

Narrative Tradition In Early Greek Oral Poetry And Vase-Painting

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Archaic Athenian vase-painting of the sixth century BC exhibits visual narrative phenomena that are very similar to the verbal narrative patterns of traditional, orally composed poetry: in the poetry these are the familiar formulaic phrases and themes analyzed by Milman Parry and the ensuing train of oral theorists; in the art they take the form of repetitious iconography and recurrent compositional structures.¹ In the vase-paintings as in the poems the same question arises: do the repetitions have an aesthetic or signficatory function in the narrative context, or are they rather incidental and even impedimental to the process of reception? In his recent work on oral traditions, John Miles Foley (1991) has recognized the need to develop a new theory of reception for oral and oral-derived poetry, one that takes into specific account the peculiar characteristics of oral composition. It will be argued that this theory can usefully be applied also to the vase-paintings.

In regard to poetry, Foley has proceeded by seeking to define a question, the answer to which is constituted by the characteristics of oral composition. Starting from the premise that the repetitious noun-epithet formulas are signficatory rather than redundant, and accepting that their signfication cannot regularly be conferred by the context in which they are

¹ The ideas on which this paper is based were presented in embryo in my Inaugural Lecture at the University of Natal, September 1991 (Mackay 1993), and subsequently in a more developed form under the current title at the 27th AULLA Congress in Dunedin, February 1993. I acknowledge with gratitude financial support for the research underlying this paper from the Research Fund of the University of Natal. For their help in obtaining photographs I should also like to thank Joan Mertens, Katherine Ireland, Michael Vickers, and Dyfri Williams.

used, he has concluded that their reference is to the whole tradition in which any given oral performance is situated. He has coined the term “traditional referentiality” for a process whereby a formula such as πόδας ὠκύς Ἀχιλλεύς (“swift-footed Achilles”) in the oral-derived Homeric texts resonates with all the other occasions in the same tale and in others where a listener has heard it used, and so evokes from that listener’s own experience of this traditional material an awareness of the whole hero, in all the complexity of his many roles, immanent in the reference. It is important to realize that Foley is examining the phenomenon of oral composition and oral-derived composition *as it is situated in a tradition*, so that the written-literature distinction between text analysis and reception-aesthetics is inappropriate, and indeed inapplicable.

While Foley’s theory explains how formulaic phrases convey meaning, it is difficult for modern readers, immersed in more than two millennia of literary traditions, to experience a process of reception appropriate to an oral tradition. One may accept intellectually that reiteration of such personalized formulas as πολυμήχαν’ Ὀδυσσεύ (“resourceful Odysseus”), πολύμητις Ὀδύσσευς (“Odysseus of many counsels”), Ὀδυσσῆα πολύφρονα (“thoughtful Odysseus”), and of course πολύτλας Ὀδυσσεύς (“much-enduring Odysseus”) builds up a composite picture of the hero’s complex personal qualities—his endurance, intellect, and guile—as exemplified in the many instances where the epithets recur; and that epithets like δῖος (“godlike”) and μεγαλήτωρ (“great hearted”), used of a number of different heroes, seem to convey a more generalized sense of heroic stature. However, the echoic quality or resonance that Foley describes tends to elude those who are not active participants in the same oral tradition. The effect is perhaps easier to appreciate in a different medium, and it is therefore of particular significance for Homeric scholarship that in the narrative art produced in Greece in the archaic period (from c. 620 to c. 480 BC) there is a set of phenomena that manifests as similar to the traditional poetic elements, and that can be shown to work in a similar way.

Although the *floruit* for “Homer” customarily ranges from the ninth to the seventh century, it is likely, since the texts as we have them represent a continuing tradition crystallized at a given point, and since that point must be rather late (at a time when writing may be presumed to have been rather widespread), that the texts represent the state of the oral tradition at a date more or less contemporary with the rise of narrative art at the beginning of the archaic period. Thus it is probable that the narrative techniques developed by the vase-painters evolved from the techniques of what was

still a living oral tradition, at a time when oral methods of expression were regarded as the natural means of telling—or depicting—a story.

Although there is a high degree of uniformity in archaic narrative techniques in all the various visual media, the largest and most diverse body of evidence is provided by narrative vase-painting scenes (mainly Athenian), on which this study will therefore focus. It has long been recognized that Greek art exists in a tradition. In reference to the beginnings of the Athenian black-figure technique J. D. Beazley wrote (1951:12):

The typical and traditional element, indeed, now becomes very strong, and remains so throughout the history of black-figure. It is strong in Greek art as a whole. This has its drawbacks, but also great advantages: the blend of tradition and originality, of past and present, makes for health and power. Before the end of the seventh century, the elusive multiplicity of the visible world has been condensed into a few well-pondered, crystalline forms, which are adequate to express the main activities and attitudes of man and beast—standing, walking, running, sitting, reclining, riding, thrusting, throwing. This small world of forms is a nucleus capable of expansion and transformation; it is the foundation on which Greek art of the fifth century was based, and through it all Western art.

