# INTRODUCTION

## 1. HOMER AND HIS POETIC MEDIUM[1]

### *(a) The Iliad and Odyssey*

According to ancient tradition, a poetic genius by the name of Homer from somewhere in the region of Ionia, and blind by many accounts, composed both the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Some sources assign his activity to the period of the fall of Troy (dated in antiquity to the twelfth century), others to some 500 years afterwards. The poet was credited with a variety of compositions, and Herodotus is the first extant author to mention either the *Iliad* or *Odyssey* by name. Modern scholars have variously rejected, altered and refined these heterogeneous ancient views. There is now reasonable consensus that the two poems are the products of a tradition of oral hexameter poetry developed over the course of the Dark Ages and reaching back to Mycenaean times. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* as we have them were composed in the period of the eighth to the early seventh century, quite plausibly in Smyrna or Chios, where the ancient biographical tradition records the poet's presence. 'Homer' himself and his authorship of two epic poems may be nothing more than a fiction that originated some time after the works' composition. According to one modern reconstruction, the corporation of rhapsodes from Chios, the Homeridae whose role it was to perform the Homeric epics and who are first visible in the second half of the sixth century, would retrospectively have created 'Homer' as putative ancestor to their 'guild'.[2]

Where ancient and modern views coincide is in recognizing pronounced differences between the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* in their subject matter and sensibility. While the two poems, both monumental in scale (the *Iliad* runs to 15,689 lines, the *Odyssey* to 12,110), focus on the period of the Trojan War and its immediate aftermath, revolve around a single hero whose exploits and emotional affinities they describe, present their protagonist enacting a bloody revenge against those who have done him and his φίλοι wrong, and foreground contention between members of the elite, the *Odyssey* incorporates material not just from the heroic sagas also basic to the *Iliad*, but from folk-tales and mariners' stories.[3] Sharply divergent goals motivate each poem's hero (κλέος for Achilles, νόστος for Odysseus), and where the *Iliad* rarely looks beyond the battlefield and war camp, the *Odyssey* moves between exotic lands and the domestic sphere (see section 2). These differences are variously explained. In Ps.-Longinus' much quoted view (*On the Sublime*, 9.12–13), Homer composed the *Iliad* 'in his prime', while the *Odyssey* is the poem of his old age. Other ancient scholars assumed two poets, and many modern readers adopt their view. However we imagine a solution

[1] In parts 1 and 2 of the Introduction, I have deliberately limited citations of the secondary literature from which many of my points are drawn.

[2] West 1999.

[3] For these see Page 1973, Crane 1988, Hölscher 1988.

to the authorship puzzle (for purposes of convenience, I assign both works to a single individual called 'Homer'), one point remains undisputed: as philologists, archaeologists and historians have shown, the *Odyssey* we possess postdates the *Iliad*. This can be demonstrated on both 'objective' and internal grounds. The *Odyssey* uses language and syntax that belong to a later linguistic stratum than those of the *Iliad* (see p. 5) and its broader geographical scope and western orientation reflect historically more recent colonizing ventures and trading networks; indicative too is the prominence of Egypt in the *Odyssey*, perhaps a reflection of increased contacts between the Greeks and Egyptians during the reign of the late seventh-century pharaoh Psammetichus I.

'Posterity' is further visible in the *Odyssey*'s internal chronology and design. The poem emphatically presents itself as 'an epilogue' (as Ps.-Longinus termed it) to the earlier work insofar as it describes the heroes of the Trojan War returning home, avoids repeating material covered in the existing poem, and supplements that composition with episodes absent from but important to its story (e.g. the tale of the Trojan Horse, the funeral of Achilles). It will be an assumption of this commentary that the complementary relations between the poems reflect more than their participation in a common poetic tradition: although the point cannot be proved, it is highly probable that the author of the *Odyssey* was thoroughly acquainted with a version of the *Iliad* and that his poem is conditioned by and a response to the traditional tale as presented in that work. While the poet borrows from what might have been recognized as the *Iliad*'s most successful innovations, apparent too in the *Odyssey* is the agonistic impulse shaping early song composition and performance (acknowledged at *Il.* 2.594–600, and on display in the competing narratives of Helen and Menelaus in *Od.* 4). Books 17 and 18 include several passages illustrating how the later poem challenges Iliadic values, revises its version of events and demotes some of its episodes to a lower social plane.[4] In his exchange with Eumaeus at 17.286–9, Odysseus, in his beggar's disguise, applies to the stomach and its impetuous demands language that the *Iliad*'s proem (likely to be one of the best known parts of that work) used to describe Achilles' heroic wrath, while the tussle between the parasite Irus and Odysseus in book 18 offers a burlesque reworking of the boxing match at the funeral games of Patroclus in *Iliad* 23, substituting, among other innovations, a blood sausage for the high-status horse and goblet that were the prizes on that more elevated occasion.

