The Rationale of Epithets and The Irrational of Patronymics

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Introduction

Epithets reveal the special abilities of a person or the significance of his emotions during a certain point in time. Epithets emphasize a particular character's violent capabilities or how strong he is in comparison to another within a battle scene. An example of this is when Homer adds the epithet “swift-footed” “πόδας ὄκυς” (1.215) to Achilles's name. This epithet shows that Achilles is stronger and faster than the person that he is up against. There are also points in the Iliad that lack epithets, Paolo Vivante addresses this in his book Epithets in Homeric Epic. He states that “they are absent in order to focus on the seriousness of a situation. The reader is not drawn to the details of characters but instead the situation itself” (15). Therefore the lack of epithets show a “bare” situation so that the details do not distract from the seriousness of the matter. Although, the epithets add wonderful detail, their absence allows a scene to be taken in with immediate force.

Another form of description in Homer's Iliad, are patronymics which show the lineage of a hero. They also tell how a hero came to be who he is. The Greek audience would understand the significance of his lineage and whether the character could trace it back to a god, goddess, or a king who performed mighty deeds that may or may not overshadow the son. If a hero had a powerful ancestry, such as Achilles, who was begotten by Peleus King of the Myrmidons and the goddess, Thetis, then he (Achilles) is respected by many because his father was a king who is loved by the gods and has performed many glorious deeds. Not only that but his mother was a goddess who also aids Achilles periodically throughout the Iliad. In other words, the parents and grandparents determine how a person is addressed in the poem and viewed by the audience.
I will illustrate the significance of Homer’s use of epithets in three specific episodes in the Iliad: the argument between Achilles and Agamemnon, the battle between Achilles and Hector, and Priam’s visit to Achilles’s tent. Homer employs epithets and patronymics in a way that reveals the attitude of the characters and emphasizes the importance of pivotal scenes within the poem.

**Epithets**

Epithets within Homeric epic assist the reader/listener with forming a character. This formation provides depth and a foundation of a character’s personality. This is important during significant scenes. Epithets show the expressions of a character and how they are identified during that event. This is to say that if the scene lacks epithets the main focus is on the event itself and the main dialogue between the characters instead of how each character is directly portrayed by the narrator.

S\cholars like Milman Parry believe that the only significance of the epithet is to fulfill a formulaic requirement without adding depth to the story itself. He states in his book, *The Making of Homeric Verse*, that “even the most sensitive member of Homer's original audience would not have noticed if the poet had changed this or that detail of this customary style; but this style, which he knew to be the poet's, and which he expected, was the aggregate of these details” (Parry 37 note 1). Parry believes that even a devoted listener who knew what to expect would only have noticed the epithets as part of the many other details that the poet gave which were meaningless details to the story and narrative as a whole. This assumes that the listener is not aware of the difference between a man who is “swift footed” from a man who is “nurtured by Zeus.” An individual who is listening to a story would be able to discern the details that the epithets give from one scene to another. These details that are illustrated by epithets “strike a delicate balance between the complexity of a thought and the outrightness[sic] of an impression, between the outline of the whole situation and the picture of a single object emerging in the field of vision.” (Vivante 99) This impression is shaped not only by the actions of the character, but by the details that the narrator reveals at different points in time. These details are
provided by “epithets [which] stress the concrete value of whatever they refer to” (Vivante 94). Epithets create a more physical image of a character that is not fulfilled any other way within the story. The details that epithets provide can be heard by a listener who would also note that these details are intrinsic to certain scenes.

Epithets emphasize a character's trait that is significant to moments within the story. Paolo Vivante stresses the importance of epithets by saying, “whether we use nouns with their adjectives or any figure of speech, what we do is to focus on a principle of identity” (4). A noun with its adjectives -- which in this case is a character's name plus the epithet-- describes an aspect of the character's identity.

**Lineage**

Another basis of a Homeric character is family relation. The lineage of a hero is significant to his reputation. The father was the head of household or ἤλος and “descent among the Greeks is reckoned patrilineally” as remarked by Walter Donlon in his article *Kin-Groups in the Homeric Epics* (33). An individual is identifiable by his father's name such as “son of Peleus” or “Πελείδης” another example would be “son of Atreus” or “Ἀτρείδης.” Oftentimes in the *Iliad* “to refer to someone simply by his father's name might indicate formality or the subject's youth or obscurity to his father's fame...” (Strauss 25). As I hope to show that the narrator regards a character by their name if they are being rational or the name of their father if they are acting irrationally. The son is obscured by their father's reputation if they are mentioned by only their father's name.

Achilles's lineage is the cause of his heroic turmoil because his mother is immortal but his father is not. The largest conflict within the *Iliad* is that Achilles must accept that he is mortal. Which is a direct result of his father's parentage. Although, he can choose a fate of “immortality” (i.e. being forever remembered) he must still die to achieve this fate. This tumultuous time for Achilles feeds directly into his anger. His rage can only be subdued when Achilles accepts that he is mortal. Until he
comes to accept it, he will be unable to fulfill his heroic duty of seizing Troy. According to Benardete and Burger in their book *Achilles and Hector: the Homeric Hero*, “[t]o ask [Achilles] who [he] is means to ask him his lineage; and as he can only define himself in terms of his past, were his ancestors unknown, he would be a non-entity” (Benardete 29). Part of Achilles' identity is his mixed-parentage and he must completely accept this before he is able to fulfill his heroic duty.

