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ROBERT FOWLER

Henry Querton Wills Professor of Greek in the University of Bristol

MATTHEW CLARK

Formulas, metre and type-scenes

Repetition in Homer

The idea that Homer was an oral poet composing in a tradition of formulaic language is one of the seminal concepts of twentieth-century scholarship. The major figure in the development of this idea was Milman Parry (1902–1935), though many other scholars have contributed to the theory. Parry built on earlier work, and it is fair to say that many elements of his theory had been stated previously; what was new was his way of combining these elements – and also the persuasiveness of his research, both in his close analysis of the texts of the Homeric poems and in his fieldwork with living South Slavic oral epic poets.¹ The work of Parry and his followers has been supplemented by analysis of recurring type-scenes, begun by Walter Arend in 1933 and continued by many scholars since.² The implications of these ideas have been felt not only in Homeric studies, and not only in classics, but in other fields as well, such as folk-lore, anthropology, medieval studies and the study of orality and literacy.³ Thus an account of oral-formulaic theory is essential for those interested in understanding modern Homeric scholarship, and also important for those generally interested in the development of twentieth-century thought in the humanities.

Many students of literature, even those who do not read Greek, know that the Homeric epics are very repetitive; they know, for example, that Agamemnon is King of Men (ἄναξ ἀνδρῶν Ἀγαμέμνων, used thirty-seven times in the

¹ Milman Parry's writings have been collected in M. Parry (1971), edited by Adam Parry; I cite Parry's writings by the abbreviations in the Table of Contents to that volume, with page references. Lord (2000) gives an account of fieldwork among oral poets in the former Yugoslavia, with comparison to the Homeric epics.

² The basic work on type-scenes is Arend (1933), for discussion of type-scenes see section, 'Composition with type-scenes', below.

³ For work directly influenced by Parry, see, among many others, Havlock (1982); Foley (1986); Goody (1977) and (2000); Whallon (1969); Magoun (1953); Duggan (1973); McLuhan (1965); Ong (1982).

two epics) and that Achilles is Swift-footed (πρόδας ὀκύς Ἀχιλλεύς, thirty-one times).⁴ Repetitions of this kind – a noun with modifiers – are common and important, but they are only part of the story. Close examination of the poems reveals many repetitions of various kinds. If an individual word is repeated, it may always or nearly always occur in the same place in the line; the names of many characters or the words for common objects are repeatedly linked with particular adjectives or modifying expressions; whole lines are repeated; many passages of several lines (such as messages) may be repeated word for word; and frequently recurring situations, such as putting on armour or performing a sacrifice, are described over and over in very similar language.

Some scholars, both ancient and modern, have been troubled by the repetitions in Homer. Often the argument has been made that a repeated line or passage is Homer's original in one place, but in other places it has been inserted by someone after Homer; the job of the editor is to find these illegitimate repetitions and mark them as interpolations or even remove them from the text.⁵ Suspicion of repeated passages, however, may raise problems. First, critics often disagree about which passage is the original. Second, scholars will question instances of certain repeated phrases, but other repeated phrases are accepted as necessary to the story or to the business of narration. Third, because repetition is so frequent in the poems, a consistent excision of repeated passages would leave only a skeleton of the epic, with greatly reduced interest and value.

Already by the early twentieth century a number of scholars had rejected the idea that repetition in Homer necessarily implied imitation,⁶ but it was not until the work of Milman Parry in the 1920s and 1930s that the role of repetition in the composition of the epics was fully understood. Parry demonstrated that the repeated phrases in the epics are neither faults nor stylistic eccentricities, but essential tools of composition in the tradition of Greek oral epic poetry. This conclusion was then bolstered by fieldwork

among living oral poets, carried out by Parry and, after Parry's death, by his student, Albert Lord. The result of these studies was a far-reaching change in the way we think of Homeric poetry.⁷

The theory of oral-formulaic composition is complex and still developing; moreover, scholars do not agree about some of the fundamental definitions and concepts of the theory. It is not possible to give a complete account of the theory in this chapter, but the works cited in the footnotes will offer direction to those interested in pursuing the arguments further.