The *Odyssey* should be viewed in relation not only to the *Iliad*, but also to the larger tradition of heroic poetry to which both belong; while other epic compositions earlier than or contemporary with Homer's are lost to us, audiences in later archaic, classical and Hellenistic times were familiar with a more expansive body of epic poems relating other parts of the Trojan saga and its heroes' adventures prior to and following the war. The poems of the so-called Epic Cycle, which postdate the Homeric compositions, but include themes and subjects narrated in earlier epics, preserve some of these incidents

[4] For the close and sometimes polemical relations between the songs, see particularly Nagy 1979: 15–58, Pucci 1982, Pucci 1987.

and Homer can presume his audience's knowledge of the events and characters given fuller treatment elsewhere (see, for example, the passing reference to Jason's voyage on the Argo at *Od.* 12.69–70 and the mention of Heracles' dealings with Iphitus at 21.22–33; the *Odyssey* also alludes to matter included in the *Iliou Persis*, *Parva Ilia* and *Memnonis*).[5] Set within this broader repertoire, Homer appears less the singular genius of the ancient picture than a master practitioner who deploys an existing poetic medium with particular brilliance and capacity for innovation and whose superiority over rival composers the early sources already recognized (see Aristotle, *Poetics* ch. 23).

### *(b) Oral composition, the Kunstsprache and formulas*

Current understanding of the medium in which Homer composed still depends to a large degree on the work of Milman Parry who, in a series of publications from the 1920s on, profoundly reshaped earlier Homeric scholarship.[6] Before Parry, readers had chiefly focused on the inconsistencies and redundancies apparent in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (e.g. Penelope's coquettish self-display to the suitors in book 18, so strikingly at odds with her fidelity to her husband up to that point, or Theoclymenus' 'revised' version of his prophecy at 17.160–1n). Where the so-called Analysts posited the existence of many independent, shorter songs or 'lays' composed by various poets of different dates, who would have altered and corrected their predecessors' accounts, and whose works were then cobbled together by a less than skilled final 'redactor', the 'Unitarians' countered with a single poet of consummate artistry whose occasional slips could be argued away.[7] Parry's fundamental contribution was to identify the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* as products of an oral tradition of hexameter poetry, a technique of composition developed and refined over hundreds of years by illiterate bards who preserved and transmitted their common heritage. This heritage consists of a repertoire of story patterns and motifs (e.g. the return of the hero, disguise and recognition), themes or 'type-scenes' (recurring units of action, such as a sacrifice, feasting, the departure of a ship, and descriptions of phenomena and objects),[8] and formulaic phrases (see p. 6). In Parry's view, this traditional phraseology and narrative stock had been devised for a very specific purpose. Thus equipped, and schooled through listening to other bards performing the extant repertoire, the oral poet could compose *ex tempore*, fashioning an original song each time he performed by using pre-existing elements, which he would expand, curtail, reorder and modify at will and in accordance with audience expectations and demands. Parry's insights, reinforced by

[5] See West 2003a: 13. As West notes, by the end of the seventh century, the Lesbian poets knew not only the *Iliad*, but also the *Cypria*, *Iliou Persis*, *Nostoi*, or poems including much of the same material.

[6] His writings are conveniently collected in Parry 1971. See too Lord 1960 and 1991.

[7] For an overview of this older debate, see Turner 1997.

