

§2. Agamemnon

Thou, with the face of a hound and the heart of a hind, wine-laden . . .
 – Achilles to Agamemnon, *Iliad* 1:225

Yes, he comes off badly in that encounter with Achilles. But in his own aristeia, Id 11:1283, Agamemnon is the ideal warrior.

Let's take a look at it. Are there interpolations? The Alexandrian critics marked for deletion ("athetized") twelve lines,¹ but this may have been only an exercise of taste. On the merits, we find only six likely interpolations:

- 20-23, "the gift of Cinyras of Cyprus." Cyprus was not known to the Greeks until later, when its religion was converted to the cult of Aphrodite. Not elsewhere in *Iliad*; in *Odyssey* at 4:83, 8:363, 17:442 and 448.
- 163-164. Zeus pulls Hector out of the battle, contradicting his later sending Iris to tell Hector to withdraw (181-213). Probably a late anticipation.

Fixing a Song. A song might be varied,² but a singer could also preserve any one version, if he had reason to. Repetition is easier than improvisation.³

What could fix *one* oral version within a performing tradition? A singer's response to an *audience's* response may be a factor. If something went well, it might well be repeated, and in that way become fixed *within the tradition*.⁴ How might that fixity spread beyond one bard? In contact with other bards.⁵ Market meetings are likely to have been present from the earliest Ionian days.

These songs were shaped by bards the one we here call Xenos ("Stranger"). He had his language organized at his fingers' ends, and was ready at the drop of a dinner plate to tell tales of Troy. An episode which succeeded especially well would tend to become fixed in his repertoire, and transmitted to others, in the course of normal festival give and take between professionals. This is how we see the tradition growing at first: by the multiplication of pieces of modest length (this one runs 28 minutes), in several variants, some of them still fluid and some of them fixed in that bard's repertoire.

Now comes our sample, an old piece seemingly preserved almost intact.

¹Lines 13-14, 22, 41, 78-83, and 179-180; see Bolling *Ilias*.

²See p15.

³Bach, the greatest improviser of his day, sometimes drew on earlier works in writing his cantatas, eg *Erfreut euch, ihr Herzen* (1724) < *Der Himmel dacht* (1718).

⁴Bach did not transcribe his improvisations, but he could recall them. The ricercars of the *Musical Offering*, which as printed bear the marks of improvisation, had been improvised for Frederick the Great (Potsdam, 7 May 1747), and could not without disrespect be published otherwise than exactly as rendered on that occasion.

⁵One bard: "I loved your Diomedes. But you should hear Xenos' Agamemnon. Terrific. That's him over there." The other bard: "Call him over. I'll pay for drinks."

The Reconstructed Aristeia of Agamemnon

001 Dawn, from her couch by the side of lordly Tithonos,
002 now did arise, bringing light alike to gods and to mortals.

Now the immediate scene, the ships drawn up on the beach:

003 Zeus meanwhile sent forth to the swift-faring Achaean galleys
004 wearisome Eris, who held in her hands the signal for battle.
005 Coming, she stood on the black and deep-hulled ship of Odysseus,
006 there in the midst, that her call might carry in either direction,
007 this way, e'en to the barracks of great Telemonian Aias;
008 that, unto those of Achilles; these had drawn up their trim ships
009 thus at the ends; they relied on their own strong hands and their valor.
010 There then standing, the goddess with loud voice, shrill and terrific,
011 shouted and set in his heart – each one, those sons of Achaia –
012 measureless might unto battle and warfare unintermittent . . .
013 Forthwith war became sweeter by far unto them than returning
014 home in the hollow ships to the well-loved land of their fathers

A warlike atmosphere has been created, and now we come to Agamemnon.

