

ULYSSES THE GOOD?
WHAT IS THE FORMULA AT OD.
2.71, 3.98, 4.328?¹

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Oral theory taught us that a proper name in Homer occurs with a given adjective largely because the metrical situation requires it. Perhaps the decisiveness of this as a general insight has kept us from a fully satisfactory, detailed account of the epithets of even one Homeric god or hero. This applies even to Odysseus, whose epithets are the most numerous and in my view the most interesting, and in spite of the detailed studies of Parry (who compared Odysseus with Achilles in the most common metrical positions), Pope, and Whallon.² While the last named allows an element of poetic choice in the joining of names with epithets, at least respecting the character of the hero in question, he may underestimate the importance of context, and on one minor point he perpetuates an error which has long needed correction. This concerns the epithet *esthlos*, commonly listed as Odysseus'³ and emphasized by Parry, Pope, and Hainsworth as his exclusively.⁴

One's difficulty with *esthlos Odysseus* begins with a sort of Platonic problem: being good at something is somewhat clear, but what is it to be, simply, good? Is Homer willing to use the adjective of commendation

¹ A version of this paper was read at the APA annual meeting, December 29, 1973.

² Milman Parry, *L'Épithète traditionnelle* (Paris 1928), now in *The Making of Homeric Verse* (Oxford 1971) 95-96; M. W. M. Pope, "Athena's Development in Homeric Epic," *AJP* 81 (1960) 129-35; William Whallon, *Formula, Character and Context* (Cambridge, Mass., 1969) 87-92.

³ See Parry (above, note 2) 39 and often elsewhere; Pope (above, note 2) 129; Whallon (above, note 2) 87; Cunliffe, *Homeric Proper and Place Names* (London 1931) and Ebeling, *Lexicon homerium* (Leipzig 1885), s.v. Odysseus.

⁴ Parry (above, note 2) 92 in a table of exclusive epithets which should include Odysseus as *polyainos* and *polymêchanos*, Pope (above, note 2) 129, J. B. Hainsworth, *The Flexibility of the Homeric Formula* (Oxford 1968) 10-11 and note.

as a title the way Adkins, with apologies, does?⁵ *Esthlos* is used with no other personal name, though it appears (contrary to what Parry and others seem to suggest)⁶ with patronymics three times in the *Iliad*.⁷ *Agathos* is used for Diomedes and Menelaus once each (*Il.* 10.559, 4.181), but these are respectively 21 and 25 times (including Menelaus' appearances in the *Odyssey*)⁸ called *boén agathos(n)* and it would be unwise to take the short form very seriously. Perhaps the three places where Odysseus is *esthlos Odysseus* show him as good in some special capacity rather than as Homer's archetype of the good man.

The three passages are in the Telemachy. In the first (*Od.* 2.40–79, Telemachus' speech in the assembly at Ithaca) the young man has claimed that two evils justify his speaking: τὸ μὲν πατέρ' ἐσθλὸν ἀπώλεσα (46)—“first, I have lost my good father”—and worse, the suitors are about to eat him out of house and home. He begs (λίσσομαι, 68) the people in the name of Zeus and Themis:

σχέσθε, φίλοι, καί μ' οἶον ἔασατε πένθει λυγρῷ
τείρεσθ', εἰ μὴ ποῦ τι πατήρ ἐμὸς ἐσθλὸς Ὀδυσσεὺς
δυσμενέων κάκ' ἔρεξεν ἐϋκνήμιδας Ἀχαιούς. . . .

“Hold off, friends, and leave me alone with my
distress—unless my good father Odysseus somehow
has knowingly injured the Achaeans. . . .” (70–72)

The second and third passages are part of a ten-line formula of, again, supplication which Telemachus uses to ask information first of Nestor (3.92–101), then of Menelaus (4.322–31). The phrase is a positive version of the one just quoted (3.98–99 = 4.328–29):

λίσσομαι, εἴ ποτέ τοί τι πατήρ ἐμὸς ἐσθλὸς Ὀδυσσεὺς
ἦ ἔπος ἢ τι ἔργον ὑποστὰς ἐξετέλεσσε. . . .

“I ask, if ever my good father Odysseus fulfilled a promise to you in word or deed. . . .”

We are clearly dealing here with Odysseus as *esthlos* only *qua* Telemachus' father. The accusative *pater' esthlon*, which precedes 2.71 by

⁵ A. W. H. Adkins, *From the Many to the One* (Ithaca 1970) 28–29.

⁶ Above, note 4.

⁷ Each time the formula begins a line in enjambment with a preceding mention of the man's name: Μύδωνα . . . / ἐσθλὸν Ἀτρυμνιάδην at *Il.* 5.580–81, Ἴτυμονῆα / ἐσθλὸν Ὑπειροχίδην at *Il.* 11.672–73, and Ἰφιδίωνα, / ἐσθλὸν Ὀτρυντεΐδην at *Il.* 20.382–83.

⁸ Counting examples in Schmidt, *Parallel-Homer* (1885, repr. Göttingen 1965).