Virtually from the beginning, Greek painters representing human activity turned their attention to mythological subjects. By the end of the seventh century BC, they had established a traditional repertoire by which actions could be represented; there remained to be developed a consistent way of identifying figures in action as representing a given narrative situation, for narrative art depends upon the principle of identification. The early archaic artists had one means immediately at their disposal: they could select narrative situations of an unmistakable uniqueness. This probably accounts for the propensity for scenes involving violent death (particularly of mythological, hybrid creatures) on the earliest vases. As interest in narrative scenes spread in the first decades of the sixth century, however, a system began to evolve whereby the common mythological figures, and especially the deities, came to be associated with certain characteristic attributes; to take an obvious example, Athena wears the aegis, and is usually equipped with some or all of shield, helmet, and spear. Within a short time this system became an established tradition, sanctioning innovation only insofar as it might serve a useful purpose in the narrative context.

From the early days, then, there was a gradual, more or less parallel development of two different kinds of formulations: first, **formulaic**

attributes such as have just been briefly described, which serve to identify a given figure irrespective of the context, and second, **formulaic composition**, in which the poses and relative positions of the figures, in short the format of the scene, gradually became standardized and so came to signify a particular mythological or generic context. At the same time, marking the spread of literacy, some painters would inscribe names of important mythological figures; it is highly significant that these inscriptions did *not* in time come to replace iconographic or contextual identification, and so were by and large functionally redundant in the signification of a scene (although inscriptions do sometimes contribute aesthetically to the compositional structure). In fact, for many painters the inscriptions would appear to have been another kind of visual attribute. While these repetitive iconographic and compositional formulations seem to have developed initially out of the need for identification, it is clear that the signification soon went beyond mere stimulus of recognition, as there regularly tend, for instance, to be *more* iconographic elements included in a scene than would be strictly necessary for identification, especially when the composition of the scene is also formulaic.

The nature of the formulaic attribute in vase-painting will be discussed first, with reference to the development of iconographic imagery associated with Herakles. Thereafter the nature of formulaic composition will be examined through analysis of scenes featuring chariots, and the potential for interactive signification between attribute and scene-type will be presented: it will be argued that this is parallel to the interactive working of formulas and themes in orally composed (or oral-derived) poetry.

Formulas

One of the earliest appearances of Herakles on an Athenian vase is on a protoattic amphora from around the middle of the seventh century BC, attributed to the New York Nessos Painter; the main scene shows the hero with the centaur Nessos and with Deianeira (Plate 1).² Herakles is represented as bearded with long hair, wearing body-armor over a *chitoniskos* (short tunic), and wielding a sword against the errant centaur. He would be undistinguishable from any other warrior were it not for the unambiguous circumstances of the conflict—who but Herakles would

² New York 11.210.1. For discussion of this vase, see Morris 1984:65-68 and pl. 15.

advance upon a centaur in defense of a woman who meanwhile steadies his chariot horses?³



Plate 1: Herakles attacks Nessos. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art 11. 210.1. (Rogers Fund 1911) Photograph courtesy of museum.

By the end of the seventh century, Herakles is represented in the black-figure technique in essentially the same format (although the composition is different), but without the body-armor and with his and the centaur's names inscribed.⁴ By c. 580 BC, Herakles brandishes a club at

³ Perhaps evidence of an early tradition of Deianeira driving a chariot that is represented much later in literature by Apollodoros, *Bibl.* 1.viii.1.

⁴ On the name vase of the Nettos Painter, Athens 1002 (Beazley 1956 [hereafter *ABV*]:4,1): the painter takes his name from the inscription of the centaur's name, which in the Attic dialect replaces sigma with tau.

Nessos, one of the earliest occurrences in Attic black-figure of what was to become Herakles' characteristic weapon.⁵

Another narrative involving Herakles that occurs on early black-figure vases is the hero's struggle with Nereus, a marine deity in this period with a human head and upper torso merging into an elongated and undulating fishy tail. Here too the opponent is immediately identifiable, and perhaps because of this, the narrative emerges early as a fairly standardized composition, showing Herakles wrestling, half-observed, astride his opponent's scaly tail: this is a scene-type established at least as early as c. 590 BC,⁶ and continued by Sophilos, who introduces a quiver and scabbard and short, possibly curly hair,⁷ as also by the KX Painter, who includes a scabbard, curly hair, and possibly a quiver.⁸

⁵ On a lekythos attributed to the Deianeira Painter, in the Manner of the Gorgon Painter: London B 30 (*ABV* 11, 20).

⁶ The *floruit* of the Gorgon Painter's workshop. See for example the shoulder of a 'Deianeira' lekythos, Louvre CA 823 (*ABV* 12, 22), with Herakles bearded, long-haired and *chitoniskos*-clad but without weapon, and the fragmentary small amphora, Boston 88.827 (*ABV* 13, 45, discussed by Williams 1986:62-64), which preserves Herakles' right arm, left fingers, and (on a joining fragment, Reading, Ure Mus. 26.ii.76) what should be the back of his head. The *en brosse* hair style is unusual, and could perhaps imitate a Middle Corinthian way of rendering short, curly hair, as is exemplified on an aryballos in Basel BS 425 (*Amyx* 1988:180). A composition rather similar to both of these seems to have been used at about the same date on a Corinthian krater fragment in Basel, Cahn 1173 (*Amyx* 1988:pl. 138,1), the fight there attended by (?) a sea nymph.

