

Herding 6000 Cats: How to Organize the Homeric Noun-Epithet *Iuncturae*

A recent volume by J. H. Dee, *Iuncturae Homericae* (Olms-Weidmann 2010) arrays 6005 different noun-epithet phrases in the Homeric corpus in seven categories according to several superficial criteria: linked vs. separated; unilocal or multilocal, two words or more (augmentation); reversibility. The sheer magnitude of this material, accounting for almost a tenth of the ca. 200,000 words in the corpus (and half of them non-recurrent and thus non-formulaic), marks it as a very significant component in the epic style, with the further advantage of being easily identified and isolated. While that seven-fold arrangement may offer some convenience in its seemingly controlled movement from static simplicity to highly mobile complexity, it offers very little in the way of interpretive assistance for analyzing the deeper and more subtle aspects of Homeric diction.

The purpose of this paper is to present—and, ideally, invite comment on—an alternative set of approaches for evaluating those *iuncturae*. A fifteen-minute paper will have to be very selective, so I will deal with just three of the many possible approaches: (1) the rôle of epithetic expressions as part of the poet's technique for describing and individualizing his characters—and, from a different perspective, as part of our way of understanding the narrator himself; (2) the general theoretical linguistic basis of epithetic phrases in formulaic and non-formulaic settings—specifically (among others) functionalist and cognitive methods of interpretation; (3) the aesthetic dimension that might be ascribed to epithetic expressions—a contested category, since Milman Parry, the founder of the oral-formulaic theory almost a century ago, denied that such phrases could be intended to produce a special effect in any one passage, whereas more recent work has insisted that that they can and do.

The paper, accordingly, will be divided into three main parts, preceded by a very brief

introduction that sets the background for this project, summarizing the history of research in this area and distinguishing the concepts of formula and *iunctura*—the latter being more inclusive and, therefore, of greater utility in exploring epic diction. The first part focuses on the contribution that epithetic phrases make in the portrayal of major characters in the epics; the most famous example is of course Achilles, whose uniqueness in speech was analyzed memorably by Jasper Griffin (*JHS*, 1986)—but Griffin focused principally on individual words. Each of the leading figures in the stories has a set of epithets and formulae (usually in proportion to their importance); the paper offers several examples to demonstrate the value of this approach. The second part looks at various post-Parryan linguistically-oriented theories of poetic diction: for example, the work of Egbert Bakker (*Poetry in Speech*, 1997) and Elizabeth Minchin (*Homer and the Resources of Memory*, 2001). A few examples, as applied to epithetic clusters, illustrate the potential of this line of interpretation. Finally, the third part opens up a wider vista, exploring (in an admittedly more subjective manner) the often quite striking dramatic power and beauty of some of these expressions as deployed in especially charged episodes of the epics.

References (only items mentioned above)

- E. J. Bakker. *Poetry in Speech: Orality and Homeric Discourse*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997.
- J. H. Dee. *Iuncturae Homericae: A Study of Noun-Epithet Combinations in the Iliad and the Odyssey*. HildesheimÉ New York: Olms-Weidmann, 2010.
- J. Griffin. “Homeric Words and Speakers.” *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 106 (1986) 36-57.
- E. Minchin. *Homer and the Resources of Memory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, esp. pp. 100-131, “Homer’s Descriptive Segments.”