[8] According to Lord 1951: 73, 'the theme can be identified as a recurrent element of narration or description in traditional oral poetry. It is not restricted, as is the formula, by metrical considerations; hence it should not be limited to exact word-for-word repetition.'

his visits to the former Yugoslavia in 1933–5 where, together with his assistant Albert Lord, he recorded examples of heroic poetry still performed by the *guslars* (traditional singers/poets) of the region, undercut the very axioms of Analytic and Unitarian criticism. Since an oral poet sings a new version of his song on every occasion, the notion of a primary, 'original' or fixed text that could deliberately be emended and changed was meaningless; nor could a mode of composition conditioned and determined by the traditional repertoire accommodate the lone creative genius of the Unitarian description.

In Parry's account, two chief elements establish the oral nature of Homeric poetry and the poet's participation in an extended tradition of heroic verse composition. The first is the linguistic medium. No Greek ever spoke the language that Homer and his characters use. Instead, the poet composed in an artificial idiom, the so-called *Kunstsprache*, an amalgam that reflects the different developmental stages through which the oral tradition had passed from the late Bronze Age until around 700 BC.[9] This language, purely a sung medium, satisfies the poet's needs on several counts; first, it is expressly designed to suit the metrical requirements of the hexameter line (see section 5); second, because it does not correspond to the language spoken in any particular region of Greece, it allowed the poems more easily to claim panhellenic status; and third, as Parry emphasized, the very artificiality and archaic-sounding quality of the diction distinguishes the heroic milieu from the everyday world, giving it the requisite remoteness and elevation.

A principal indicator of the artificial nature of Homeric diction is its regionally heterogeneous makeup. Epic language includes words and forms drawn from different dialects, chiefly Ionic and Aeolic as spoken in two neighbouring areas in the Eastern Aegean, but with contributions from the Arcadian and Cypriot dialects; among the terms found uniquely in these last two regions, and retained in the Homeric poems, are αἶσα, φάσγανον, ἦμαρ, αὐτάρ and ἴδε. The predominance of Ionic forms (η has replaced ᾱ in virtually every line) suggests that Homer, having inherited an oral tradition that had already passed through an Aeolic phase, was composing in an Ionic milieu. The poet may select the Aeolic forms of the first person plural pronouns ἄμμες and ὔμμες or, under different metrical conditions, prefer the Ionic ἡμεῖς and ὑμεῖς. Infinitives ending in – ειν and – ναι are Ionic, those in –μεν and –μεναι are Aeolic; πρός, the Ionic form, can be replaced by Aeolic προτί, and πτόλις (originally a Mycenaean formation) can take the place of Ionic πόλις when the poet needs a lengthened vowel at the end of the preceding word. The two dialects may be combined within a single formula (in Πηληϊάδεω Ἀχιλῆος at *Il.* 1.1 the quantitative metathesis typical of Ionic formations appears only in the first of the two terms), or even within a single word (as when the Aeolic dative plural ending –εσσι is attached to the Ionic stem in νήεσσι at 17.429).

[9] The fullest description of Homer's language and grammar remains Chantraine, *GH*; for more succinct and recent accounts, see Palmer 1962: 75–178, Janko 1982, Janko 1992: 8–19, Horrocks 1997.

The presence of forms from different chronological stages of the language's evolution, with archaisms and neologisms standing side by side, also points to Homer's use of a traditional diction developed over the course of many generations (and not to the existence of 'earlier' or 'later' strata of his poems). The decipherment of the Linear B tablets showed that epic preserved expressions already current in Mycenaean times (just as archaeological evidence proved that artifacts such as Ajax's tower shield hark back to weaponry already outdated by the end of the fourteenth century) and the stately phrase ἱερὸν μένος used for Antinous and Alcinous may have originated in the formal diction of the Mycenaean court (see 18.34n). This particular formula, like several others (κλέος ἄφθιτον most famously), may be of still greater antiquity; Vedic cognates for the expressions point to their emergence from a common Indo-European poetic heritage. Several innovations in morphology and syntax appear without displacing the older forms. The early genitive termination -οιο exists alongside the later -ου (e.g. κλαυθμοῦ . . . στυγεροῖο γόοιο, 17.8); some imperfects are used without the augment, while others, following subsequent linguistic developments, are augmented, and the poet enjoys a similar freedom with respect to *ν*–mobile.[10] One feature of Homeric diction, its use or neglect of the letter digamma (ϝ, pronounced w), further indicates its chronologically composite character: by the time the *Odyssey* was composed, Ionic had lost the digamma, retained in the majority of dialects, and the poet could preserve or ignore it at will. Thus some words beginning with a vowel behave for metrical purpose as though they begin with a consonant, with the 'silent' element serving to create hiatus or lengthen the previous syllable. The phenomenon frequently occurs in the context of inherited phrases and older formulas (see 17.84n for a rare exception to the rule). The common phrase ἔτι δ(ϝ)ήν at 17.72 preserves digamma, giving the necessary ∪ – – scansion, as does the formulaic expression at 18.104, καί μιν φωνήσας (ϝ)έπεα πτερόεντα προσηύδα, though not when the phrase has a feminine subject (φωνήσασ' ἔπεα).[11]