**Book I- The Argument Between Achilles and Agamemnon**

Achilles acquires the epithet “swift-footed” which Benardete and Burger quote “is the most obvious proof of Achilles’s power, so that even his eloquence seems based upon it. He assumes it first when he addresses Agamemnon[1.54-58]” (Benardete 48), but once the argument ensues Achilles is named only by his patronymic “son of Peleus” “Πηλείωνι” (Line 1.188). This illustrates Achilles irrationality towards Agamemnon during the argument, because Achilles is obscured through his father's name and can no longer be an individual with his own. However, when Achilles unsheathes his sword and prepares to kill Agamemnon, the goddess Athena intervenes.

Once Achilles sees Athena he is no longer called “son of Peleus” “Πελειόνα” (line 1.197) but “Achilles” “Ἀχιλέως” (line 1.199). He is no longer lost in his anger towards Agamemnon but in his wonderment and fascination at the arrival of the goddess, Athena. The shift from Achilles being the “son of Peleus” to “Achilles” when Athena arrives indicates a period of rationality for Achilles. It is a break in his anger because his actions are briefly directed toward the goddess instead of Agamemnon. Although Achilles obeys Athena's words and does not kill Agamemnon, when the goddess departs Achilles returns to his previously angered state that is directed at Agamemnon who he now attacks with “violent words” “ἀταρτηροίς ἐπέσσιν” (Line 1.223) because, “he did not cease from his wrath” (Murray Translation 29) “καὶ οὐ πῶ λῆψε χόλοιο” (line 1.224).

Later in the dialogue between Agamemnon and Achilles, Nestor from Pylos enters and
interrupts the argument. He addresses the individuals directly as “son of Atreus” “Ἀτρείδης” (line 1.282) and “son of Peleus” “Πηλείδης” (line 1.277). This type of address shows that both characters are acting irrationally about the situation. Nestor encourages the two to end their arguing. After Nestor's monologue the narrator returns Achilles's name to him as “noble Achilles” “δῖος Ἀχιλλεύς” (line 1.292) and Agamemnon's name is returned to him as “lord Agamemnon” “κρείων Ἀγαμέμνον” (1.285). This indicates a break in the characters' actions and their moods. This mood break is interrupted by another violent verbal exchange, Achilles resorts back to being called “son of Peleus” “Πηλείδης” (line 1.306) and Agamemnon goes back to being called the “son of Atreus” “Ἀτρείδης” (line 1.309). Both are obscured by their fathers' names because their actions are irrational and therefore they are not identified as individuals.

**Book XX and XXII- Battle Between Achilles and Hector**

In book twenty, Achilles is anger is further fueled by the death of Patroclus at the hands of Hector. Because of this, Achilles goes to fight the Trojans and enters battle with revenge in his mind. Before encountering Hector, Achilles battles Hector’s brother, Polydorus. Polydorus is described as “showing off his fleetness of foot” “ποδῶν ἀρετὴν ἀναφαίον” (20.411-2). While he was doing this, “swift-footed Divine Achilles hits the middle of his [Polydorus's] back with the javelin” “τὸν βάλε μέσον ἄκοντι ποδόκης δῖος Ἀχιλλεύς” (Murray Translation 397)(20.413-4). It shows that even though a full mortal is described as being “swift-footed” Achilles is still much swifter as indicated by the narrator. The combination of these epithets is evidence that overcomes the ability of Polydorus who lacks the partial immortal heritage that Achilles has.

Achilles's rage is at full force when he sees Hector. Achilles's spear is even “like a flame” “δόρῳ…Φλογή ἐκέλος” (20.420). Hector addresses Achilles as “son of Peleus” “Πηλείδης” (line 20.431) as if Achilles lacked identity beyond his father's name. Whereas the narrator calls him “glorious Achilles” “Ἀχιλλῆος… κυδαλίμωο” (20.439), “swift-footed, noble Achilles” “ποδάρκης δῖος
Ἀχιλλεύς” (20.445), and likens Achilles to a god “δαιμονίῳ ἰσος” (line 20.447). The reason that the narrator addresses Achilles by name is because Achilles is acting rationally by fighting Hector and the other Trojans because he is avenging the death of Patroclus. However, Achilles is referred to only by third person pronoun when he is dragging Hector’s body behind his chariot. Achilles is totally stripped of his identity through this irrational act where he does not even deserve the name of his father.

**Book XXIV- The Conversation Between Achilles and Priam**

Book twenty four is the dissolution of Achilles's rage. The beginning of the book clarifies the details of Achilles's heritage. The narrator describes Peleus as “dear to the hearts of immortals” “Πηλέι, ὃς περὶ κηρὶ φυλος γένει” (24.61) and goes on to tell how Zeus gave his daughter, Thetis, to Peleus as a wife. Then the narrator shares a discussion of the gods who send Thetis to convince Achilles to relinquish Hector's body.

When Priam manages to make it into Achilles's tent, he kneels before the great hero and kisses his “terrible, man-slaying hands that had slain his many sons” “χειρας δαινας ἀνδροφόνους αῖ οἱ πολέας κτάνων υἷς” (lines 24.478-9). Priam begins speaking to Achilles by pleading to him to “think of his father” “μνησαι πατρὸς σοιο” (24.286) and even calling Achilles “god like” “θεοῖς” (24.286). For Priam to tell Achilles to think of his father, juxtaposes calling Achilles “god like.” He is asking the hero to think of the half of him that is mortal. Even though Priam is not aware of it, he is also asking Achilles to accept his fate to die. A fate that is linked to his father, Peleus. Achilles through his grief for Patroclus, is “moved to tears for his father.”

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, epithets are an aspect of a character's identity whereas patronymics are the overshadowing image of the father. The character must earn their own identity by proving themselves through acting rationally and through glorious deeds. In the case of Achilles it is accepting his own fate.


