

Putting Odysseus on the Spot: Arete's Poetic Function in the *Odyssey*

“τίς πόθεν εἰς ἀνδρῶν . . .”—a simple enough question for most, but for Odysseus it is an opportunity to perform. This seemingly innocuous question (recurring seven times in the *Odyssey*) may appear unremarkable because of its obvious relation to the guest-host type-scene or its proximity to Odysseus' “lying tales,” both of which are discussed extensively in scholarship (Goldhill 1991, Reece 1993, de Jong 2001, Louden 1999, Fenik 1974). However, an unexplored and revealing perspective on this question is available if viewed in light of 1) its metonymic value as an oral compositional marker within the *Odyssey* and 2) the force of the question when asked by significant women on islands. These considerations demonstrate the question to be integral to the narrative arc of the Odysseus' *nostos* and, in turn, highlight the role of the interrogator as audience to Odysseus' performance. In this light, Arete's reception of Odysseus becomes instrumental to Odysseus' *nostos*, similar to Penelope's own crucial reception of the *xenos*. When seen as a performance cue (rather than a simple greeting), the formulaic question positions Odysseus to tell a tale that must be appropriate to his audience, thus lending a great deal of agency to Arete as facilitator of Odysseus' successful return.

Previous scholarship on the formula “τίς πόθεν εἰς ἀνδρῶν . . .” treats this question as mundane or subordinates it within the recognition motif or the guest-host type-scene (Reece 1993, de Jong 2001). However, an examination of recent work on oral poetics (Foley 1999, 2002; Montanari et al. 2012) establishes why such a construction merits consideration as an encoded cue, thereby providing the unit an aesthetic force beyond its mere structural function. Particularly, John Miles Foley's methodology of *immanent art* elucidates how a single occurrence can resonate deeply beyond its literal meaning.

Further, Odysseus' so-called "lying tales"—which correlate *directly* to the recurrences of this question—must be reconsidered not in light of their relative truthfulness or falsehood (Emlyn-Jones 1986, Murnaghan 1987, Richardson 2006), but in relation to Odysseus' command as narrator and poet (Pucci 1998, Goldhill 1990). The resulting conclusion is that the "lying tales" are more than confirmations of Odysseus' masterful guile but rather moments of performance and reception that have a determining effect on the outcome of the narrative.

Hence, attention to both the reception of Odysseus' tales and the function of the formulaic question leads us to Arete. Although it is announced that Arete will play a significant role in Odysseus' journey (*Od.* 6.305-15, 7.66-77), commentators have been confused or disappointed by her apparent inaction (Heubeck et al. 1991, Katz 1991, Richardson 2006; cf. Fenik 1974). Irene de Jong (2006) notes that Arete's reception of Odysseus is related to her appearance, but an explicit connection between Arete and the traditional force of the formulaic question has yet to be highlighted. The simple observation is that Arete's interrogation of Odysseus invokes his first "truthful" admission of his name in addition to initiating the *apologue* of the *Odyssey*—arguably Odysseus' only sincere response to the question. In light of the question's metonymic force, Arete's then positive reception of Odysseus is the determining event of his return to Ithaca, not at all unlike Penelope's own decisive role in determining the success of Odysseus' *nostos* (Katz 1991, Foley 1999). This reading establishes Arete as centrally important to the *Odyssey* and highlights the powerful aesthetic function of oral poetics, confirming its ability to enhance our understanding of epic narrative.

References

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