At the centre of Parry's theory is his conception of the formula. Before Parry, the term had been used in a rather vague way, but he offered a clear definition: 'the formula can be defined as an expression regularly used, under the same metrical conditions, to express an essential idea'.⁸ Three points stand out in this definition. First, a formula must be 'regularly used'; here we see that the theory first derives from repetitions found in the text; Parry later noted that repetition of the individual formulaic expression is not strictly speaking necessary, as we shall see when we look at formula systems. Second, the formulas are defined in terms of their relation to the metrical structure of Homeric verse. This point will be the topic of the next section of this chapter. And third, the formula expresses 'an essential idea'. This point raises the very important question of meaning in oral-formulaic poetry, a topic which we will examine in a later section of this chapter.

Homeric metre

Homeric metre can be analysed from two different perspectives, which can be called *outer metrics* and *inner metrics*.⁹ Outer metrics is the traditional scanning of long and short syllables, not unlike the scanning of strong and weak syllables in English verse. But whereas English verse is qualitative – that is, based on patterns of strong and weak syllables – ancient Greek verse is quantitative – what counts is the length of the syllable, rather than stress. A syllable is long if it contains a long vowel or a diphthong, or if the vowel of the syllable is followed by two consonants; otherwise it is short. The vowels eta (η) and omega (ω) are always long; the vowels epsilon (ε) and omicron (ο) are always short (though they may occur in a long syllable, if followed by two consonants); the vowels alpha, iota and upsilon (α, ι and υ)

⁴ The bibliography on repetition in Homer is large. For general discussion, see Calhoun (1933); also Lowenstam (1993).

⁵ A few examples must do for many. In the Hellenistic period, Zenodotus questioned 16.141–4 partly on the grounds that it was a copy of 9.388–91; Aristarchus, however, argued the reverse. Leaf (1960) questioned 1.430–92, and made particular note of 1.463, which appeared 'more at home' as 11.460. (But see Kirk (1985) 202 who defends the passage against Leaf's critique.) Leaf also questioned the repetition of a famous simile, used to describe Paris (6.506–11) and Hector (15.263–68). For discussion, see Calhoun (1933) 21; also Fenik (1974) 133–5. Repetition is, of course, only one ground for annotation, and not the most important. See the chapter on the Homeric question in this volume.

⁶ See, for example, Scott (1911) 321 and Shewar (1913) 234.

⁷ Whether or not the Homeric poems as we have them are the direct product of oral composition is impossible to establish finally to everyone's satisfaction. In my opinion, the debate is not now very fruitful. In any case, the style of the poems is marked by the techniques of oral composition, and we can say with some confidence that the poems are oral-based.

⁸ Parry (1971) III. 13. ⁹ These terms are taken from O'Neill (1942).



The *Odyssey*
Re-Formed



FREDERICK AHL AND
HANNA M. ROISMAN

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ITHACA AND LONDON

cut off from the sea, may themselves be as unimpressed by nautical prowess as those who think an oar is a winnowing fan. Odysseus reminds all his audiences, both internal and external, that a narrative of exploits means little to an audience to whom the very basis of those exploits is unintelligible. Fame demands receptive hearers as well as skilled poets.

Because Odysseus's oar will be set among people who will think it an agricultural implement for the rather unadventurous occupation of sifting harvested grain (and a people who also do not seem to eat meat), it may be an even less significant marker than Elpenor's oar. At least Elpenor's oar will be planted where someone knows what an oar is—among *unexceptional* people who know of the sea and who "eat meat."⁸⁶ Among such unexceptional people, Elpenor merits status not only because he belongs to the common folk—his death followed a feast on "abundant meat" (10.477)—but because he himself was almost turned into a pig or a boar and thus was designated for consumption himself. His misfortune as he reaches the world of the dead before Odysseus is heightened by the fact that he is condemned, because his corpse lies unburied, to wander aimlessly and homelessly for ten times as many years as Odysseus does on this return to Ithaca.

