

## Towards a Method for Considering Homeric Humor

While few who read the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* would deny that they have humorous moments, very little has been written about the subject. The reasons are obvious. First is the not always implicit prejudice that humor is beneath serious scholarly consideration. Poppycock! Second, the multi-layered ironies and paradoxes that create humor complicate interpretation. More fundamentally, the psychological mechanisms of humor make it nearly impossible for non-native audiences to distinguish humor from the stylistic missteps for which Homeric poetry is famous, or even to recognize instances of more subtle humor. So the area has been largely avoided, and the few scholars who address it tend to rely on their own subjective judgments. In this paper, I suggest that the oral formulaic nature of Homeric poetry can help us identify possible instances of humor and understand how the epics use it.

Semiolinguistic studies of humor (e.g., Koestler 1964, Raskin 1985, Attardo 1994) propose models for the semantic mechanisms of humorous language. Such studies suggest that humor relies on its audiences being so familiar with native speech patterns and idiomatic usages that they do not require conscious, deliberate thought to absorb the sometimes subtle shifts in phrasings, ambiguities, sub-tones, and other nuances of language through which humor is often generated. Because the formulaic nature of Homeric poetry reduces the range of expressions compared to unmarked speech and establishes readily identifiable norms of phrasing, it should theoretically be easier than in other media to determine when a particularly odd Homeric passage reworks standard formulations in a manner resembling a joke. Moreover, the formulaic recurrence of phrases in similar contexts can charge them with supplementary, extra-lexical significance through a process posited by Lord (1960) and explored more fully by Foley (1991 and 1999), who called the phenomenon “Immanence” or “Traditional Referentiality.” So it

should be possible to glean the sub-tones and nuances of formulaic phrases that recur in contexts with close thematic affinity. Applying the findings of semiolinguistic humor studies to the oral formulaic poetry of Homeric epic will never enable us to prove definitively whether an ancient audience would have found any given passage funny, but positive results should at least encourage us to explore the possibility.

I consider one scene from each epic as a test case. From the *Iliad* I discuss Oilean Ajax's role in the footrace. The humor here is primed when Achilles presents a bull as the second place prize (23.750) and "swift Ajax" (ταχὺς Αἴας, 23.754) volunteers first. Athena prevents Ajax from winning by causing him to slip in cow dung. After the race, Ajax, now ironically called "resplendent" (φαίδιμος, 23.779), grabs his appropriately bovine prize in mock sacrificial language while spitting out bull dung and grumbling about the inequities of divine intervention. Beyond the humor patent to us (and the foreshadowing of Ajax's demise), I suggest that the audience would appreciate darker humor in the switch of epithets and sacrificial language. Oilean Ajax only receives the epithet φαίδιμος here. Elsewhere it primarily modifies Hector and Telemonian Ajax. Hector recently lost his own footrace to Achilles due to Athena's intervention despite having sacrificed many cows (22.171-2), and his corpse was defiled using bull-hide thongs (22.398); Telamonian Ajax's famous demise following Athena's intervention has bullish aspects of its own. Against their deaths, Oilean Ajax's race stands as a ludicrous foil highlighting the absurdity of human life without the heroic quest for meaning in our shared tragic existence.

I also examine *Odyssey* 6.117-136, in which Odysseus awakens on the shore, decides to approach Nausicaa and her friends, plucks a branch to conceal his genitals "with a stout hand" (χειρὶ παχείῃ, 6.128), is compared to a starving lion in a simile resembling the one describing Sarpedon assailing the Achaean walls (*Il.* 12.299-308), and approaches the girls "though naked"

(6.136). The phrase *χειρὶ παχείῃ* almost always marks moments when a man asserts his masculine authority by using his stout hand as a weapon or to grasp an object of (virile) authority. Odysseus will eventually use his “stout hand” to grasp the sword with which he kills the suitors (22.326). Here such bellicose virility, underscored by the simile, would be ludicrously inappropriate and counterproductive. The function of *χειρὶ παχείῃ* is inverted, since Odysseus must conceal his *membrum virile* in modesty. Unlike the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey* integrates humor into its main plot, where it serves as a mechanism through which the poem refurbishes the traditional heroic ethos of military epic to suit its more domestic world.

#### Bibliography

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