015 Then Atrides shouted and ordered the Argives to arm them,
016 While he himself put on him his armor of bronze all refulgent.
017 First on his legs he fastened his greaves all round about deftly,
018 beautiful: fitted with buckles of silver and firm at the ankles.
019 Next then donned him a corselet, engirdling his breast all about him.⁶
024 Ten were the stripes of cyanus dark, well-wrought on the breastplate,
025 twice six also of gold thereon, and of tin there were twenty.
026 Dark blue also the dragons that writhed up there on the collar,
027 three on a side; they were like unto rainbows set of Cronion
028 high on a cloud, for a sign unto earth-born, perishing mortals.
029 Next, then, over his shoulders he slung his sword, and refulgent
030 glimmered its golden rivets; while of silver itself was the scabbard
031 round and about it, with hangers well fitted, all of them golden.
032 Then he took up his shield, rich-wrought, for defense or for onset,
033 beautiful: ten were the circles that ran all bronzen around it.

Beautiful indeed, sigh the robbers; they are connoisseurs as well as practitioners.

034 Bosses there were, all fashioned of tin, full twenty in number,
035 white, though the one in the middle was molded of cyanus, dark blue.
036 Thereon was also the Gorgon embossed, ferocious of visage,
037 glow'ring terrific; about her on both sides were Panic and Terror.
038 Down from the shield hung fastened a baldric of silver, and on it
039 coiled up in dark blue metal, a dragon; upon him were triple
040 heads turned different ways, and all from the same neck sprouting.
041 Next, on his head he set his two-ridged helmet, with bosses
042 fourfold, horsehair-plumed, and the crest waved dreadful above it.

Done with the armor; now for the arms.

043 Two long lances he grasped, well-shodden with bronze, keen-sharpened,
044 out from the lances the bronze shot upward afar off a splendor
045 high unto Heaven. Queen Hera and Pallas Athena, the goddess,
046 thundered thereat, to honor the King of Golden Mycenae.

⁶Here is where the intrusive four lines about Cyprus have been removed.

Sigh. What wonderful weapons. Or, should fortune but favor, what wonderful plunder. The robbers are engrossed. Xenos picks up the tempo a little, to normal level.

047 Therewith each of the leaders committed his steeds to a driver,
 048 with instructions to hold them far back, by the trench, in good order,
 049 while they, meanwhile, dismounted and armed in their war gear,
 050 marched on ahead, and their cry unquenchable rose toward the dawning.

The singer hasn't a clue how chariot warfare worked, in ancient times, but neither does anybody else in his century, so he gets away with this silly "taxi" concept.

056 Over against them, the Trojans, on their side, stood on the rising
 057 ground of the plain, around tall Hector and grand Polydamas,
 058 with them, Aineias, esteemed in the land as a god by the Trojans,
 059 Antenor's three sons: Polybus first, then godlike Agenor,
 060 And third, young Akamas, like an immortal; these were the leaders.
 061 And Hector was there in the front, with his shield all evenly rounded.
 062 As out of the clouds, there gleams of a sudden the Evening Star⁷
 063 glittering bright, then it sinks once more in the clouds and the darkness,
 064 so, at one time, Hector would show himself in the front line,
 065 then in the rear giving orders, while he in his armor of bronze
 066 gleamed like the lightning of Father Zeus, who wieldeth the aegis.

The last time Xenos had done Agamemnon was in town on a market day; he continues with the same simile he had improvised then, for the farmers in that audience:

067 And then, like two lines of reapers, that over against one another
 068 drive, on opposite swaths, through the fields of a well-to-do owner,
 069 whether of barley or wheat, and the handfuls of grain fall frequent,
 070 even so, leaping against one another, Achaians and Trojans
 071 slew, and of ruinous flight nor the one nor the other was minded;
 072 rather, the fight kept even their heads, as they kept on charging.

Xenos notices that the reaper image made no special effect. He will vary his approach in the rest of this performance, substituting forest scenes. Here is the first:

073 like unto wolves. And beholding it, Eris, the woeful, was gladdened,
 074 she that alone of the gods still chanced to be by in the battle.
 075 none of the other Immortals were present among them, but seated
 076 far in their halls and at peace, where'er unto each was appointed
 077 a palace surpassingly fair in the dells of Olympus erected.

These personalized deities are not true Olympians, but dwell only on the lower slopes.

