

An Ironic Stock Epithet in Homer's *Iliad*

M.M. Willcock, in his commentary on Homer's *Iliad*, says of 3.57 on *Ἀλέξανδρος θεοειδής*: "This is a good example of the Homeric stock epithet, for it is the fourth time in twenty-two lines that Alexandros has been unnecessarily described as 'godlike'." He then ascribes to it "a metrical rather than a semantic function." But, I think, even Milman Parry himself would have agreed that Homer could have arranged his syntax so as to use one of the other stock epithets if he had wished to. In my paper I should like to take up the challenge implied in Willcock's commentary (and those, like G.S. Kirk's, that agree with it) and make the case that the repetition of this one epithet is deliberate, and that though Homer may, to a large extent, have used pre-fabricated units, formulae, we can acknowledge that he was an artist and that his manipulation of the units was artistic.

The scene in which the fourfold use occurs, the exciting confrontation of the two armies, is rich in similes as the Greek and Trojan forces come together. Throughout the passage Paris is called Alexander and referred to as *θεοειδής*: Alexander, whose beauty is like a God's. Elsewhere Homer uses other epithets of Alexander, for example, *δῖος* and *βασιλεύς*. But here he engages in word play and various ironies that emerge by his use of the name and epithet.

Lines 15–37 fall into three sections, the description of Alexander challenging the Greeks; the response of Menelaus; Alexander's response to Menelaus. In each of the three sections, Alexander is called godlike (*θεοειδής*); the epithet appears twice in the last section, in which Alexander responds to Menelaus; the epithet, by its repetition and collocation there, takes on added artistic significance.

In leading the attack, Alexander does appear like a god, and the epithet is appropriate. Alexander wears a panther skin across his shoulders, carries a bow and arrows, and a sword. Yet

he also carries two spears. Homer's ἀντάρ shows that his armament is unusual for an archer (these lines, 19–20, are athetized by Aristarchus but well defended by Leaf). To convey all that equipment and still appear godlike speaks well for Alexander's grace. Menelaus' response is compared to the joy of a lion who has stumbled on the carcass of a deer or goat that hunters have slain. At the end of the simile, Homer concludes, "Menelaus rejoiced as he saw godlike Alexander before his eyes." The stock epithet has begun to change meaning by its context: Menelaus does not see Alexander as godlike and immortal; he sees him as a corpse.

We next see Alexander respond to Menelaus, not that Menelaus does anything except rejoice. The two passages are almost exact parallels in construction. Alexander leaps back like a man shunning (*ἀλεείνων*) a snake. The word *ἀλεείνων* is a pun on his name, as Alexander, the defender of men, denies both his name and his elected role. In comparing godlike Alexander to a man, Homer reminds us that his hero is not a god. Menelaus' response had been internal, rejoicing; Alexander's response manifests itself in his appearance (*εἶδος*), in his godlike beauty, which turns pale green with fear. Once again context alters the original heroic impression of Alexander; though godlike, he quails before a mere man, the son of Atreus (*Ἄτρεος υἱόν*).

The lexicons tell us that the epithet *θεοειδής* denotes only physical appearance, not moral qualities. By placing the formulae skillfully Homer has made the meaning clear. Then as if to emphasize the etymology of the word, he has Hector play with the other root of the epithet, *εἶδος*. When he rebukes his brother's cowardice he uses the word *εἶδος* three times, in the beginning, middle and end of his speech, and he also uses it in line 48, in the form *εὐειδέα*, of Helen: Alexander and Helen are thus linked and identified.

This kind of subtlety is surely the work of a great artist. Though I focus on the artistry in this one example, I should like to suggest that a broader investigation will show its pervasiveness throughout the Homeric epics.

Bibliography

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