⁷ On a well preserved column-krater, Athens Inv.12587 (*ABV* 40, 24), very similar in composition to Louvre CA 823 (see note 6 above), again showing Herakles in a *chitoniskos* and bearded, but with short hair with incised lateral lines (perhaps intended to represent curliness), and with a quiver and scabbard; the whole between a pair of bystanders on the left and Hermes (with *kerykeion* [herald's staff]) on the right. A hydria fragment attributed to Sophilos in the Maidstone (Kent) Museum and Art Gallery, preserving the head and arm of Nereus, and the *kerykeion* of Hermes on the right, probably derives from a similar composition (*Bakir* 1981:pl. 64/126).

⁸ Samos 2294 (*ABV* 25, 18), fragments of a hydria preserving most of Herakles and much of Nereus (both with names inscribed). Herakles' hair is represented as short, with an incised headband: across his forehead are incised open loops, and a similar effect is achieved with the brush around the contour of his head—the first Attic representation of which I am aware showing short curly hair for Herakles, although this scheme becomes virtually canonical in certain workshops by the middle of the sixth century. A scabbard with incised patterning juts at Herakles' waist, and a small, triangular black protrusion at his shoulder may perhaps be intended as a quiver.

It is clear from these examples that already, before c. 570 BC, Athenian painters representing Herakles were beginning to include certain features that were not standard for other mythological figures. The body-armor, which before the archaic period typified Herakles as a warrior,⁹ was omitted by the black-figure artists; the beard and *chitoniskos* were retained; the hair became generally short and curly; and although the sword (commonly represented by the scabbard) was retained, the quiver begins also to be incorporated into the scheme (initially without indication of the bow), as does the club.

The painters of the next generation introduce the lionskin, an innovation in Athenian painting that can be dated to soon after c. 570 BC. A splendidly incised image of Herakles wearing his lionskin with the head pulled, helmet-like, over his head appears on a Siana cup in the Manner of the C Painter, in a scene showing his entry to Olympus (Plate 2).¹⁰ It is significant that there is no other specific attribute clearly associated with this figure; the lionskin alone already seems to constitute adequate identification in a context that by no means aids the identificatory process. On “Tyrrhenian” amphorae Herakles is regularly identified by the lionskin, with or, more often, without other attributes. There is still some experimentation in this period, at least to the extent that Herakles does not always wear the lionskin’s head over his own;¹¹ however, a distinctive draping of the skin has become almost canonical, with the lion’s back down Herakles’ back, the sides wrapped around his sides to meet at his belted waist with the hind legs dangling by his thighs, and the front paws knotted

⁹ *LIMC* V,1:184; Brommer (1986:65-66) comments on this point in a succinct discussion that is relevant to this analysis.

¹⁰ London B 379 (*ABV* 60, 20). The rendering of the mane of the lionskin is very elaborate, the pattern derived from earlier renditions of lions in animal friezes and the like—compare for instance the incised zig-zagged shagginess of the lions on Sophilos’ loutrophoros, Athens Inv. 991 (*ABV* 38, 1) and lebes gamikos, Izmir Inv. 3332 (*ABV* 40, 20), and his amphora Jena Inv. 178 (*ABV* 39, 7), which has a more elaborate pattern.

¹¹ As for instance on three ovoid neck-amphorae (not “Tyrrhenians”) attributed to the Camtar Painter, Tarquinia RC 5564, Cambridge 44 and Louvre E 863 (*ABV* 84, 1, 2, and 3 respectively). In all three scenes Herakles also wears a quiver, and fights variously with sword or spear; all three show the hero with short hair, and the Cambridge and Louvre examples have incised spiral curls across the forehead. Among examples from the “Tyrrhenian” amphorae is Villa Giulia 74989, attributed [Bothmer] to the Prometheus Painter (*LIMC* V, 2:Herakles 2822).

(in a “Herakles’ knot”) across his chest. Sometimes the lion’s tail hangs behind the hero.¹²



Plate 2: Athena introduces Herakles to the gods on Olympus. London, British Museum B 379. Photograph courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.

¹² For instance, Boston 98.916 (*ABV* 98, 46).

About this time the club begins to become a frequent, though by no means ubiquitous, feature: Boardman observes that Herakles “is commonly shown wearing a sword but not often using it except against humanoid foes — Amazons, Kentauroi, Kyknos—and often in Attic [black-figure] against the Lion, sometimes shown to be ineffective . . .” (*LIMC* V, 1:184).