078 All [the gods] were blaming the son of Kronos, Zeus of the dark mists
 079 because his will was to give glory to the Trojans. To these gods
 080 the father gave no attention at all, but withdrawn from them
 081 and rejoicing in the pride of his strength, sat apart from the others
 082 looking out over the city of Troy and the ships of the Achaians,
 083 watching the flash of the bronze, and men killing and men killed.
 084 While it was still early morning, and daylight divine was advancing,
 085 missiles from both sides kept striking amain, and felling the people.
 086 But just at the hour when a woodman gets ready to pause for his dinner,
 087 deep in a mountainous glen, when the strength of his arms is expended
 088 in felling the high-grown trees, and weariness comes on his spirit,
 089 ay, and a longing for savory food lays hold on his feelings . . .

⁷Following West **Studies** 211.

The hearers chuckle at this sly reference to dinner; one of them passes Xenos the wine. He takes a swallow, and then resumes, picking up the tempo to battle level:

090 then the Danaians broke with their might the opposing battalions,
 091 calling aloud on their comrades, rank unto rank. Agamemnon
 092 rushed in first. And a hero, Bienor, shepherd of peoples,
 093 he slew; both him and his comrade Oileus, lasher of horses,
 094 who, springing down from his chariot, stood forth to face him.
 095 But him, in his furious onset, the keen lance full in the forehead
 096 pierced, and his vizor, though heavy with bronze, availed to repel it
 097 nowise; onward it drove through vizor and bone; it bespattered
 098 all of his brain within, and quelled him, for all of his fury.
 099 There he left both men lying, the monarch of men, Agamemnon,
 100 shining with chests left bare, for he stripped off even their tunics,
 101 and hastened away, bent on despoiling the children of Priam,
 102 Isus and Antiphus, this one legitimate, that one a bastard,
 103 riding one chariot, and the bastard son was the driver,
 104 and far-famed Antiphus fought at his side. Before this, Achilles
 105 had bound them on Ida's slope, with pliant withies of willow,
 106 minding their sheep he had caught them, but set both free for a ransom.

Xenos takes no chances that the audience don't know these background details.

107 But this time, Atreus' son, wide-ruling King Agamemnon,
 108 smote with his spear the breast of Isus, right over the nipple,
 109 Antiphus close by the ear he struck with the sword, and threw him
 110 down to the ground. In haste he stripped off their beautiful armor,
 111 which he knew well, for before at the swift-sailing ships he had watched
 112 that time when Achilles, the fleet of foot, had brought them from Ida

Time for another simile, and Xenos tries something new and violent.

113 Even as when, on the lair of a swift-footed deer, a lion
 114 alights, and seizing her fawns unguarded, he readily crushes
 115 them with his powerful teeth, and of life-breath robbeth the weaklings,
 116 she, however, though she might chance to be near, is unable
 117 to give them help, for trembling and terror have fallen upon her.
 118 Swiftly she bounds away, through thick-grown coppice and woodland,
 119 sweating and hastening far from the powerful wild beast's onset,
 120 likewise, then, not one of the Trojans availed to deliver
 121 these two from death; they were fleeing themselves, in fear of the Argives.

Frisson. Xenos notices that the lion bit has gone over well. The rest of his song will be peppered accordingly with lions.

122 Next on Pisander he fell, and Hippolochus, sturdy in battle,
 123 wise-heart Antimachus' sons, the same that was first in refusing
 124 (for glorious gifts he expected; rich gold from the Prince Alexander)
 125 ever to give Helen back to her fair-haired lord, Menelaos.
 126 His were the sons now taken, the twain, by Lord Agamemnon
 127 both in one chariot, trying to drive the fleet-footed horses
 128 since the glittering reins had slipped from their hands, and escaped;
 129 also, the horses were stricken with panic. Then, like to a lion . . .

Another lion, in passing. Only one who was completely master of his medium could work such things in so smoothly. He is not so much telling the tale as toying with it. H is enjoying the audience's engagement, and it moved to continue in that direction.

