

Re-examining Penelope's Stout Hand and Formulaic Infelicities in *The Odyssey*
Daniel W. Turkeltaub (Millsaps College)

The attempts to excuse Penelope's infamously inelegant "stout hand" (χειρὶ παχείη, *Od.* 21.6) as consistent with contemporary notions of female beauty (Wyatt), as contextually appropriate (Schlesinger; Eide; and Austin, 73-74), or as an accident of the epic formulaic medium (Stanford, *ad loc.*) not only fail to explain this particular verse, they fail to explain why such infelicities occur more regularly in *Odyssey* than in *Iliad*, why Iliadic "gaffs" never approach the absurdity of, for instance, the Odyssean "blameless" (ἀμύμονος, *Od.* 1.29) Aegisthus, and why *Odyssey* often spotlights its "gaffs" as though trying to ensure that the audience does not miss them. Scholars generally presume that *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, despite their ethical differences, use the traditional formulaic structures of heroic epic similarly, yet *Odyssey* regularly employs them in contexts where their words are ridiculously inappropriate or where bathos highlights their ludicrously implausible pretensions. Such instances form a poetic undercurrent that plays with the unbending conventionality of oral epic and slyly undercuts the heroic ethos its formulaic structures embody.

This paper examines three infelicities, each on a different formulaic level, that have troubled scholars. Penelope's aforementioned "stout hand" emasculates the male heroic mode by transferring it to a feminine, domestic sphere. The contrast between the key Penelope holds and the rock Athena wields with her "stout hand" (*Il.* 21.403) underscores the transference. *Od.* 18.195, from which Wyatt argues that stoutness was an aspect of female beauty, only augments the effect. Second, the εἶδωλον in *Od.* 4 and its parting words—the formulaic sentence "it is bad to babble empty things" (κακὸν δ' ἀνεμώλια βάζειν, *Od.* 4.837)—are contextually incongruous (West in Heubeck, *ad loc.*). They set up a *jeu de mots* in the next verse when the εἶδωλον escapes "into the gusts of the winds" (ἐς πνοιᾶς ἀνέμων). The *figura etymologica* (ἀνεμώλια... ἀνέμων) resuscitates and reifies the dormant metaphor in ἀνεμώλια to poke fun at the formula and play on the airiness of εἶδωλα. The game draws attention away from the formula as a unit of traditional meaning and to its constituent words. Third, the appearance of Athena in *Od.* 19.33ff. contorts a "type-scene" to suit a bathetic context, rendering its heroic conventions and presuppositions absurd. Athena's lamp allows Odysseus and his son to see, but elsewhere epic gods radiate light inherently and heroes act freely in darkness. Even so, Telemachus cannot see Athena and her lamp because Homeric gods reveal themselves to only one person at a time (Kullmann, 94). As he gawks like a buffoon at the mysterious light, Odysseus offers a humorous punch-line *à propos* to the bewilderment of this epic neophyte: "that's just the way of gods" (αὕτη τοι δίκη ἐστὶ θεῶν, *Od.* 19.43).

Athena, who directs this poetically self-conscious epic, instigates each example. As she guides Odysseus on his *nostos*, she conveys the formulaic language of epic heroism back with him. But this language proves inappropriate for the new epic world of *Odyssey*, a world of Athena *Ergane* rather than Athena *Nike*. While *Odyssey* posits a notion of heroism to rival the traditional heroic values the Iliadic Sarpedon and Diomedes embody, it adopts a poetic destabilizing the formulaic structures that evolved to communicate those values and that can lead *Iliad* into poetic infelicities.

Works Cited

- Austin, Norman. 1975. *Archery at the Dark of the Moon*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
Eide, Tormod. 1980. "A Note on the Homeric χειρὶ παχείη." *Symb. Osl.* 55: 23-26.
Kullmann, Wolfgang. 1956. *Das Wirken der Götter in der Ilias*. Berlin: Akademie Verlag.
Schlesinger, Alfred Cary. 1969. "Penelope's Hand." *CPh* 64: 236-237.
Stanford, William Bedell. 1965. *The Odyssey of Homer*. London: St. Martin's Press.
Heubeck, Albert *et al.*. 1988-1992. *A Commentary on Homer's Odyssey*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
Wyatt, William F. 1978. "Penelope's Fat Hand (*Od.* 21.6-7)." *CP* 73.4: 343-344.