With these resources, the poet enjoys a greatly expanded dictional range. In 17.2 Telemachus binds his sandals about his feet, ποσσίν; at 27 the poet uses the form ποσί; πόδεσσι is a still third option in the composer's repertoire. For the verb 'to be', Homer may choose among five metrical variants for the infinitive (εἶναι, ἔμεν, ἔμμεν, ἔμεναι, ἔμμεναι) and four for the third person singular of the future (ἔσται, ἔσεται, ἔσσεται, ἐσσεῖται). On occasion epic diction includes artificial word-formations, designed to allow the word a place in the hexameter line; so the artificially lengthened ἀπονέεσθαι (18.260), and several of the forms used in the beautification of Penelope, including the irregular plural προσώπατα at 18.192. A few Atticisms also enter the text (e.g. πῶς, ὅπως for the Ionic κῶς, ὅκως), but these may have been introduced at a later stage or be the result of scribal corruptions. Seeming peculiarities and unusual formations

[10] For the use of augmented and unaugmented forms, see Chantraine, *GH* I 479–84 and van der Valk 1949: 140–1; for *ν*–mobile, see Hoekstra 1965: 71–87.

[11] It has been calculated that Homer observes digamma some 3,354 times and ignores it 617, a proportion that suggests that singers tried to maintain it despite current linguistic usage.

are not sure grounds for excision or emendation or proof of interpolation; whereas vernacular speech will exclude anomalous forms, the poet's medium preserves them as markers of its distinctive character.

Just as integral to Homeric poetry as the *Kunstsprache* is the 'formula', a basic building block of oral epic song essential for the singer's work of improvisatory composition and his transmission of the traditional repertoire.[12] In 1928, Parry defined the formula as 'a group of words which is regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea'. By 'essential idea', he meant 'that which remains after one has counted out everything in the expression which is purely for the sake of style'.[13] More simply, a formula is the means by which the poet articulates a given thought or phenomenon in metrical form. The line opening book 17 belongs among the examples that Parry cites: used 20 times in the *Odyssey*, the expression 'when young rosy-fingered dawn appeared again' is, in his account, simply the oral tradition's way of saying that a new day has dawned. Even more common is 17.16, 'in answer to him [or her] resourceful Odysseus replied', a formula that appears 45 times in the *Odyssey* to indicate that the hero is about to speak. Parry's work on formulas concentrated chiefly on noun-epithet combinations ('rosy-fingered dawn', 'resourceful Odysseus'), and demonstrated the intimate relation between the phrases and the line's metrical sequence. As his research showed, the principles of 'economy' or 'thrift' and of 'extension' govern Homeric verse composition: as a rule, only one noun-epithet combination exists for each metrical condition, and duplications are largely avoided; and for each case or form of a name there are several different epithets, each designed for a different slot in the line.[14] Two large-scale conclusions follow. First, such is the refinement and scope of the formulaic repertoire that it must have been developed over many generations; and second, what determines the poet's choice of word or phrase is principally metrical convenience, not its suitability to a particular context.

