

§27. Epithets

Since in the depths of his heart he remembered the blameless Aegisthus.

– *Odyssey 1:29*

In this chapter and the next two, we take up aspects of Homeric repetition.

The Homeric poems feature repeated epithets, some of which occur in seemingly incongruous contexts. Why incongruous? Have they no meaning? Or can they be interpreted so as to avoid the incongruity? This issue came up in the Seventies, the epithet being *amumon*, conventionally “blameless,” but in *Odyssey 1:29* applied to the hateful Aegisthus. It was proposed to construe “blameless,” as “handsome,” which at least implies no moral qualities. Another view was that these epithets convey no meaning at all; the supposed problem is actually a non-problem.¹ Before going further, let us consider all the *Odyssey* occurrences² of *ἀμύμονος* before or after a name or other personal referent.

1:26	Aegisthus ἀμύμονος
2:225	Odysseus ἀμύμονος
4:4	[daughter] ἀμύμονος
4:187	ἀμύμονος Antilochus
7:29	[father] ἀμύμονος
8:118	ἀμύμονος Alkinoös
8:419	ἀμύμονος Alkinoös
11:236	Salmoneus ³ ἀμύμονος
11:468 = 24:16	Patroclus and ἀμύμονος Antilochus
11:494	Peleus ἀμύμονος
11:505	Peleus ἀμύμονος
11:553	Aias, son of Telemon ἀμύμονος
14:159 = 17:156 = 19:304 = 20:231	Odysseus ἀμύμονος
16:100	Odysseus ἀμύμονος
19:109	[Basileus] ἀμύμονος
19:456	Odysseus ἀμύμονος
20:209	Odysseus ἀμύμονος
21:99	Odysseus ἀμύμονος
21:325	ἀμύμονος [man]

These examples do not seem to be unintelligible. On the contrary, *ἀμύμονος* here has a certain semantic range: persons of status or positions of respect. “Blameless” might be ill-chosen as a translation; perhaps “faultless” is better, or, as referring to rulers and others entitled to deference, “excellent.”⁴

¹Insiders will find it amusing that the opponents here were [Anne Amory] Parry and [Albert Bates] Lord. See Parry **Homer** (1971) and Parry **Blameless** (1973).

²The word does not occur in the *Iliad*.

³Father of Tyro, “gloriously descended.”

⁴Combella [rev Parry **Blameless**] suggests “honorable.”

We might also consider cases where the association of ἀμύμονος is not a person at all. The instances are these:

22:442	wall
22:449	courtyard
23:145	dance

Then ἀμύμονος may apply to anything well-constructed or well-executed, which would still be within the semantic range of “excellent,” but often outside that of “handsome” – a merely personal quality, not one which applies more specifically to persons of rank and respect, or constructions apt and admirable.

It seems that ἀμύμονος is applied to anyone of rank and respect, whether or not those people are otherwise estimable. For purposes of Od 1, Aegisthus is such a person;⁵ so important that the very gods attempt to dissuade him:

Fully he knew of the doom that impended, for this we foretold him,
sending him Hermes, the keen-eyed slayer of Argus, to warn him . . .

So ἀμύμονος is not at all without meaning; it is used by no means at random, but its occurrences may not always be agreeable to any reader’s ethical feelings. Such jarring notes we must simply accept as part of the cost of reading Homer.

How might such clichés arise? Clichés arise whenever a phrase or remark is found useful: “Dear Sir” (in addressing superiors; compare ἀμύμονος), or “cut-and-dried,” or “proof of the pudding.” In poetry, there is also metrical usefulness; whatever fits part of a hexameter line will tend to become standard, as part of the inherited style of that kind of discourse or poetic presentation. Such convenient and thus (in the course of time) simply customary locutions are what we might, if we chose, defensibly call “formulas.”

There is a further consideration, not yet pointed out so far as we know. This is the limit on information transfer to the listener. A *singer* can go fast or slow, but the practical upper limit on speed is the ability of the *listener* to follow.⁶ Fixed phrases are the boilerplate of the style, things the singer need not worry about. But the listener also welcomes those empty bits, and for the same reason. The master stratagem, for anyone putting together a viable performance text, is probably the simple guideline, “not too much, not too fast.”

⁵For Aeschylus, at least, Aegisthus was a son of Thyestes (the brother of Atreus), and so equal in ancestry to Agamemnon himself. Myths of the rivalry of brothers are ubiquitous, especially when the brothers are of different character. In Od 3:310, Aegisthus is called “unwarlike,” while Agamemnon (see §2) is famed for warlikeness. For other such mythic pairs, consider Jacob and Esau, or Adonijah and Solomon.

⁶So can a pianist, but not always with good results. Said Horowitz to Simon Barère, “Simon, you play the [Schumann] Toccata a little bit too fast.” Answered Barère, “Oh, I can play it even faster!” (Dubal 203). But when played too fast, the work simply blurs on the listener, who indeed hears the *notes*, but cannot take in the *music* at that rate.