Anticleia

The extent to which Odysseus's self-subversion is part of his narrative intent rather than the Muse's mockery of his unintentional or unconscious "slips"—much less any occasional nodding of her own—is sometimes hard to tell. Readers determined to view the *Odyssey* as a work of almost accidental genius will certainly be predisposed to treat anything that is not explicit as fortuitous. But if we are prepared at least to allow for the possibility of some conscious artistry and design in the epic, some details Odysseus gives of his exchanges with the ghost of his mother, Anticleia, may help sharpen our sense of how far and how deep the intentionality of design could run.

Odysseus's account of his meeting with Anticleia's ghost is one of the most powerful, if oblique, arguments to convince the Phaeacians (and us) that he is telling the truth about his travels. Even a mildly superstitious person would balk at Odysseus's fabricating his mother's death. The introduction of Anticleia's ghost, then, is a moment of great rhetorical power, as well as of great pathos, in Odysseus's narrative. Yet even as he introduces her ghost into his tale and tells the Phaeacians of his sorrow at discovering that she is dead, he mentions *her* surprise at seeing *him* there: not because he is still alive, but because one needs a ship to cross the Ocean that separates the realms of the living from those of the dead

(11.159–60).⁷ Although Anticleia mentions his ship as part of his return from Troy with his companions, the words Odysseus attributes to her suggest she thinks her son might lack either the expertise or a sufficiently durable ship for such a supremely heroic voyage:

My child, how did you come under the murky darkness? For it is difficult for those who are living to see these realms, for in between lie great rivers and terrible streams, Oceanus first, which in no way can one cross on foot; one must have a well-built ship. (11.155–59)

Anticleia's remarks are fully consonant with Odysseus's frequent belittlement of his own navigational skills.

When Odysseus reports Anticleia's description of how Telemachus is faring in Ithaca, however, the effect is more puzzling. She assures Odysseus that no one has usurped the throne and that Telemachus has not only full use of his father's possessions, but a share in the palace banquets. He is, she says, the invited guest of many men (11.184–86). Since Anticleia envisages Telemachus as a young adult, her words refer to some period not long before Odysseus lands in Phaeacia and therefore not long before Odysseus actually returns to Ithaca. Her report, then, runs counter to what the Muse tells us in her narrative voice throughout the epic. Even before he sets out for Nestor's palace and Menelaus's Sparta, Telemachus's position is anything but secure. His attempts to appeal to the Cephallenian assembly reveal his isolation and contradict Anticleia's claims that he is "invited by many." Further, we are soon to learn that when Odysseus arrives in Ithaca, Telemachus, having narrowly eluded an ambush set for him on his return from the Peloponnese, has great difficulty participating in the palace banquets, which are run by the suitors. He appears to be lonely. Of all the comrades he has in his homeland, only Peiraeus, whose friendship he gained on his own and not as an inherited family connection from his father, remains on his side.⁸ Telemachus, in fact, is left almost as much to his own resources as is his father.⁹

The "reality" of Telemachus's position is so different from what Odysseus has Anticleia suggest that one is tempted to argue either that there is an inconsistency at this point in the *Odyssey* (perhaps explicable by its patchwork, "oral" state or the Muse's nodding) or that Odysseus is simply fabricating these words (and perhaps the entire encounter with Anticleia). Both Odysseus and the Phaeacians are, in this matter, less informed than the external audience. He and they have no additional basis for determining what is or is not true about the domestic situation in Ithaca and would not necessarily see the contradictions evident to the external reader. Thus we cannot rule out the possibility that Odysseus is, in fact, inventing words to put in his mother's mouth to express his hope that all

ODYSSEY

Homer

Stanley Lombardo

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Translated by

Stanley Lombardo

Introduction by

Sheila Murnaghan

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*Odysseus as
a Plutarch*

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known as the Ionians, developed a tradition of heroic poetry, through which they recalled their own history, looking back and recounting the experiences of that earlier lost era. This poetry centered on certain legendary figures and events, among them the events surrounding the Trojan War, which, as mentioned earlier, appear to reflect the final moments of Mycenaean civilization.

