

EPITHETS IN HOMER'S ODYSSEY

Epithets are a characteristic of oral poetry and Epic style. Proper names of people and places, ordinary nouns (such as 'ships', 'sea' 'sheep' 'oil' 'cities') have an adjective or adjectival phrase which precedes or follows each.

The numbers given with examples refer to the line number in the E V Rieu translation of the Odyssey updated by D C H Rieu.

1. DIFFERENT TYPES OF EPITHET

When describing a person, an epithet may indicate:

- a) Origin / Home "Penelope, the gracious daughter of Icarus" (1.328) or "Odysseus, Laertes' son, whose home is in Ithaca" (4.555).
- b) Patronymic "Eurymachus, son of Polybus (1.399)
- c) Appearance/State "auburn-haired Menelaus"(4.332), "Nausicaa of the white arms" (6.101)
- d) Skill/Art "Odysseus of the nimble wits" (13.383)
- e) Position "Eumaeus, the swineherd" (14.165), "the mighty king Alcinous" (7.167)
- f) Heroic quality / General "shrewd Odysseus" (7.207), "illustrious Menelaus" (4.02), "sensible Telemachus" (1.411)

* List attached showing epithets used for gods and goddesses and main characters. *

2. IMPORTANCE OF EPITHETS

A. Characterisation. Epithets identify individuals and give the audience an opportunity to recognise their favourites.

B. Realism. They appeal to the experience of the audience because of their familiarity with known folk-heroes, places, skills, objects, etc.

C. Colour and vividness in the narrative. They make it possible to visualise what is mentioned. In a long narrative, such as an epic poem, variation and detail must be introduced often to avoid tediousness, especially when there is a main theme in a section of the poem eg sea-travel, feasting, fighting. This is particularly important in the Iliad where so many scenes revolve around combat.

D. Formula is made by combination of name plus epithet.

a) This acts as a mnemonic for the bard (*aoidos*) who is using oral tradition in telling folk tales learnt by heart, though he may also be able to improvise in order to construct a connected narrative while using these blocks of material **which fit exactly into the rigid metrical structure**. A formula may fill a whole line or a half of one.

b) This formula is a traditional and conventional element in epic - entirely appropriate to the heroic subject-matter and therefore a recognisable quality of the song for the audience.

c) Type (f) - the general epithet which is purely ornamental - will often thus be used without specific relevance to the context and even Types (c) and (d) will be used without particular appropriateness or even to the extent of being contradictory: e.g. p.117 'Aphrodite, smiling goddess'- when she is actually wounded and weeping. Think of this as like describing a Ferrari as "a fast car", even when it is parked!

d) The frequent repetition of the formulae has something of the same effect as rhyme might have in more modern verse: they are obviously rhythmical, keep up the momentum of the verse and endow the narrative with a kind of poetic quality. All epithets can be either **ornamental** (purely there for poetic effect and not necessarily relevant to the specific situation the character finds themselves in) or **particular** (chosen for their appropriateness in the situation being described.)

3. EPITHETS FOR FAMILIAR OBJECTS

These stimulate the imagination, as poetry should, and assist visual recognition as well as providing colour and detail. N.B. Similes have the same effect and there are more of these in the 'Iliad' than in the 'Odyssey'. (This may be explained partly by the fact that there is more variety of action and direct speech in the 'Odyssey', whereas the 'Iliad' needs the stimulus provided by a simile.)

Epithets are useful to the narrative of both poems. e.g. long-shadowed spear, dear life, yearlings never touched by the goad, fertile land, broad streets, sounding sea, swift horses, black/benched/beaked/balanced ships, useless burden. These examples can be found throughout and, while they add poetic effect (Ornamental type), they do not necessarily have any particular importance in the context.

There are also blocks of lines which recur like the half-line formulae of epithet plus noun. These usually describe common actions such as harnessing horses, offering a sacrifice, etc. It has been suggested that the use of such formulae indicates less skill on the part of the poet / bard. This is not entirely the case. It does indicate a different method of composing a poem and one which is appropriate to the age of oral poetry and long, ballad-type poems. It is clear from internal evidence (ie that found within epic poems) that bards were much respected and thought to be divinely inspired. cf. Demodocus Od. 8.487 ff. 'Homer' must have drawn on a long tradition of oral poetry and folk-tales, but his choice of central theme and the relation of the parts to the whole the wonderful craftsmanship following the artistic inspiration is a masterpiece.

The Homeric poems influenced all later epic and other poetry too, became the first flowering of Western literature and the basic element in the education of following generations. What is more, they provided religious and moral precepts in a developing society. The shadowy figure of Homer was revered by all later scholars, as if he was one of the gods about whom he wrote.

Epithets for Gods and Goddesses in the Odyssey

NB: Where examples are given they are by no means the only times these epithets are used!

Aphrodite - golden

Athene - the goddess of the flashing eyes 1.45, 1.180 3.13; bright-eyed 1.80, 3.25, Daughter of the mighty Father 1.101, grey-eyed 21.02

Dawn - fresh and rosy-fingered 2.02, 8.01, 13.17, 17.02

Hermes - the keen-sighted slayer of Argus 1.39; the Messenger 12.390; son of Zeus

Persephone - daughter of Zeus; dread; august

Poseidon - Lord of the Earthquake 3.06; earth-shaker; dark-haired god; powerful lord; Sustainer of the earth 3.55

Zeus - the Thunderer 5.03; son of Kronos; far-seeing; Father 5.06; the cloud-gatherer 1.64; who holds the aegis 3.41; father; the father of men and gods 1.28

Epithets for men and women in the Odyssey

Agamemnon - wide-ruling; lord of men 74; godlike 101; glorious son of Atreus 53

Menelaus - master of the war-cry; glorious; excellent; fair-haired; warrior; auburn-haired 1.285; son of Atreus

Nestor - excellent 1.245;

Odysseus wise and unlucky 1.48; admirable 1.65; wise 1.82; patient 1.88, 1.128; son of Laertes; good 1.196; resourceful; nimble-witted; godlike; sacker of cities; much-enduring; gallant; stalwart; loved of Zeus; famed

Orestes - Agamemnon's far-famed son 1.30

Penelope - wise; queen; flawless; richly-dowered; prudent; Ikarius' daughter; constant; loyal.

Telemachus godlike youth 1.114; courteous 2.14, 2.30; thoughtful 1.307; prudent 1.345; sensible

Suitors insolent 1.106

Epithets for things and places in the Odyssey

Jostling sheep 1.93; shambling cattle with twisted horns 1.94; Sandy Pylos 1.94; The wine-dark sea 1.184; Hollow ships 1.210; Rocky Ithaca 1.246; Wooded Zacynthos 1.246

There are many more examples of epithets in the Odyssey - add your own to this document and learn about why they are so common in epic, the effect they have for the listener or reader.