### *(c) Modifications and challenges*

While the account that Parry and his followers have given of the makeup of Homeric poetry and its oral character seems fundamentally correct, questions concerning the relation of the individual composer to his poetic medium still remain. The poet's use of traditional material, which may have been devised for contexts and scenarios different from his own, can explain some of the incongruities and anomalies that vexed Analysts. Because a recognition scene conventionally requires the testing of the individual to whom the disguised hero is about to reveal himself, Odysseus must, in seemingly cruel and gratuitous fashion, follow the standard sequence in his encounter with his father in *Od.* 24, for all that the hero need no longer be

[12] Important discussions of the formula include Nagler 1967, Whallon 1961, Heubeck 1974: 130–52, Austin 1975: ch. 1, Hainsworth 1993: 1–33, Foley 1995, Foley 1997, Russo 1997. For good bibliography, see Edwards 1986 and 1988.

[13] Parry 1971: 272. [14] Parry 1971: 276 and 277–8.

disguised and Laertes' loyalty is not in question. As Lord remarks, 'in a traditional poem . . . there is a pull in two directions: one is toward the song being sung and the other is toward the previous uses of the same theme'.[15] But on other occasions Homer may vary an existing type-scene so as to invest a situation with the desired thematic significance: a detailed description of a sacrifice can indicate a well-regulated, stable society; the curtailed procedures performed by the suitors on Ithaca highlight the current social disarray (see 17.180–1n). Through modification of a motif, the poet also creates novel combinations that are both conventional and situation-specific.[16] Foley analyses the lines in book 18.119–52 as an instance of a 'greeting type-scene', in which typically an individual (Amphinomus here) presents a cup of wine to someone and accompanies that gesture with a verbal pledge;[17] in this episode, Homer interrupts the traditional sequence (e.g. 13.50–62) so as to accommodate the unparalleled warning that Odysseus gives Amphinomus, thereby reminding an audience of the hostile environment surrounding the hero and intimating the dark fate hanging over the suitor. More famously in book 19 the poet seems launched on a recognition type-scene between the disguised Odysseus and his wife. Because Penelope must not yet be party to the revenge plot, the formulaic line 'she recognized the sure proofs that Odysseus had given her' (250) that regularly precedes recognition does not produce the usual result; instead Eurycleia takes over the role of 'recognizer' seemingly allotted to the queen. Fresh anomalies arise when Penelope, still ignorant of the beggar's identity, reclaims her forfeited part: the interview concludes in the manner typical of standard recognition scenes as husband and wife devise a plan to ensnare the suitors.

Purposeful repetition is a second area that demonstrates that the poet composes in anything but mechanistic fashion. On three occasions in books 17, 18 and 20 a suitor hurls an object at Odysseus. While the events and diction are broadly the same, the details that distinguish one episode from its predecessor reflect the growing power of Odysseus and Telemachus and a corresponding loss of efficacy on the suitors' part (see 17.462–5n). These patterns can stretch over many books, creating large-scale structural relations between the poem's different parts (see further section 2(a)). Odysseus' walk from the Phaeacian shore to Alcinous' palace in book 7 supplies a template for the hero's passage from Eumaeus' hut to his home in book 17. The surface similarities (springs and groves in both places, prayers for the hero's safe reception, a description of the palace) play against the deeper distinctions between the sites, one a fantastical, super-luxurious environment, the other very much of this world with a patina of 'historical' authenticity (see 17.207n).

Nor does the poet prove an uncritical transmitter of his traditional material. Without returning to the notion of a compositional patchwork, recent ('neo-analytic') work has shown how Homer draws on the contents of poetry, particularly tales preserved in the Cyclic epics, that predates or is contemporary with his own and whose

[15] Lord 1960: 94. But see Scodel 1998b for the coherence of the Laertes' scene with the poem's themes.
[16] Foley 1997: 169–70. [17] Foley 1990: 257–63.

versions of events the composer can allude to, 'sample' and/or reject with subtlety and no small degree of one-upmanship.[18] Frequently cited is the *Odyssey*'s debt to a seemingly pre-existing account of the voyage of the Argo for its representation of Circe and for Odysseus' passage from her island;[19] Homer seems deliberately to have his hero reject the route that Jason would have followed, through the Clashing Rocks, so as to introduce what may have been his innovation, passage through the monstrous Scylla and Charybdis instead (see 12.55–8). In the versions of his wanderings that the disguised Odysseus devises in books 17 and 18, the protagonist borrows from alternate accounts of his journey and his post-Odyssean travels as presented in other contemporary compositions. Homer's agonistic impulse may again inform that act of appropriation. Because the hero's Cretan associations and sojourns in Thesprotia are embedded in Odysseus' lying tales, these competing versions of events are 'de-authorized' and the veracity of the current poet's more 'authentic' account highlighted.[20]

