Ηρέιτο μνημών: Performance and Beginnings in Homer's Odyssey

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Homer Through Oral Composition

One of the most important developments in Classics was the work of Milman Parry (pub. 1973), who established that Homeric poetry was orally composed in front of an audience. One of the major components of oral poetry is the presence of common formulas, or stock phrases the composer would have at hand to fit the metrical pattern of the poem. However, there are occasionally variations within formulas, where there may be several formulae using a similar grammatical pairing with a slight variation. While there are many scholars who have argued that formulaic variation is simply a metrical tactic (for example, see the different perspectives from Reece (2008) and Fletcher (2009) on the same variant formula, cited below), I examine the two variants of the formula μῦθος ἤρχετο (middle voice), ἤρχετο μῦθων, ἤρχετο μῦθων, which classical Richard Martin defines as a “performative speech act” (Martin, 1989). The verb archo takes a genitive object (in this instance, muthos)

Key Vocabulary:

- **Muthos**: performative speech act.
- **Archo (active voice)**: to instigate, start, or lead.
- **Archomai (middle voice of archo)**: to begin.

The distinction between the active and middle voice of archo differentiates instigating and leading with simply beginning performative actions. Thus, beginning rather than instigating performative speech carries a significant (and slightly negative) connotation within the larger context of poetic performance through which we must read Homeric text. In identifying differences between ἤρχετο μῦθων and μῦθος ἤρχετο, we can begin to unpack the ways that formulaic variation in Homer signifies subtle differences in meaning which play into larger narrative themes.

The other only genitive object which is used with both the middle and active voice of archo is polemos (war). Thus, the poet draws connections between beginning muthos speech-performance and beginning acts of warfare. As Smyth notes, to begin a war (bellum incipere, archesthai polemos [middle voice]) and to move or incite a war (bellum movere, archein polemos [active voice]) are different modes of action. This note is used to distinguish the difference in meaning between the middle and active voice of archo. (Smyth, 1734)

Muthos-speech functions similarly, where beginning and moving performative-speech are markedly different, both in definition and in context.

References:


Textual Examples

1. Characters whom the poet describe as ήρχετο μῦθων are often beginning muthoi in a context in which is not authorized by either character or setting/audience, while characters who either μῦθος ἤρχετο or ἤρχετο μῦθων are fully authorized to start performative speech acts.
   - Zeus begins the first muthos-speech in the poem with muthon ērche and complains of mortals who blame the gods for their misfortune rather than recklessness in not following the gods’ instructions (Od. 1:29)
   - Directly after this, Athena gives a discrete set of instructions, which she tells Telemachus (Odysseys’ son) to follow (μουθον ἦρχετο, Od. 2:27:1, 305)
   - When Telemachus begins muthos between himself and Penelope’s suitors as an attempt to establish authority, he misperforms these instructions.
   - He is not authorized by Athena, nor the setting in which he speaks, and therefore merely begins muthos rather than instigating muthos as an act of authorized performance.
   - The poet used ἤρχετο μῦθων for this instance, using the middle voice in an instance where divine instruction is incorrectly followed.
   - In order to correct his actions, Athena leads the crew as they leave Ithaca (erch’ d’ Athene, 2.416 & 3.12)
   - In contrast, in Book 22, Telemachus begins speaking with ἐρχομαι (active voice). In this instance, he is taking initiative and slaughters the maids who have been helping the suitors. Both moving the plot forward and instigating change within the household (22:461)
   - In contrast, at the beginning of Book 5, Kalyxos is given a set of instructions from the gods.
   - Unlike Telemachus, Kalyxos (reluctantly) performs the outlined instructions, where she officially
     - the statement gives Odysseus leave (thus performing Hermes’ instructions) is marked with muthos (active voice) (5:292)
     - When she sends Odysseus off, again correctly performing her instructions, the poet uses the phrase ἐρχομαι d’ hodos (she led his path), again using the active archo.
   - The active archo is used for correct performance of divine instruction

2. In Odyssey 19, Penelope questions a disguised Odysseus in hopes of gathering information on Odysseus’ whereabouts. During this, the poet describes her as instigating the muthos between them twice, once before Penelope (keeps herself to a lamenting nightingale and describes a prophetic dream (19.103,508)
   - Nancy Felson (1996) describes Penelope as weavng and unweaving the plot in Ithaca within the poem as she weaves and unweaves Laertes’ funeral shroud
   - As Penelope weaves and unweaves the plot, instances of muthon ērche occur at moments where the plot itself is also instigated or ‘moved’ forward as well as the resulting speech acts.
   - Nagy (1996) describes Penelope’s metaphor of the nightingale as a stand-in for poetic variation and performance. The nightingale (like a bard) moves the song as it is recited, just as characters who instigate mutho move the plot forward.
   - In Books 7 and 11, Areté does not ‘move’ the plot, as she begins muthos (archesthai polemos) which compel Odysseus to remain in her court and tell his story (7.233,11.335)
   - In contrast, Nestor in Book 3 moves the plot forward as he instigates mutho between himself and Telemachus which help Telemachus on his quest to find news of Odysseus (3.688,417,474)