130 . . . darted Atrides against them, and up from above they implored him,
 131 “Take us prisoners, Atreus’ son, and receive a rich ransom.
 132 Many the treasures rich in the halls of Antimachus lying,
 133 many of gold, and of bronze, and of iron cunningly wrought,
 134 whereof our father would give thee a ransom beyond all telling,
 135 doubtless, if only he heard we were safe by the galleys Achaian.”
 136 Thus did the twain with tears address themselves to the monarch,
 137 pleading with piteous words, but the answer they heard held no pity:
 138 “If ye are truly the sons of the wise Antimachus, ye twain,
 139 he who one time in the Trojan assembly bade slay Menelaos,
 140 when as an envoy he came with Odysseus the godlike,
 141 nor would allow him return once more to the men of Achaia,

Again Xenos takes no chance that the connection may be unknown to his hearers.

142 verily, now you shall pay for the outrage foul of your father.”
 143 So saying, Pisander he thrust, from the chariot onto the ground
 144 smiting him full in the breast with his spear, and hurling him backward.
 145 Down leaped Hippolochos; him he felled to the earth and despoiled him,
 146 lopped with his sword his two arms, hewed off his head at the shoulders,
 147 and kicked it away, to go rolling off through the throng like a mortar.
 148 These he left lying. Then, where the squadrons were clashing the thickest,
 149 thither he rushed, and with him the rest of the well-greaved Achaians.

So much for individuals. Here comes the mass encounter.

150 Footmen were slaying footmen, necessity-driven before them.
 151 Horsemen were slaying horsemen (a cloud uprose from beneath them,
 152 dust from the plain, stirred up by the thunderous hoofs of the horses),
 153 Dealing them death with the bronze; and meantime Lord Agamemnon
 154 went on, ever slaying, giving commands to the Argives,
 155 even as falleth, devouring, a fire in the midst of a dense-grown
 156 woodland, spread all around by the wind meanwhile, and the thickets
 157 crumble away at the roots, assailed by the blast of the burning,

Another woodland image, and we note that even the woodland images are violent.

158 so then, before Agamemnon Atrides the heads of the Trojans
 159 fell, as they fled, while many a one of the strong-necked horses
 160 rattled along on the bridges of war, their chariots empty,
 161 yearning in vain for their faultless drivers – but they on the earth lay,
 162 lovelier far to the vultures, then, than to their own consorts.⁸
 165 Still Atrides followed in fury, and called on the Argives,
 166 well past the barrow of Dardanus’ scion, Ilus the ancient,
 167 through the midst of the plain, some were speeding past the wild fig-tree
 168 on, as they made for the city, and shrill-voiced, ever Atrides
 169 followed and ever with gore his hands unapproachable spattered.
 170 But now, when they had come to the Scaean gates and the oak-tree,
 171 there they came to a stand, and one another awaited.

The watchman sits down by the chief. “What’s this about?” “Agamemnon. You should have heard the part about the head.” Xenos, alert to this new element in the sensibility of his listeners, will presently oblige.

⁸Here is where the extra “removal of Hector” piece was inserted. See line 181.

172 Some through the midst of the plain were struggling in panic, as cattle,
 173 which in the dead of night a lion's coming hath scattered
 174 all, but to one cow cometh an instant, an utter, destruction:
 175 first, he seizes her neck with his powerful teeth, and he breaks it;
 176 next, he greedily gulps down the vitals and blood of his victim.
 177 So Agamemnon, the Lord Atrides, was pressing upon them,
 178 always slaying the rearmost – and they kept fleeing before them.
 179 Headlong fell from their cars full many, or prone or supinely,
 180 under Atrides' hands, for his spear raged round and about him.

This is the point at which the second, original, "removal of Hector" occurs. He is removed to give Agamemnon free scope for his aristeia.