If the Homeric epics demonstrate the plasticity of the poetic medium at the level of story patterns and motifs, the same flexibility is evident where formulas are concerned. While Parry came to view the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* as almost entirely formulaic, a notion that allows the poet little capacity for innovation and that privileges the tradition over what any individual practitioner can contribute, readers now recognize how different passages deploy formulaic density to varying degrees and how the poet can re-cast standard verbal expressions or create novel formations.[21] Speeches, similes and episodes involving singular and/or exotic situations are likely to exhibit the lowest frequencies of formulaic expressions, or the greatest number of modifications of the usual system. Odysseus' encounter with Argus in book 17 is a scene without parallel in Homeric epic (although its subject matter may be a standard element in the 'return' story type; see 17.291–327n), and consequently contains a comparatively small percentage of formulaic diction.[22] Both Hoekstra and Hainsworth have demonstrated the versatility of the formulaic system beyond what Parry imagined, showing how

[18] I borrow the term 'sampling' from Richard Martin, who in several public lectures has compared the epic poet to a contemporary rap artist, who 'samples' songs of other singers familiar to his audience in his composition with just the competitive and ludic impulse that seems to motivate Homer's borrowings.

[19] For details, see West 2005.

[20] See King 1999 and Marks 2003. This type of rivalry is still visible in contemporary oral song traditions; cf. the remark of a Bosnian poet concerning a fellow singer cited in Murko 1929: 21: 'We are enemies of one another. It is torture for me when I see another singer who knows more than I'.

[21] According to one hypothesis, that treats any expression found two or more times in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* as formulaic, approximately one third of the Homeric corpus is made up of lines repeated in part or in their entirety elsewhere. For varying accounts, see Page 1959: 223, Notoupolos 1960: 180. However, with little agreement on what actually constitutes a formula, such assessments remain a matter of debate. The loss of earlier material contributes to the uncertainty; had we pre-Homeric heroic epic, expressions considered unique might turn out to be formulaic.

[22] See Russo 1976: 45–7 for a formal analysis of the formulaic diction in the passage.

changes in the language allowed the development of new combinations.[23] The lofty phrase used of Zeus at 18.137, πατὴρ ἀνδρῶν τε θεῶν τε, must compete with the newer and more flexible Κρόνου πάϊς (ἀγκυλομήτεω), which includes metathesis and has the advantage that it can be shortened when necessary. In other modifications, noun-epithet formulas normally occurring in one metrical shape may, when divided up and positioned in different parts of the line, appear under other metrical conditions, or the order of a formula's two terms can be inverted, with or without additional changes; the insertion of epithets, adverbs, particles and prepositions creates an expanded formula, while a complex formula results from the combination of an existing expression with another standard set of terms. Where Parry assumed that formulas were metrically conditioned, Hainsworth has shown how 'mutual expectancy', in which the use of one word creates a strong expectation that another will follow, also determines the formation of word-groupings.

No element of Parry's work has been more contested than his assertion that the formulaic epithet is wholly 'ornamental': 'the technique of epithets . . . is solely designed to help the poet to fit a noun into a line of six feet; once the noun has been fitted in . . . the epithet has no further function'.[24] But an unconsidered application of the available repertoire is hard to reconcile with even a cursory reading of the poems. Epithets are introduced with an eye to context, and exceptions such as 'loud-barking dogs' that are silent (*Od.* 16.4–5), Penelope's surprisingly 'stout hand' (*Od.* 21.6), and Irus' improbably 'revered mother' (*Od.* 18.5n) are few. Through purposeful selection the poet also invests his phrases with the requisite stylistic, emotional and/or thematic charge. The inclusion or omission of epithets (this more frequent in dialogues and speeches than in the poems' narrative portions) can alter the pacing and representational impact of the lines, while Homer's choice to style Telemachus 'the dear son of godlike Odysseus' at 17.3 in place of another formulaic designation reminds an audience of the tearful reunion between father and son that has just occurred. Significant too are variations between the different systems of address available to characters, and their selection of the formula best suited to their sentiments towards an interlocutor (see 17.152n). Thematic concerns may also prompt departures from the principle of 'economy' that Parry defined: within a space of ten lines, the poet substitutes for Hephaestus' regular epithet περικλυτοῦ (*Od.* 8.287) the metrically identical πολύφρονος (297), a term coupled elsewhere in the poem only with Odysseus. The point may be to alert listeners to the parallels between god and hero, and the ruse of the marital bed deployed by both to test the fidelity of their wives.[25]