Before the middle of the sixth century, then, the painters had established a set of attributes that in combination, or in some instances singly, allowed Herakles to be identified without necessary reference from inscription or unusual context. It is certainly not coincidental that from about 560 on there is a noticeable expansion in the range of narrative contexts in which the vase-painters featured Herakles.¹³ For instance, Herakles and the Nemean Lion was a story known in Greek art at least from the late seventh century,¹⁴ yet it is neglected by the Athenian vase-painters until c. 560 BC, when it begins to appear on Siana cups. About the same time the Hydra,¹⁵ the Boar, the Deer, and the Amazons also begin to occur with comparative regularity, along with Herakles’ entry to Olympos. While one cannot of course say which developed first, the expanded repertoire requiring visual identification or the iconography that made it possible, at about the same time there is evidence of increased interest among vase-painters in rendering mythological scenes generally. More or less simultaneously there was established what must be recognized in the broader context as a tradition of identifying the more common or significant mythological figures through prescribed sets of iconographic attributes.¹⁶

By the second half of the sixth century, the iconography of Herakles had become more or less canonical, as may be observed in the vases attributed to Group E and (its later continuation) the Lysippidean workshop. This large workshop, active over three decades, seems to have had a particular interest in depicting Herakles, as scenes involving the hero occur on over a

¹³ The relationship between the representations of Herakles on Athenian vases and those on the series of fragmentary pedimental sculptures from the Akropolis cannot be defined with any certainty owing to the vexed problems of chronology for the latter.

¹⁴ From the bronze shieldband relief, Olympia B 1911 (*LIMC* V, 1:1776).

¹⁵ It is noteworthy that the limestone pediment from the Athenian Akropolis (Athens, Acr. 1) featuring Herakles and the Hydra is usually dated to about 560-550 BC.

¹⁶ For instance, Carpenter (1986) gives a clear and selectively illustrated account of the development of Dionysian imagery, in which he cites the Heidelberg Painter (c. 560) as establishing the canonical features (ivy wreath and drinking horn) for Dionysos.

third of the two-hundred-and-eighty-odd vases attributed variously to Group E and to painters within or associated with the workshop.¹⁷

Named by inscription on only five of these vases,¹⁸ Herakles is nonetheless easily recognized, first by his lionskin (either on the hero, or still on the Lion in representations of his encounter with the beast), and then by the club that is fairly regularly included in the scenes: and few indeed are the scenes without either lionskin or club.¹⁹ Herakles continues to wear his *chitoniskos* regularly, although he is occasionally nude, and equally commonly his sword is included, either in use or (more often) sheathed at his side. The quiver and bow become increasingly popular as attributes, particularly among the later painters,²⁰ and this same group occasionally emphasizes Herakles' short, curly hair by incising (or indicating in relief paint) tight spirals all over his head.²¹ Curls of this kind became a fairly regular attribute of Herakles on vases from c. 525 BC on, into the red-figure tradition.

This brief survey of Herakles' appearance on archaic vases shows how in a comparatively short time the painters established a set of visual attributes for the hero that by being consistently used in various combinations seems quickly to have amounted to a tradition: the association of iconographic formulas with a given figure is sanctioned by continual usage, and yet there

¹⁷ Excluding Exekias and the Andokides Painter, as these are special cases in terms of their innovativeness, but including the Lysippides Painter (whom I take to be distinct from the Andokides Painter).

¹⁸ Louvre F 53 (*ABV* 136, 49: Group E, amphora, Geryoneus); Reggio 4001 (*ABV* 147, 6: Manner of Exekias, amphora fr., Chariot of Demeter and entourage); Boulogne 417 (*ABV* 260, 32: Manner of the Lysippides Painter, hydria, Chariot of Athene and entourage); Boulogne 417 (*ABV* 260, 32: Manner of the Lysippides Painter, hydria, Chariot of Athene and entourage); Rimini (*ABV* 261, 36: Manner of the Lysippides Painter, hydria, Chariot of Athene and entourage); Philadelphia 3497 (Beazley 1971 [hereafter *Para.*]: 318: "recalls Exekian and the Lysippides Painter," amphora, Lion).

¹⁹ For instance, the Group E amphora San Antonio 75.59.15P (*Para.* 56, 38 *bis*, ex La Rochelle, Imbeza Valley), where the opponent is Nessos (and Deianeira is included). The Lysippides Painter's scene showing Herakles as a symposiast (Munich 2301: *ABV* 255, 4) also omits lionskin and club, relying on quiver, bow, and curly hair as well as context to identify the hero: it is arguable that he was following the Andokides Painter's red-figure handling of the scene on the other side of the amphora.

²⁰ The Lysippides Painter and those in his Manner or Related to him.

²¹ For example Exekias' amphora in Orvieto, Faina 2748 (was 78: *ABV* 144, 9), and the neck-amphora attributed to the Lysippides Painter, Zurich ETH 7 (*ABV* 258, 17).

is continuous development by analogy and mythological association as much as by clearcut innovation. It must be appreciated, of course, that this kind of diachronic analysis of the process by which a figure accumulates a number of overlapping and semi-redundant formulaic attributes is a relatively easy matter where every stage of the development is represented by extant archaeological material; it is not possible in ancient oral literature when the establishing of a written text, at whatever time and by whatever means that occurred, preserved a single evolutionary stage as it was at that given point of time.