The so-called Dark Age came to an end during a period roughly corresponding to the eighth century—the 700s—B.C.E. The cultural shift that we label the end of the Dark Age and the beginning of the Archaic period involved not a series of upheavals, as with the end of the Bronze Age, but the emergence of new activity in a variety of fields. A growth in population led to a wave of colonization, with established Greek centers sending out colonies to such places as the Black Sea, Sicily, southern Italy, and southern France. There was also greater contact among the various Greek communities, which were politically distinct and remained so for centuries. This led to the development of institutions designed to unite those communities culturally and to reinforce a shared Greek, or panhellenic, heritage, such as the oracle of Apollo at Delphi and the Olympic games (founded in 776 B.C.E.). Around this time, the Greeks began to build large-scale stone temples and to make large-scale statues and a new kind of pottery decorated with elaborate geometric patterns. Many of the features of Greek culture that we associate with the Classical Period—the period that loosely corresponds to the fifth and fourth centuries B.C.E.—had their origins in the eighth century.

In addition to colonization, this was also a time of increased trade and thus of greater contact with other Mediterranean cultures. One consequence of this trade was the renewal of contacts, which had been intensive in the Mycenaean period, with cultures of the Near East. Through their dealings with the Phoenicians, a Semitic people living in present-day Lebanon, the Greeks learned a new system of writing—not a syllabary like Linear B, but an alphabet, the alphabet which is still used to write Greek and which was adapted to become the Roman alphabet, now widely used for many languages, including English. This new way of writing Greek quickly became much more widespread than Linear B had been, and it was put to a greater variety of uses. Among these was the writing down of poetry, and it is generally believed among scholars (although by no means universally agreed) that the *Odyssey* and a number of other surviving poems (including the other Homeric epic, the *Iliad*, two poems by Hesiod,

the *Theogony* and the *Works and Days*; and a group of hymns also attributed to Homer) came into being in the written form in which we know them at that time.

While we know these poems in written form, we can see in their style and in their narrative techniques traces of their oral origins, although there is considerable disagreement among scholars over how close to those origins these particular works may be. Specifically, these poems manifest a use of repeated elements—phrases, lines, groups of lines, and types of episodes—that are an essential feature of an oral poet's style. Because a poet who performs orally does not memorize and recite an unchanging artifact but composes his song as he goes at the same rate at which he delivers it, he relies on a supply of stock elements; acquiring that supply is a key aspect of his training. Analysts of Homeric style have discovered that these repeated features form an elaborate system, involving both ready-made whole lines and shorter phrases that allowed the poet easily to generate new lines that fit the meter in which he composed, known as the dactylic hexameter. Among the most striking of these are the phrases used to identify the characters, which link their names with their attributes or their ancestry, and exist in different forms to be used as needed at different places in the line and in different grammatical cases. But the poet's reliance on repetition extends to much larger units as well, including obvious repetition of whole blocks of lines, as when a character reports on an event in the same words in which it was originally narrated, and more subtle uses of repeated sequences of actions to describe such circumstances as a host welcoming a guest or one character visiting another in search of important information.