25 lines in the same speech, turns up three other times in Telemachus' dealings with the problem of his father's absence (*Od.* 1.115, 3.379, 16.214) and is used also of Autolycus (*Od.* 19.395) and Laertes (*Od.* 23.360), always before a caesura at the third trochee. The nominative *patēr emos esthlos Odysseus*, a metrical doublet of the very common *polytlas dios Odysseus*, ought to be read as an expanded and modified form of *pater' esthlon*, created for very specific contexts in one section of one poem.

Our certainty that in fact *esthlos* is only an epithet of *patēr*, and *patēr emos esthlos* the real epithet of Odysseus, in these passages, is increased if we inspect Penelope's phrase *πόσιν ἐσθλὸν ἀπώλεσα* (*Od.* 4.724 = 814), which is metrically the same, and in the same position, as Telemachus' *πατέρ' ἐσθλὸν ἀπώλεσα*. Other terms of relationship connected with *esthlos* are *pêos* (*gambros* or *pentheros*) at *Od.* 11.582, cousin at *Il.* 10.519 and 16.573, and sons in a sinister passage at *Il.* 23.175 and 181. The three patronymics mentioned above belong with these cases: Mydon the "good son" of Atymnios (*Il.* 5.581), Itymoneus of Hypeirochos (11.673), Iphition of Otrynteus (20.383). There is a continuum of meanings from the vague reinforcement of the idea "one's own" inherent in the term of relationship (cf. similar uses of *philos* and *eüs*)⁹ to the ethical use one tends to expect.¹⁰

Two slight corrections to established ways follow from all this. In the first place, the phrase (by itself) *esthlos Odysseus* ought to disappear from oral theory. Its function was to be a vowel-initial alternative to the very common *dios Odysseus* just as *ôkys* serves for Achilles. Whallon apologizes for it in this connection: if there were only two suitable trochaic adjectives "the greater right of Achilles to be *ôkys* leaves Odysseus with *esthlos*. In this instance the poet was not brilliant, but his choice may well have been the best available."¹¹ But, since *esthlos Odysseus* does not in fact exist in the way *dios Odysseus* or *ôkys Achilleus* does, we need not assume that the poet felt any pressure to provide such an expression for the sake of formulaic scope or

⁹ See *LSJ* s.v. *esthlos*, I.3.

¹⁰ Cf. Penelope's repetition of *esthlon* at *Od.* 4.726 = 816, in enjambment two lines after her *posin esthlon* phrase quoted above, and immediately after an evocation of Odysseus' manifold excellences.

¹¹ Whallon (above, note 2) 112.

whatever. Achilles is easily sometimes *δkys* because he is often *podas δkys*, but the poet has no trouble keeping Odysseus out of contexts which would require an analogous expression for him. This observation suggests that, however onerous it may be, we ought in general to read the contexts and not be content to deal statistically with items like "*esthlos* 0 + 3."

The second correction is in the punctuation of our texts. Allen's OCT has commas before *esthlos Odysseus* at 3.98 and 4.328, while Stanford's Macmillan red has one only at 3.98; both texts thus suggest, though inconsistently, the division of the phrase we have just rejected. Of older texts Ludwich and Van Leeuwen are consistently wrong with commas in all three lines, but Ameis-Hentze, Dindorf-Hentze, and Nauck are surely right never to divide the phrase.¹² Translators have compounded these errors: we should follow Rieu's "my good father, Odysseus" in all three lines (or perhaps Fitzgerald's "my father" and—with no emphasis on "noble"—"my noble father"), rather than Butcher-Lang's "the good Odysseus," "noble Odysseus," Butler's "my brave father," Cook's "my noble father Odysseus," "my father noble Odysseus," "my father, noble Odysseus," Lattimore's "my noble father Odysseus," "noble Odysseus, my father," Rouse's "my father Odysseus, my good father," "my father, the noble Odysseus," "my father, your faithful friend," or Lawrence of Arabia's poignant "the father who was so good to me," "my father, noble Odysseus," "excellent Odysseus, my father."¹³ This last tedious group of examples shows clearly the difficulty Parry noted¹⁴ in even beginning to translate the detail of formulaic poetry into modern literary language.

¹² The editions cited are those of T. W. Allen (Oxford 1917²), W. B. Stanford (London 1964²)—who follows Allen in joining *εἴποτε*, though not in the punctuation, at 4.328, making that line look oddly different from 3.98, which it exactly repeats, A. Ludwich (Oxford 1889), J. Van Leeuwen (Leipzig 1917), C. F. Ameis rev. by C. Hentze (Leipzig 1900¹¹), W. Dindorf rev. by C. Hentze (Leipzig 1902⁵), and A. Nauck (Berlin 1877).

¹³ The translations cited are those of E. V. Rieu (Harmondsworth 1945), Robert Fitzgerald (Garden City 1961), S. H. Butcher and A. Lang (Modern Library, New York 1950), Samuel Butler (London 1900), Albert Cook (New York 1967)—the variety of whose translations here belies his "literalist" preface, Richmond Lattimore (New York 1967), W. H. D. Rouse (New York 1937), and T. E. "Shaw" (New York 1932).

¹⁴ (Above, note 2) 171–72.