So far the focus of discussion has been the primarily identificatory function of the visual formulas described. It remains to be determined whether these iconographic elements, like the traditional oral formulas, are active in conveying meaning beyond this. As with Homeric nominal epithets, for example, one does not look for necessarily contextual signification in archaic vase-painting: were it so, then Herakles would scarcely appear nude when tackling the heavily-armed triad of Geryoneus,²² nor would he wear his protective lionskin when not in a risky situation.²³ The question to be asked, then, is not what the significance of the attributes may be in the context of a given scene, but rather whether they may be possessed of a traditional referentiality such as Foley has defined for the formulaic phrases of oral composition.

This question may best be answered by considering, for each of the main attributes of Herakles, what it may signify within the continuum of the black-figure tradition. It is certain that in varying degrees, all evoke specific and characterizing actions: to wear the skin of an animal, for instance, would suggest that one has killed it. Herakles' lionskin is thus doubly signficatory, in that he is the *sort* of hero who can kill a lion, and he is the *selfsame* hero who *did* kill the Nemean monster in his first "Labor." Thus when he is depicted in the lionskin while engaged in another feat, such as the battle with Geryoneus or the capture of the Erymanthian Boar, the image is resonant with the earlier achievement, and immanent within it is the extra-contextual characterization as the hero who has already destroyed one monster. Furthermore, since the lionskin recurs in the narrative representation of many different adventures, it acquires an accumulating, secondary resonance from each and every context.

²² As he does for instance on an amphora in Christchurch (N.Z.) 42/57 (*Para.* 55, 7 *bis*).

²³ See below, espec. notes 28-29.

Like the lionskin, the club is an attribute mainly reserved for Herakles' use.²⁴ It is a weapon of strength and brute force rather than intelligent precision, only a little more refined than the tree-trunks often used by centaurs; thus it clearly betokens these traditional aspects of Herakles, and again, in any given context it resonates with other contexts where Herakles has been shown to carry it or, better, to employ it.

The quiver, with or without the bow, evokes Herakles' early established reputation as an archer, known in the Homeric tradition and subsequently.²⁵ It is perhaps significant that the only visual context in which Herakles is fairly regularly shown using his bow is the Gigantomachy,²⁶ and it could be that inclusion of the quiver elsewhere evoked an echo of this heroic involvement. The sword, in use or sheathed, is almost omnipresent in scenes depicting Herakles from early times through to the late archaic period, and here too the signification is obvious: Herakles was a warrior *par excellence*, and indeed in many narratives of his exploits in early Greek literature he is specifically described as using either a sword or a spear.²⁷

Of course, while the lionskin and club are closely associated with the identity of Herakles, the sword and spear (and to a lesser extent the bow and quiver) are not, but rather form the standard equipment of any warrior, whether identified as mythological or not, on archaic Athenian vases. In comparison with the Homeric noun-epithet formulas, then, the club and lionskin can be compared with personalized formulas such as πόδας ὠκὺς Ἀχιλλεύς (“swift-footed Achilles”) and πολυμήχαν’ Ὀδυσσεύ (“resourceful Odysseus”), evoking a particularized awareness of the hero in his many roles in many other contexts, while the rest of the panoply, being

²⁴ Rarely, a lionskin is worn by other figures (see, for instance, the fragmentary dinos signed by Lydos, Athens, Akropolis 607 (ABV 107, 1), where Artemis fighting giants wears her lionskin in Herakles' manner. Compare also Homer, *Iliad* 10.23 and 177.

²⁵ Homer, *Iliad* 5.392; *Odyssey* 8.224; 11.606-8; Hesiod, *Shield of Herakles* 129-34. Compare also Bacchylides, *Epinikion* V, 71-76.

²⁶ See *LIMC* IV.1:257.

²⁷ The spear is not distinct from the sword in its traditional signification as a standard-issue warrior's weapon. In Hesiod, for instance, against the Hydra νηλέϊ χαλκῷ (“with ruthless bronze [sword]”): *Theog.* 316-18; against Kyknos ἐγγεῖ μακρῷ (“with a long spear”): *Shield of Herakles* 416-19; compare also in the same work the arming of Herakles, where he takes up ἀρῆς ἀλκτῆρα σίδηρον (“the iron [sword] that protects against doom”: 128) and ὄβριμον ἔγχος, ἀκαχμένον αἶθοπι χαλκῷ (“the strong spear, tipped with flashing bronze”: 135).

generally applicable to other fighters, is like such generalized epithets as *δῖος* (“godlike”) and *μεγαλήτωρ* (“great-hearted”): like these formulas, the sword, spear and occasional breastplate (especially on early vases) convey merely a generalized sense of a successful warrior, evoking an ambiance of heroic conflict.

It must be recognized that while the lionskin and club (as the particularized elements) are often *relevant* to the context in which they are portrayed, in that the skin provides invulnerable protection against attack from man or beast and the club is a useful weapon, they are also to be found in situations where their referentiality is clearly extra-contextual. Such is the case, for example, in scenes such as Herakles among the gods,²⁸ or Herakles as a musician playing a *kithara* (a stringed musical instrument),²⁹ where there is no need for protection or offensive armament. Of course, these elements serve clearly to identify Herakles, but it can be argued that they refer as well to the whole visual tradition of the hero, identifying him not only by name but by *curriculum vitae*. That is, the visual attributes, like the noun-epithet formulas of traditional oral poetry, seem regularly to signify *more* than just an essential idea; they seem consistently to resonate with the entire concept of the heroic Herakles, victor in many conflicts, supreme over many monsters.

