

Does Repetition Make it True? Strategies of (Dis)honesty in Homer

What is the effect of repeatedly asking someone to tell the truth, or of hearing someone claim over and over to be speaking the truth? Although the thematic importance of truth and falsehood for the *Odyssey* has hardly gone unnoticed (see e.g. Adkins 1972, Boussein 2017, Emlyn-Jones 1986, Murnaghan 1987, Pratt 1993, Reece 1994, Richardson 1996, Trahman 1952, and Walcot 1977, to name just a few), scholars have rarely delved deeper to examine the conversational strategies of how characters in the Homeric poems employ formulaic lines that request a truthful answer or claim that the speaker is telling the truth. (For this sort of conversational analysis applied to a different subject, see Beck 2005.) Nor have they discussed the repetitive pattern that arises from this strategy, which the poet can then break for dramatic effect. This paper aims to show, by investigating this pattern in the *Odyssey* (and, for comparison's sake, *Iliad* 10), that the poet uses the repetition of requests for truth and claims of truth as one of the structural devices that bind the *Odyssey* together.

The paper falls into two halves. The first briefly examines passages in the Homeric poems where requests for truth and claims of truth occur in close proximity to one another, namely *Iliad* 10, *Odyssey* 1, *Odyssey* 3-4, and *Odyssey* 24. In all of these passages, as is most often the case in the Homeric poems, formulaic requests for truth outnumber claims of truth by a significant margin; additionally, while claims of truth often do not directly respond to requests for truth, the repetition of these formulas over a relatively short passage primes Homer's audience for an enhanced awareness of truth and falsehood. So, for example, in *Odyssey* 24, Odysseus' revelation of himself to Laertes is preceded by two requests for truth from the disguised Odysseus (24.256, “ἀλλ’ ἄγε μοι τόδε εἰπὲ καὶ ἀτρεκέως κατάλεξον”, and 24.258, “καί

μοι τοῦτ' ἀγόρευσον ἐτήτυμον, ὄφρ' ἐν εἰδῶ"), as well as by two requests for truth from Laertes (the same two lines, repeated: 24.256 = 24.287; 24.258 = 24.297). Only at 24.303 do we finally get a claim of truth from Odysseus ("τοιγὰρ ἐγὼ τοι πάντα μάλ' ἀτρεκέως καταλέξω"), which in fact introduces not Odysseus's revelation of his identity, but his final lie. This pattern is typical of the Homeric poems, foregrounding a concern for truth and alerting the audience to that concern, yet ultimately frustrating it.

The second half of the paper then turns to *Odyssey* 13-23, where, in marked contrast to what has just been noted, claims of truth come to outnumber requests for truth. Moreover, many of these claims of truth have to do with the homecoming of Odysseus, and will be fulfilled rather than frustrated. For example, at 19.269, the disguised Odysseus offers a strong claim of truth to Penelope that is unmotivated by any request for truth: "νημερτέως γάρ τοι μυθήσομαι οὐδ' ἐπικεύσω." Here as elsewhere in *Odyssey* 13-23, the breaking of the usual pattern, combined with the dramatic irony of the disguised Odysseus making grandiose but accurate claims of truth, changes the overall atmosphere of the *Odyssey* from one in which the outcome is dangerously uncertain to one in which the hero's return and slaughter of the suitors is practically predetermined. It is almost as though Odysseus makes his *nostos* true by his repetition of its truth, speaking it—speaking himself—into being.

Bibliography

- Adkins, A.W.H. 1972. "Truth, κόσμος, and ἀρετή in the Homeric Poems." *CQ* 22: 5-18.
- Beck, D. 2005. *Homeric Conversation*. Cambridge, MA.
- Bouxsein, H. 2017. "Truth be Told: The Rhetoric of Honesty in *Odyssey* 13-24." In Anne H.

Groton, ed., *Ab Omni Parte Beatus: Classical Studies in Honor of James M. May*.

Mundelein, IL: 1-15.

Emlyn-Jones, C. 1986. "True and Lying Tales in the *Odyssey*." *G&R* 33: 1-10.

Murnaghan, S. 1987. *Disguise and Recognition in the Odyssey*. Princeton.

Pratt, L. 1993. *Lying and Poetry from Homer to Pindar: Falsehood and Deception in Archaic Greek Poetics*. Ann Arbor.

Reece, S. 1994. "The Cretan *Odyssey*: A Lie Truer Than Truth." *AJP* 115: 157-73.

Richardson, S. 1996. "Truth in the Tales of the *Odyssey*." *Mnemosyne* 49: 393-402.

Trahman, C.R. 1952. "Odysseus' Lies (*Odyssey*, Books 13-19)." *Phoenix* 6: 31-43

Walcot, P. 1977. "Odysseus and the Art of Lying." *Ancient Society* 8: 1-19.