Because repeated elements such as epithets have such a clear usefulness as aids to oral composition, it is hard to be sure how much further significance they are meant to bear in any particular context, although they certainly are meaningful as general expressions of a character's nature. For example, two of the epithets most frequently applied to Odysseus are *polunêtis* (having much *mênis*) and *polutlas* (enduring much), which clearly pertain to his most defining characteristics, but that does not mean that he is acting especially cleverly at the points at which he is called *polunêtis* or that he is being particularly patient when he is called *polutlas*. The question of how integral these repeated elements are to the meaning of Homeric poetry is especially pressing for the translator, who has to decide whether to

carry this stylistic feature over into a new language and a poetic form that does not have the same strict metrical rules as Homer's hexameters. The modern translator is also involved in a different relationship between the poem and the audience—not a live performance at which all parties were present at once and at which the conventions of Homeric style were familiar and unremarkable, but a less direct form of communication over large stretches of time and space, mediated through the printed page.

Stanley Lombardo has played down the repetitive dimension of the Greek original more than some other translators do for the sake of a swift narrative pace and of making the characters speak in English as real people do. He has also taken advantage of some of Homer's repetitions for a creative solution to one of the most difficult problems of translation, the way in which there is almost never a single word or phrase that captures what is in the original. The fact that the same expressions occur over and over again gives him a chance to try a range of different versions that cumulatively add up to what is in the Greek. For example, one of the most famous lines in Homeric poetry describes the coming of dawn. This is a routine building block of Homeric poetry, which appears twenty times in the *Odyssey* and twice in the *Iliad*, a convenient, efficient way of marking a new phase in the action that comes with a new day. But the announcement of dawn's appearance is made to fill an entire line through the addition of two epithets, which mean "early born" and "rosy-fingered." By offering us several different versions of this line, Lombardo is able to bring out much more fully the many meanings of these wonderfully suggestive adjectives: "Dawn's pale rose fingers brushed across the sky" (2.1); "Dawn came early, touching the sky with rose" (5.228); "Dawn spread her roselight over the sky" (8.1); "Dawn came early, with palmettoes of rose" (9.146); "Light blossomed like roses in the eastern sky" (12.8); "At the first blush of Dawn . . ." (half of 12.324).

The relationship between oral poetry and Homeric style was not fully understood until earlier in this century. A crucial step in this understanding was the comparative work of an American scholar, Milman Parry, who during the 1920s and 1930s studied oral poets who were then still practicing their art in the Balkan region and saw that many of their techniques corresponded to the conventions of Homeric style. For well over a century before Parry's discoveries, scholars had been worrying over the ways in which Homeric poetry

is different from later poetry produced through the medium of writing, speculating about how these poems were produced, or what came to be known as "the Homeric question." Much attention was given to inconsistencies between different sections of the narrative or to places in which sections of the narrative seem to be awkwardly joined; for example: the fact that Circe's description to Odysseus of what will happen in the Underworld does not match what actually takes place; the fact that the parallel stories involving Odysseus and Telemachus between the divine council in Book 1 and their reunion in Book 16, while occupying the same span of time, actually involve different numbers of days; the fact that in the Underworld scene in Book 24, a dead suitor claims that Odysseus told Penelope to set the contest of the bow, while in Book 19 she comes up with the idea herself; the way the poem seems to backtrack to start over again with a new divine council when the second part of Athena's plan is put into effect at the beginning of Book 5. These inconsistencies were seen by scholars known as "analysts" as supporting a theory according to which the *Odyssey* was created through the joining together by editors of several shorter traditional poems composed by illiterate bards: perhaps one about Telemachus, one about Odysseus' adventures, and one about Odysseus' revenge. The analysts were countered by "unitarians," scholars who found in the poem an overall unity of theme and conception that outweighs those inconsistencies and points to a single intelligence shaping the entire work. Parry's discoveries have tended to uphold the unitarian position because they reveal that the kinds of small inconsistencies that concerned the analysts are both common and unimportant in the context of oral performance.

Although the answers to the Homeric question proposed during the 18th and 19th centuries are not generally accepted today, the scholars who wrestled with it helped to show how different these works are from modern poetry, and they recognized early on that an important clue to their origins might be provided by the bards actually portrayed in the *Odyssey*, Phemius and Demodocus, who perform songs as entertainment for groups of people gathered in aristocratic households. Phemius and Demodocus are like the modern bards studied by Parry in that they perform songs that are at once new and traditional, original retellings of legendary material that is the common property of the singer and the audience. Also like modern oral poets, they display a high degree of responsiveness to their audiences as they give shape to each particular version of a story.