Themes

Just as the repeated iconographic attributes associated with mythological figures in archaic Athenian vase-painting can be seen to serve similar functions and to work consistently in similar ways to the formulas of orally composed (or oral-derived), traditional poetry, so there is in often-repeated (formulaic) compositions a visual narrative parallel for the themes that constitute another of the essential characteristics of oral composition. Themes work for Foley in a similar fashion to formulas—the repeated use of the same theme or cluster of ideas in different contexts, applied to different participants, creates an aura of additional signification around the theme derived from the totality of occasions when the hearer has heard it used. It is noteworthy that many epic themes tend to involve ritualized or quasi-ritualized situations, like performing a sacrifice to the gods, preparing for and eating a feast, calling a council, engaging in single combat: the effect of the extra-situational resonance is to imbue each occasion with the additional quality of being a single example of an often-performed event,

²⁸ Such as that attributed to Exekias: Orvieto, Faina 2748 (78) (*ABV* 144, 9).

²⁹ Such as the Lysippides Painter’s neck-amphora, Munich 1575 (*ABV* 256, 16).

for which the nature and sequence of the actions is prescribed and intrinsically significant. This is important to the reception of the meaning of each occurrence, as not infrequently there is a tension between the *traditional* form of the theme and the *specific* form presented in a given context.³⁰

That the same kind of tension can be generated in vase-painting is easily demonstrated by a brief analysis of one very common generic scene-type: the chariot departure scene.³¹ Like a theme in orally composed poetry, the chariot scene is a prescribed basic structure that can be applied to a number of different narrative contexts; again like a theme, it can be cut to its bare minimum of the four horses and chariot and a person holding the reins,³² or it can be expanded and elaborated upon.³³ Even the chariot-harnessing scene, which might at first glance seem to be a substantially different composition, can be shown in terms of balance of mass to be essentially the same, in that the horse or horses being led up for harnessing occupy positions otherwise filled by human figures; the same is true of the chariot involved in a battle context, as for instance in many Gigantomachies.

Wrede (1916) has shown that there are certain more or less fixed positions for figures in the chariot departure scene-type that becomes the norm around the middle of the sixth century: that is, a scene that is more or less fully occupied by the chariot and entourage (normally heading towards the right), with the human figures grouped around the equipment. Although Wrede's analysis focused almost exclusively on warriors' departure scenes, by and large the same positions operate *mutatis mutandis* in other applications of the chariot scene.

In any chariot scene, one figure will be holding the reins. In a warrior's departure, that person will most often be a charioteer (usually identified by his distinctive long, and often white, *chiton* [long tunic] and sometimes with a "Boeotian" shield), either standing in the chariot-body or

³⁰ As Foley (1991:156-89) demonstrates in his analysis of *Iliad* 24.

³¹ That is, the chariot scene that consists of a *quadriga* seen from the side; frontally presented chariots or chariots wheeling round are excluded from this discussion since the scene-type is significantly different.

³² For instance, the amphora signed by Andokides, New York, Bastis (ABV 253, 1); seldom are self-standing chariot scenes so stark, however, and such minimal representations usually occur in the context of racing chariots, or of a chariot waiting while its owner engages in battle on foot.

³³ For instance, see the overpopulated amphora attributed to the Painter of Munich 1410, Karlsruhe 61.89 (*Para.*135, 1 *bis*; see also Weiss 1990:plates 12-15).

in the process of mounting; he will often hold a long stick (goad) in his right hand. The warrior may in the first instance stand in the chariot beside his driver on his left (to keep his shield-arm free, as Wrede suggests [1916: 253]), often with one hand on the front rail of the chariot, or he may himself be in the process of boarding; otherwise he will be standing to the left of the chariot facing to right, or behind the chariot-body facing either to left or right, or behind the chariot-pole, normally facing to left as if moving up to board. Members of his family or household are grouped around the chariot: a figure standing or (less commonly) seated to left at the right margin of the scene, before the noses of the horses; a figure behind the bellies of the horses, either to right or to left; a figure behind the horses' tails and chariot-pole (if the position is not occupied by the departing warrior). Further optional positions are: facing to right at the extreme left margin of the scene; either way behind the rumps of the horses; standing behind and more or less obscured by the horses' heads. Some of these figures will be women (rarely more than two in a scene), and sometimes a second warrior may be included.

Plate 3 illustrates a fairly typical chariot departure scene on an amphora attributed to the Rycroft Painter:³⁴ a charioteer in a white *chiton* (the white paint now partly flaked off) stands in the chariot holding the reins; next to him and partially hidden by his body stands a warrior, his right hand on the front rail; an old, (once) white-haired man stands to right behind the chariot pole; a second warrior walks to right, his face turned to left, behind the horses' bellies; a woman stands to left at the right margin of the scene.