181 But when he was about to come under the town, and the close-built
 182 wall of the city, just then the Father of men and immortals,
 183 faring from Heaven adown, took seat on the summit of Ida,
 184 Ida, the many-fountained; his hands were holding the lightning.
 185 Forth he was sending Iris, the golden of wing, with a message:
 186 "Hie thee away, fleet Iris, and speak this word unto Hector:
 187 Haply as long as he seeth the shepherd of hosts, Agamemnon,
 188 raging among the foremost, wide-wasting the ranks of the heroes,
 189 so long let him hold back, but order the rest of the people
 190 still to contend with the foe throughout the fury of combat.
 191 But when a javelin smites or an arrow wounds Agamemnon,
 192 soon as he leaps on his car, anon I will grant unto Hector
 193 strength to slay, till he come to the well-beached ships, till in Ocean
 194 sinketh the sun, till cometh the hallowed darkness upon them."
 195 Thus spake he. Swift Iris, shod with the wind, disobeyed not;
 196 sped from the mountains of Ida on down into Ilium holy.
 197 Godlike Hector she found, that scion of wise-hearted Priam,
 198 standing at rest on his firm-framed war-car there with his horses.
 199 Close to his side came Iris the fleet-foot now, and addressed him:
 200 "Hector, scion of Priam, thou peer of Cronion in counsel!
 201 Zeus the Father, hath sent me to bear unto thee this message:
 202 'Haply, as long as thou seest the shepherd of hosts, Agamemnon,
 203 raging among the foremost, wide-wasting the ranks of the heroes,
 204 so long keep out of the fight, but order the rest of the people
 205 still to contend with the foe throughout the fury of combat.
 206 But when a javelin smites, or an arrow wounds, Agamemnon,
 207 soon as he leaps on his car, anon Zeus grants unto Hector
 208 strength to slay, till he come to the well-benched ships, till in Ocean
 209 sinketh the sun, till cometh the hallowed darkness upon them.'"

The singer takes time to predict what will happen, thus orienting the hearers, who need to hear it a second time, if they are to recall it, as the song goes by.

210 Thus she spoke, and departed, the fleet footed messenger goddess.
 211 Hector then leaped from his chariot, down to the earth in his armor,
 212 brandishing two sharp spears, and ranged everywhere through the army,
 213 rousing them up to the fight, and a battle-din dreadful awakened.
 214 So they were rallied, and stood and resisted again the Achaians,
 215 while upon their side also, the Argives made strong their battalions,
 216 setting their lines, they faced the foe. Then rushed Agamemnon
 217 forward the first, ahead of the vanguard, resolved to do battle.

A hush in the audience. Here is the climactic face-off. All is set for the final encounter. Xenos takes a pull of the wine, and pretends to search his memory for the next details:

218 Tell me now, ye Muses, who dwell in the halls of Olympus,
 219 who came forward the first, to oppose the King, Agamemnon?
 220 whether of Troy's own folk, or their allies of wide renown?
 221 He was Antenor's son, Iphidamas, goodly, majestic,
 222 who had been nurtured in Thracia, mother of flocks, and the fertile
 223 Kisseus nurtured him there in his home, when he was an infant,
 224 even Kisseus, the sire of his mother, the fair-faced Theano.
 225 Now, as the lad had attained to the measure of glorious manhood,
 226 there he thought to detain him and offered his daughter in wedlock.
 227 Yet when the tidings came, of the Argives, forth from his chamber
 228 Issued the bridegroom, leader of twelve beaked galleys that followed.
 229 These gallant ships he had left behind, at this time, in Percote,
 230 whence he had journeyed on foot, overland, to Ilium City.
 231 He it was, then, that encountered Atreus' son, Agamemnon.
 232 Now, as they came close up in the onrush, against one another,
 233 Atreus' son made a miss, and aside went glancing his spear,
 234 whereas Iphidamas smote on his waist, down under his corselet,
 235 putting behind his heavy hand all the weight of his body,
 236 nevertheless, he pierced not the war-belt, but long before
 237 that, upon reaching the silver, the point turned as if leaden.
 238 Grasping the spear in his hand, wide-sceptered King Agamemnon
 239 pulled it in rage toward himself, then wrenching it, like as a lion,
 240 out of his hand, he smote his neck with his sword, and unstrung him.
 241 Thus Iphidamas fell, and a slumber of bronze overcame him,
 242 piteous man, as he aided his countrymen, far from the wedded
 243 maiden, his bride, no pleasure of her yet known, though he'd given
 244 gifts in abundance, a hundred of oxen, and promised a thousand.
 245 Goats too, and also sheep, for he herded uncountable numbers.
 246 Then Agamemnon, the son of Atreus, stripped off his armor,
 247 and bearing the beautiful gear, went back through the throng of Achaians.