Particular formulas also become significant through changes in context, repetition, and minor variation. When Homer uses the phrase so often applied to a hero's martial death, κατὰ μοῖρ' ἔλαβεν μέλανος θανάτοιο ('the fate of black death claimed him'),

[23] Hoekstra 1965, Hainsworth 1962, Hainsworth 1968.

[24] Parry 1971: 165. Sale 2001: 65 proposes replacing Parry's 'essential idea' with the perhaps better notion of an epithet that is 'context free'.

[25] The suggestion belongs to Sacks 1987: 13–17.

for Argus (*Od.* 17.326), that demise acquires a nobility and stature consonant with the dog's larger characterization. Redeployment with a difference occurs when the poet terms Aphrodite ἐϋστέφανος Κυθέρεια ('fair-crowned Cythereia') in the context of the beautification of Penelope, who is about to display herself to the suitors (18.193). A listener might recall an earlier scene in which Aphrodite played a much more central role and where the poet also called the goddess, there about to embark on an adulterous tryst, ἐϋστέφανος Κυθέρεια (8.288). The phrase's appearance uniquely in these two contexts invites us to consider possible affinities between the situations of the goddess and queen (see 18.193–4n). As Foley's notion of 'traditional referentiality' explains, these formulas as well as other traditional elements act as repositories of a significance that can extend far beyond their denotative meaning in any individual passage and that encompasses not just the particular poem, but even the entire tradition that stands behind the expression.[26] This larger frame is one with which both the poet and at least some portion of his audience are thoroughly familiar: according to the recent 'performative' approach to Homeric composition, individuals in cultures where a tradition of song-making still survives possess 'the mental equivalent of a CD-ROM player full of phrases and scenes',[27] and can instantly recognize innovations and departures from the norm.

By virtue of his mastery and creative use of his medium, Homer composes poems of a length,[28] sophistication and thematic density unparalleled in the South Slavic material gathered by Parry and Lord. For some readers these very qualities pose a challenge to what is axiomatic in Parry's work, the fact of oral and *ex tempore* composition-in-performance. But poems created without the aid of writing and 'on the spot' need not lack the complexity, structural coherence and elaborate patterning of the Homeric epics: through repeated performances over many generations (and oral epic poets can also think about their songs in advance, rehearse and improve on them each time they perform), a composition may achieve the outstanding unity and organization of Homer's poems. Nor does the older hierarchical dichotomy between oral and literate poetry, the first marked by 'primitive' compositional practices such as formulas, ring composition, digression, anaphora and parataxis (the 'adding on' technique), the other by a more sophisticated syntax and structure, still stand. Instead recent work views the poetic medium deployed by Homer as 'a way of using language that is different from, and opposed to, written communication', and treats his traditional poetry as a form of 'special speech', spoken discourse that is stylized and regularized

[26] Foley 1991: 7: 'Each element in the phraseology or narrative thematics stands not for that singular instance but for the plurality and multiformity that are beyond the reach of textualization.'

[27] Martin 1993: 227. For this 'performative' approach, see too Martin 1989, Bakker 1993, Bakker 1997a, Bakker 1997b. However, note Scodel 2002: 6–9 for the problematic assumptions that go into supposing this 'supremely competent audience'.

[28] One of the Serbo-Croatian examples, 'The wedding of Smailagić Meho', runs to 13,000 lines, but generally the songs are very much shorter.