An adaptation of the departure of a warrior is the departure of other figures in a non-military context, such as the pair of youths evidently going hunting on the reverse of an amphora in Boulogne,³⁵ or the many scenes, mainly later in the sixth century, where a male or female deity is shown standing in or mounting a chariot. In such scenes the figures in the other positions tend to be similar to those in a warrior's departure, though sometimes identified iconographically as Olympian deities.

³⁴ Oxford 1911.256 (*ABV* 336, 11).

³⁵ Boulogne 558 (*ABV* 145, 18).



Plate 3: Chariot scene: departure of a warrior. Oxford, Ashmolean Museum 1911.256.
 Photograph courtesy of museum.

In a wedding-procession scene there is less variation in the positions of the essential figures—the bride and groom stand together in the chariot-body, with the groom in the foreground, holding the reins and stick, the bride partially hidden behind him, in most cases with her hand on the chariot rail. These two figures are in parallel to the charioteer and warrior in a departure scene. The other positions in the picture-field are occupied by figures of women bearing ritual objects or perhaps gifts on their heads (behind the chariot-pole, horse-tails, and horses' bellies). There is usually at least one figure at the right margin of the scene. A typical example of a wedding chariot scene is illustrated in Plate 4, from the name amphora of the Painter of London B 174.³⁶ In some scenes with a man and woman in a chariot, a musician playing a *kithara* appears behind the horses' tails or

³⁶ London 1868.6-10.2 (B 174), (*ABV* 141, 1).

bellies, and other figures (male or female) replace the women bearing objects on their heads.³⁷



Plate 4: Chariot scene: wedding procession. London, British Museum 1868.6-10.2.
Photograph courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.

Rarely in wedding chariot scenes after about 560 BC are the participants named or otherwise specifically identified as deities; yet there are so few examples of “daily-life” scenes on vases before c. 520 BC that it must be assumed, unless there is clear evidence to the contrary, that mythological scenes are intended. One thinks most readily of the wedding procession of Peleus and Thetis, given the popularity of the scene on early black-figure vases. The inclusion of the *kithara*-player may be a clue to the specifically divine nature of the occasion: he is usually represented as a youth, often with incised locks of hair hanging before his ear, and so it is difficult not to perceive him as Apollo. Such a tendency to automatic identification usefully illustrates the way in which traditional referentiality works in vase-painting.

³⁷ So for instance the reverse of an amphora attributed to the Painter of the Vatican Mourner [Bothmer], Malibu 78.AE.148. For illustration see Mackay 1985:230. In other such scenes with a *kithara*-player, of the figures in the chariot the woman is in the foreground, holding the reins, while the man is partially obscured beside her (for instance the scenes on both sides of the neck-amphora attributed to Exekias, New York 17.230.14 [ABV 144, 3]).

In all chariot scenes the most visually dominant objects are the horses, as they constitute a large, more or less unbroken, mass of black. It is this regularly recurring and immediately recognizable kernel of the chariot scene that serves to link all the different applications together: the positions of the horses and chariot are fixtures in the picture-field, and of necessity there are only a few convenient positions for figures if they are to stand out with any clarity. The composition of chariot scenes is thus a common factor, relying for narrative meaning on closer inspection of the definition of details such as the identity (or function) and arrangement of the various constituent figures.

A dynamic tension between the signification of formulaic iconographic elements and the formulaic compositional context in which they are used may be seen in a specialized application of the chariot scene, of which there are many examples from a variety of workshops in the last third of the sixth century. The chariot is that of Athena, and Herakles is also featured within the scene, associated with the goddess and her chariot; subsidiary positions are usually occupied by figures identified iconographically as Olympian deities. It is arguable that most of these scenes show the procession escorting Herakles to Olympos in celebration of his apotheosis.³⁸ In some versions, Herakles and Athena stand side by side in the chariot, with Athena always in the foreground, holding the reins; she is the higher-ranking personage, and she is presumably to be thought of as conducting Herakles,³⁹ so that this seems logical. But is the underlying image-referent that of the warrior's departure, or the departure of the wedding procession? If the former, then Athena is playing charioteer to Herakles' superior role; this could be supported by noting that Herakles is customarily represented in his lionskin and equipped with his club—the equivalent of the fully armed warrior; also Athena's *peplos* is a long garment reminiscent of the charioteer's *chiton*, and the added white so often applied to the latter garment could be evoked by Athena's flesh, white as is customary for women in the black-figure technique. On the other hand, the overriding image could be defined as a male and a female in a chariot; that their roles are reversed, in that the female holds the reins, serves to draw attention to

³⁸ See *LIMC* V, 1:126.

³⁹ This is the inference to be drawn from setting these chariot procession scenes into their developmental context: the earliest occurrences of the narrative of Herakles' introduction to Olympos show Athene leading Herakles on foot (for instance Plate 2 and see note 10 above), and the relationship between conductress and conducted is made clear by the Phrynos Painter on his cup London B 424 (*ABV* 168).

the unusual circumstances,⁴⁰ and to the fact that this is no wedding.⁴¹ Some scenes that include Apollo playing his *kithara* would seem to underline this interpretation.⁴²

Placing a specific processional scene within the context of the broader genre exposes the dynamic interrelationship between formulaic attribute and formulaic composition. The composition can create a new context for a given narrative that contributes substantially to the signification of the scene, for instance by revealing through similarities of structure a narrative link between two quite different stories.⁴³ The attributes, by identifying the participants in a scene, particularize it and so render it narrative rather than just depictive. Both composition and attributes enrich the scene by bringing together reminiscent echoes from the entire developing tradition.