The tale cannot end here; the convention is that the hero must be stopped in his killings, and then exit; the usual thing is a wound, as a sufficient excuse for departure.

248 When now Koön beheld it – conspicuous peer among heroes,
 249 first-born son among all of Antenor's children – a grievous
 250 sorrow enveloped him, clouding his eyes, at the fall of his brother.
 251 Standing off to one side, he, unmarked of divine Agamemnon,
 252 smote him upon the arm with his spear, under the elbow,
 253 clean through the forearm went the point of the glittering spear.

The hearers gasp in sympathetic shock; is this the end? They are soon reassured:

254 Then did a shuddering seize on the monarch of men, Agamemnon,
 255 yet even so, he ceased not a whit from the battle and warfare,
 256 but rushed on Koön instead, with a spear that tempests had toughened
 257 Koön was eagerly dragging away by the foot his dead brother,
 258 son of his sire, while calling aloud on all of the bravest.
 259 Him, while dragging his dead through the tumult, under his bossy
 260 buckler he wounded with bronze-shod spear, and loosened his sinews.
 261 Over Iphidamas he stood, and hewed off the head of his brother.
 262 Thus did these sons of Antenor, subdued by the monarch Atrides,
 263 fill up their measure of Fate, and enter the mansion of Hades.

Another sensation, as the head trick works again. Now the bandit chief's wife joins the group to announce dinner. A gesture is due to her as hostess, and Xenos works one in:

264 Still Agamemnon kept ranging the ranks of the rest of the heroes,
 265 Wielding a sword or a spear, or a ponderous boulder for hurling,
 266 long as the blood welled warm, as it flowed from the wound in his arm.
 267 But as the wound waxed dry, and the blood no longer was flowing,
 268 sharp, penetrating pangs then assailed the mighty Atrides.
 269 even as keen as the shaft that smiteth a woman in travail,
 270 piercing; the Ilthylae, birth-pang goddesses, send it,
 271 daughters of Hera, that ever hold poignant pangs in their keeping,
 272 even so sharp was the pang that entered the soul of Atrides.

Time to be done with this; dinner is smelling good. Here comes the conclusion:

273 Then he sprang into his chariot, giving command to the driver,
 274 straightway to head for the hollow ships, for his heart was in anguish.
 275 Then with a ringing shout he called to the Danaan warriors,
 276 "Friends of mine, commanders, and counseling chiefs of the Argives,
 277 ye yourselves now must ward off, from the sea-faring galleys,
 278 the din of the desperate battle, for Zeus, the counselor, hath not
 279 suffered me here to make war the whole day long with the Trojans."
 280 Thus spake Atrides, and then the fair-maned horses the driver
 281 lashed toward the hollow ships, and they flew not unwillingly forward,
 282 Both their breasts foam-flecked, sprinkled with dust from beneath them,
 283 stirred up as they bore the King sore-smitten, away from the fighting.

Applause, and approving slaps on the back for Xenos. These are rough men, who know what it is to end the day's work with a wound. Time now for dinner, and Xenos has fended off hunger for one more day. The evening has been a success. This version of Agamemnon, unlike the others he has sung and forgotten, he will keep for the future, with all its spontaneous adjustments to the mood of this moment.

Retrospect

There it is. And how like is it, to the longer pieces we will encounter in the next chapter? In a word, *very* like. They share these features:

- interfering gods,
- invocations of the Muses,
- long speeches,
- extended similes, all of them suitable to the situation,
- a few epithets like "fleet-footed," always applied meaningfully,
- wounds, described in almost as gory detail, and of course
- chariots, just as stupidly misused (p16). Nobody has a clue.

The technique as we see it in this piece is thus much as it would be later on. The differences will be largely differences of scale, not narrative devices.

So far, we have seen two ways an incident might be presented: compressed to about 12 minutes as a banquet interlude (§1), or full length, as here. Later, singers will learn to *put such pieces together* into a larger presentation module. You cannot preface dinner with something interminable, or call together a concert audience and then send them home again after only 28 minutes or so.

The next chapter will show that next step in the evolution of the tradition..