attention to the apparent inappropriateness of an epithet to its context. In *Iliad* 7, Nestor tells the story of Arêithoos, “whom men and beautifully-girdled women used to call (*kiklêskon*) by the epithet (*epiklêsis*) ‘mace-man’ (*korunêtês*)” (7.138-39); Nestor’s tale recounts how the “mace-man” was in fact undone by his inability to use his mace effectively. In the aftermath of the chariot race in Book 23, Menelaos alleges that Antilokhos’ reckless driving has disqualified him from the epithet *pepnumenos* (“prudent”), by which he was previously characterized (23.440, 570). These passages share a number of striking features, apart from the highlighting of an incongruity between formulaic language and its context. In both cases, the incongruity is produced by an act of *dolos* (“trickery”), and in both cases the *dolos* in question revolves around the restrictions imposed by a “narrow pass” (*steinôpôi en hodôi*, 7.143 = 23.416). Most importantly, in both cases the value of the formulaic epithet is ultimately confirmed.

I propose a reading of these passages in terms of an impulse on the part of Homeric tradition to test the validity of its own language. Far from evincing an indifference to the ornamental aspects of its traditional phraseology, Homeric poetry recognizes the necessity of ensuring the adequacy and meaningfulness of its language. Moreover, the association of *dolos* with this testing procedure suggests the possibility of describing the difference between Iliadic and Odyssean modes of discourse in terms of their relative interest in questioning the relationship between language and its applications.

Works Cited

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