Initially each such reinterpretation of an established genre of composition, each such recontextualizing of an often-depicted tale, must

⁴⁰ Reference should be made here to the political inference drawn by Boardman (1972) in suggesting that these scenes may refer to the trick played upon the Athenians by Peisistratos (related by Herodotos 1.60).

⁴¹ I am aware of at least four scenes with a male and female in a chariot where the figures are not specifically identified, but where the woman holds the reins (cp. *LIMC* V, 1:126): both scenes on the neck-amphora attributed to Exekias, New York 17.230.14 (*ABV* 144, 3); a scene on an amphora attributed to the Bateman Group in the Manner of the Lysippides Painter (*ABV* 258, 5); a scene on an amphora attributed to the Euphiletos Painter, London 1843.11-3.70 (B201: *ABV* 323, 22). All except the reverse of the New York Exekias amphora have an Apollo-like musician figure; in addition the Bateman Group scene includes a Hermes look-alike, and the London amphora has a Hermes (with *kerykeion*) and a Dionysos (seeming to hold the stems of the ivy that has invaded the scene): these details seem sufficient to identify a divine setting, and one thinks first of the wedding of Peleus and Thetis, where the couple, otherwise iconographically unmarked, would quite likely be represented giving “driving-seat” preference to the divine Thetis over mortal Peleus.

⁴² For instance, Vatican 351 (*LIMC* V, 2: Herakles 2881) and Berlin F 1827, by the Chiusi Painter (*Para.* 170, 5, *LIMC* V, 2: Herakles 2884).

⁴³ For instance, after about the middle of the sixth century there is a general similarity between Herakles fighting the Nemean Lion amid onlookers and Theseus tackling the Minotaur amid onlookers: both Herakles and Theseus adopt a similar stance, especially in the scenes where they thrust a sword into their opponent’s neck or breast. Both stories concern a major hero overcoming a fearsome monster to the advantage of others. It is noteworthy, however, that despite this passing similarity at one time, the Nemean Lion narrative underwent an extensive subsequent development under the influence of a new kind of genre scene—wrestlers in the *palaistra*—while the Minotaur narrative remained comparatively static.

have been highly innovative, and would probably on this account have been regarded with some suspicion by painters' clients or patrons. However, as soon as an innovative combination caught the popular attention and began to be reproduced, it too, sanctioned by usage, became part of the developing tradition, to be reinterpreted in its turn. Evidence of this phenomenon in the example of Athena's chariot analyzed above may be found in the many variations of the basic scene that emerge particularly from about 520 BC on, and especially those where Herakles is shown standing in or mounting the chariot while Athena (or a woman who may be so identified) stands nearby.⁴⁴

The working of this interrelated system of formulaic attributes and formulaic compositions seems to be very close to the signficatory system described by Foley for the formulaic phrases and themes of orally composed (or oral-derived) traditional poetry. Both sets work consistently in concert in their respective media; the elements of both are susceptible to being analyzed in isolation, in a way that tends to blur their meaning when taken together; both have given rise to rejection by critics as merely repetitive, when recurrence is the very essence of their value as affirmative conveyors of an established yet ongoing tradition. The value of the vase-painting analysis lies not only in its potentially bringing to archaeologists and art historians a new approach to the reception of visual narrative in the archaic period (with advantage also to fields of visual narrative other than vase-painting), but also in the confirmation it offers of Foley's reception theory for oral poetry by showing that in a related but distinct tradition a similar system obtained; furthermore, in that system it is possible to trace the whole process of development, which it is here suggested should be viewed as potentially parallel to the development of an oral poetic tradition. Precisely because so much evidence remains of the vase-painting narrative tradition over its whole period of popularity, one may become sufficiently familiarized that one can perceive to a small extent what it is like to experience traditional narrative from within the relevant tradition, recognizing the wider referentiality of at least some of the traditional narrative components.

There are thus two advantages to be derived from comparison between the narrative art of vase-painting and the Homeric poems. One consists in the fact that the visual tradition preserves evidence of every stage of its development, so that it is possible to trace the evolution of repetitive

⁴⁴ The examples listed in *LIMC* V, 1: Herakles 2877-2906, provide a representative selection of examples illustrating the whole development of this narrative type.

narrative elements in the art, and to postulate a similar evolutionary process for repetitive verbal elements in the poetry. It is in the nature of things that an isolated example of an oral tradition, be it text or recording, can be studied only synchronically, whereas a tradition is essentially a diachronic phenomenon. The other benefit lies in the realization that orality is not merely a feature peculiar to orally composed "texts," but is rather a way of thinking, a way of looking at the world that is most prominent at times in cultural development when writing is least in evidence, but that by no means comes to an abrupt end when poet puts stylus to tablet.

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