The Mimetic Effects of a Story-Pattern and its Formulas

In the *Odyssey* the story-pattern of arriving in a strange country (signaled by Odysseus’ formulaic questions) paradoxically both grows stale and becomes fresh through repetition and mimics both the character’s and the audience’s response (e.g., surprise, excitement). That Odysseus fails to recognize Ithaca when he finally arrives there and so asks what land he has come to and whether the men are *philoxeinoi* and their mind *theoudes* is highly ironic and gives these questions new meaning and life. De Jong (2001) notes how Odysseus’ arrival on Ithaca combines story-patterns, type-scenes, and motifs (the delayed recognition story-pattern, “god meets mortal” type-scene, “stranger meets with local inhabitant,” the mist motif). Scholars have of course appreciated the dramatic irony of Odysseus’ failure to recognize Ithaca, the ironies of Odysseus’ lengthy exchange with Athena, and the thematic and structural importance of their meeting and of the transformation of Odysseus into a beggar (Clay 1983, Hoekstra 1989, de Jong 2001, Murnaghan 1987, Tracy 1990). But no one has remarked on the mimetic effect of Odysseus’ repeated questions or on their changing significance. His questions, which constitute a formula, seem to become less meaningful with each repetition until their ironic deployment in book 13 surprises us and revitalizes them.

On three occasions Odysseus asks the same formulaic questions (To the land of which mortals have I come this time (*aute*)? Are they insolent and wild and not *dikaioi*, or are they *philoxeinoi* and do they have a god-fearing mind? [6.119-121; 9.175-6; 13.200-2]). Alcinous asks a slight variation of them in 8.573-6. Echoing these questions, Odysseus also sends men to learn what sort of people lives in the unfamiliar land (9.89, 10.101). As formulas go, appearing four times is not exceptionally often, so we might not have expected the formula to become tedious. But because the formula consists not merely of a word or phrase but of two or three whole lines and is confined to an eight-book span, we notice each repetition, and each repetition soon gives rise to repetitiousness.

The repetition of these questions, especially in book 13, mimics Odysseus’ weariness and momentary despair (*o moi ego*, “alas” in 6.119 and 13.200). With each appearance of the lines Odysseus’ emotions seem stronger and the lines themselves staler. In a way the formulaic lines are stale even in their first appearance because, besides being formulaic, they contain *aute* (“this time, now”). (*Aute*, nevertheless, makes sense because this is not the first time Odysseus has come to a new land in the fabula.) Just as Odysseus has already visited undiscovered countries to his chagrin and more times than he would like, we have already heard a story about his misadventures in an alien land. “Oh no, not this again,” Odysseus and the audience think. We quickly tire of the repetition of these lines and so our weariness mirrors Odysseus’ weariness. The repetition of these lines not only mimics the repetition of story-pattern and Odysseus’ weariness but also produces our weariness, which vicariously mimics that of Odysseus.

The irony of these lines in book 13, however, rejuvenates them. They take on new mimetic qualities in this new context. For Odysseus, to be sure, they at first mimic his exhaustion and despondency, but for us they mimic Odysseus’ surprise at waking up alone on the beach, in that the ironic deployment of the lines surprises us. The effect of these lines on us also turns out to mimic Odysseus’ condition upon recognizing that he is in Ithaca after all, for he is again surprised but now rejoices at being home, just as we delight in the refreshing irony of the lines. For us, just as for Odysseus, the familiar becomes unfamiliar. Like Ithaca, these formulaic lines seem new. Paradoxically, through repetition the formulaic has become not stale but fresh.

# Works Cited

Clay, Jenny Strauss. The Wrath of Athena. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1983.

de Jong, Irene. A Narratological Commentary on the Odyssey. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001.

Foley, John Miles. Homer's Traditional Art. University Park: Penn St. UP, 1999.

Heubeck, Alfred, Arie Hoekstra. A Commentary on Homer's Odyssey. Vol. 2. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1989. 3 vols.

Murnaghan, Sheila. Disguise and Recognition in the Odyssey. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1987.

Tracy, Stephen. The Story of the Odyssey. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1990.