

“Framing” Odysseus: An Application of Neoanalysis to the *Odyssey*

This paper argues that methods of neoanalysis, modified by research on oral poetics, can explicate the artistry of the *Odyssey*’s use of different narrative traditions to create a poem that dramatizes competitive “framing.” I demonstrate this with a case study of Homer’s use of the “Oresteia” tradition, especially the paradigmatic figure of Aegisthus.

Neoanalysis, a largely German and textualist method of Homeric criticism, assumes the active, intertextual participation of parallel narrative traditions alongside the principal epic *fabula* in the construction of the poem. This method of criticism was originally developed with explicitly textualist assumptions (Pestalozzi 1945; Kakridis 1949; Schadewaldt 1959; Kullmann 1960), but recently a few scholars have made interesting attempts to combine this method with the discoveries of Parry, Lord, and their oralist followers. This new synthesis unites the powerful tools of neoanalytic attention to the artful interplay between reconstructed earlier poetic models and the Homeric epics together with the insights of oral poetics on the use of traditional material in a process of composition-in-performance. As with the earlier generation of neoanalysts, recent scholarship in this line has largely focused on the *Iliad* (Allan 2005; Burgess 2006, 2001, 1997; Marks 2005; Edwards 1990), while a smaller number of studies have used these methods on the *Odyssey* (Danek 1998; Marks 2003; Reece 1994). There remains considerable opportunity for further study of the *Odyssey* with these methods.

Even with the refinements of oral poetics, neoanalytic criticism often puts too much weight on the identification of models or sources for the composition of the Homeric epics, as though simply demonstrating the origin of the poet’s material constituted the end of interpretation. More nuanced criticism is possible. Parallel narratives often appear as mythological *paradeigmata*, which characters are presented as offering in order to make an argument by analogy to another tradition. In the more complex cases, these *paradeigmata* are subject to competing applications and interpretations. What we see, as characters competitively compose alternative paradigmatic interpretations of parallel traditions fitted to their own current context, is a dramatization of their attempts to construe their actions and actions of others as moral agents in what social-scientists call “frames” (Goffman 1974). This drama of “framing” involves the audience as well, as it asks them to experience and participate in mimetic acts of interpreting and applying different frames they know from inherited traditions. This use of *paradeigmata* can be seen as another technique of oral poetry. The traditional tool of the *paradeigma*, on par with the type-scene or the formula, is brought forth and recomposed to suit a new epic poem.

This study explores these issues through one case study: Homer’s use of the “Oresteia” tradition. Zeus offers the first *paradeigma* in the poem, implicitly and strikingly “framing” Odysseus as an Aegisthus-like figure (1.28-43). Athena’s contestation of this *paradeigma* heightens the drama concerning how Odysseus will be construed (44-62). However incongruous the parallel of Odysseus and Aegisthus may seem to us, the traditions about Aegisthus that lie behind the poem, I argue, present these two figures as more alike than first supposed. For example, in the version of Agamemnon’s murder told by Proteus, Aegisthus ambushes Agamemnon and his companions in his own ancestral home at a feast, not at a bath in Mycenae (4.512-37). Artistic evidence about the *Nostoi* epic tradition, known to us chiefly through Proclus’ summary of the later, cyclic poem attributed to Agias of Troezen based on this material but certainly having much earlier, oral antecedents, also supports this reconstruction (Berlin: PM 4996). Thus, Odysseus’ ambush of the suitors in his own home at a feast could be read paradigmatically as having Aegisthus-like characteristics. One conclusion of this analysis is that contained within the *Odyssey*, and very likely circulating in the wider epic traditions about Odysseus—though this is harder to prove—, there exist multiple, valid ways to construe the ethics of epic hero Odysseus.