The fact that Demodocus is blind marks the poet as a figure who relies on inner resources. In Homeric terms, that means that he is divinely inspired, instilled by the Muses with knowledge of past events that he has not himself witnessed. For divine inspiration, we might substitute the inherited skills and familiarity with poetic tradition of an oral poet, but in either case those inner resources can be contrasted with the external aid of writing, which is never alluded to in the *Odyssey*, and only once in the *Iliad*. Interestingly, ancient legends about Homer, the poet to whom both the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad*, along with other poems, were attributed, claim that he was blind, so that he too was seen as both a visionary figure—in myth, prophets are also often blind—and one who did not write. It should be noted, though, that ancient stories about Homer, like most of the biographical information we have about early Greek poets, are largely fictitious, based mainly on the events of the *Odyssey*, so that Homer is portrayed as an itinerant beggar resembling the figure impersonated by Odysseus.

We have no reliable information about Homer that would allow us to decide whether, for example, he really was responsible for both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* or just what role he played in the process by which the poems we have came into being. A key step in that process was the point at which the traditions of oral performance intersected with the new practice of writing and the epics took on the written form in which we now know them. One of the main challenges now facing Homeric scholars is that of figuring out to what extent the distinctive qualities of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are due to the use of writing. On the one hand, the poems bear all the marks of oral style, which tend to disappear quickly once a poet learns to write. On the other hand, they are far too long to have ever been performed on a single occasion like the ones depicted in the *Odyssey*, and there is considerable debate about whether the large-scale design and complex structure exhibited by both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* could have been produced without the aid of writing. And, while most scholars believe that the poems were written down in the eighth century B.C.E., when writing first became available, others argue that this happened later, possibly in Athens in the sixth century B.C.E., where we know that official versions of both epics were produced.

Whenever they were actually written down and however much they may have been shaped by writing, the Homeric epics were still primarily oral works, in the sense that they were regularly performed

and were known to their audiences through performance, well into the Classical Period. The process of transmission by which the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* became what they are today, poems experienced almost exclusively through reading, whether in Greek or in translation, is a long and complicated one. It starts with that first, still mysterious moment when the epics were first written down and encompasses many stages of editing and copying: by ancient scholars, especially those working in Alexandria in the third century B.C.E., who were responsible, for example, for the division of both poems into twenty-four books; by medieval scribes, who copied out the manuscripts on which our modern editions are based; and by modern scholars who have produced the texts from which translations like this one are made.

Amid such uncertainty, the idea that Phemius and Demodocus might represent singers of the kind who helped to shape the *Odyssey* is not implausible. Many of the customs and institutions represented there reflect the times in which the poem and its tradition took shape rather than the earlier period during which the events depicted supposedly occurred. Historians and archaeologists who have compared the culture described in the Homeric epics to what we know of Greek history have discovered that the epics describe a world that does not correlate to any one period but combines elements of the Bronze Age with elements of the Dark Age: memories of the earlier time in which the Trojan legend is set have been woven together with circumstances borrowed from the period during which the Trojan legend evolved. The depictions of daily life that come in the sections of the *Odyssey* that involve Ithaca or the visit of Telemachus to Sparta and Pylos tend to reflect that later period. The kingdoms depicted there are much smaller and much less highly organized than those of the Mycenaean period, and many details of their material culture and social organization accord more closely to what we know of Dark Age life—a way of life that, we then assume, must have seemed quite familiar to the poem's original audience.

The *Odyssey*'s complicated structure serves as an elegant means of handling this combination of different historical eras. The events of its narrative present are those set in this more mundane world resembling that of the audience, while the events of the Trojan War and its aftermath are treated as part of the past. These past events are placed at a distance as they are conveyed through embedded