

Ei Pote: A Note on Homeric Phraseology

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The phrase *εἰ ποτε* (“if ever”) has long been recognized by Homeric scholars as a characteristically important element of many Homeric prayers and supplications and especially as a component of entreaties that are intended to remind an individual of services performed in the past.¹ However, it remains to be thoroughly explored how this seemingly simple phrase functions as a dynamic unit in its own right within the framework of the Homeric poems, specifically to examine the extralexical meaning metonymically encoded into the phrase by the ambient oral tradition from which our present-day texts ultimately derive. By understanding this additional significance of *εἰ ποτε* within Homeric poetry, we can gain not only a better appreciation of the events narrated in the poems themselves but also an improved awareness of how traditional rules may affect the phraseological content of such oral-derived works of art.

The phrase *εἰ ποτε* appears eleven times in the Homeric epics (*Iliad* 1.39, 1.340, 1.394, 1.503, 5.116, 15.372, 22.83, 24.705; *Odyssey* 3.98, 4.328, 4.763), and each of these occurrences is found within a passage concerning either the unfolding of future events or the marked elevation of the emotional or dramatic content of the current scene. Both of these functions of individual passages are especially characteristic of Homeric prayers and supplications, for the result of a request will nearly always affect subsequent events, and the mere fact that an individual is forced to ask for assistance is often enough to bring emotions to the forefront (cf. Morrison 1991:149ff., Thornton 1984:113ff.). Therefore, it is no coincidence that nine of the eleven appearances of *εἰ ποτε* occur within prayers or supplications.² However, it is telling that all but one of these

¹ See, e.g., Janko 1992:268, Lang 1975, and Richardson 1993:15.

² In fact, the two instances that are not definite examples of prayers or supplications can actually be seen as such. The occurrence at *Iliad* 1.340 is found within Achilleus’ speech in which he orders/requests the two heralds to be witness to Agamemnon’s wrongful action that will in the future cause destruction for the Achaeans. This occurrence

requests are successful. It is the intent of this note to demonstrate that the success of an important request is part of the expanded meaning of εἰ ποτε and that the poet may therefore use this meaning in a variety of ways.

In order to show that εἰ ποτε has such an additional meaning, we must first prove that this phrase may actually exist as a single compositional unit within the poetic tradition. As Eugene O'Neill, Jr. has shown in his analysis of metrical word-types in the Greek hexameter, while there is substantial evidence that in Homer “an accented word and its enclitic did not constitute a single and indivisible metric unit” (1942:106), “the independence of proclitics, enclitics, and the like was very limited, and that with the words that preceded or followed them they constituted *quasi-units*, phrases that cohered just closely enough to suggest single words, and hence to be avoided in those verse positions in which single words of the same metrical type were to be avoided” (110). The fact that εἰ ποτε, collectively a dactyl (— ..), does indeed avoid the only position in the Homeric line at which a single dactylic word is uncommon—that is, the third foot, which extends over the mid-line caesura—thus lends credence to the argument that this phrase is an actual element of Homeric composition. In this respect, the two-word phrase acts as a single word in Homeric phraseology.

However, we need not think that the single simplex phrase, εἰ ποτε, is the only shape that this formulaic component may take in Homer. As John Miles Foley has shown, such an element may actually consist of several multiforms that are associated with each other in meaning but with no single one of these units being the original kernel from which the other forms are generated.³ For instance, the phrase εἰ ποτέ μοι/τοι occurs six times in the epics (*Iliad* 1.39, 5.116, 22.83; *Odyssey* 3.98, 4.328, 4.763). O'Neill’s analysis establishes that single Homeric words of a metrical type identical to this phrase occur in one of the first two possible positions (those beginning in either the first or second foot of the line) about eighty percent of the time (144). In fact, since εἰ ποτέ μοι/τοι always occurs in these two positions, this phrase also appears to work in accordance with

can be seen as a precursor to the prayer Achilleus makes less than sixty lines later, which also uses the phrase εἰ ποτέ. The case is much simpler at *Iliad* 24.705, where Kassandra orders the Trojan men and women to look upon the body of Hektor—an order that, when seen in the context of the surrounding narrative, is easily understood as an emotional request or supplication.

³ See Foley 1990:129-37 for a discussion of this oral traditional characteristic as it relates to the phrase ἔπεια πτερόεντα, “winged words.”

traditional rules and may itself be considered a formula. This fact is especially important because it accounts for the extraordinarily high occurrence of εἰ ποτε in the second foot of the line. According to O'Neill's figures, such a formula should only occur in this position less than ten percent of the time (142). However, six of the eleven occurrences of εἰ ποτε (54.5%) actually appear there. But since four of these instances are part of another formula (εἰ ποτέ μοι/τοι) that is working in combination with traditional rules as a larger compositional unit in its own right, this statistical discrepancy is resolved. The interplay of larger and smaller composite "words" is one of the ways in which traditional rules may affect Homeric phraseology—namely, that traditional requirements of the idiomatic register may skew the purely metrical localization of a given formula.

Now that we have established that the phrase εἰ ποτε and its multiforms can indeed be viewed as a formulaic component of Homeric poetry, we can move on to explore how this phrase is actually employed in different narrative contexts throughout the epics. Let us begin by looking at the simpler and more usual occurrences of εἰ ποτε in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and then proceed to investigate how the indexed meaning of this phrase can come into play in other significant passages.

The first occurrence of εἰ ποτε in the *Iliad* furnishes a clear example of how this phrase is used within a successful Homeric prayer. While Chryses prays to Apollo at 1.37-42, he says:⁴

“κλῦθί μεν, ἀργυρότοξ’, δὲς Χρύσην ἀμφιβέβηκας
Κίλλαν τε ζαθένην Τενέδοιο τε ἴφι ἀνάσσεις,
Σμινθεῦ, εἰ ποτέ τοι χαρίεντ’ ἐπὶ νηὸν ἔρεψα,
ἢ εἰ δὴ ποτέ τοι κατὰ πίονα μηρό’ ἔκηα
ταύρων ἥδ’ αἰγῶν, τόδε μοι κρήγηνον ἐέλδωρ.
τείσειαν Δαναοὶ ἐμὰ δάκρυα σοῖσι βέλεσσιν.”

“Hear me,
lord of the silver bow who set your power about Chryse
and Killa the sacrosanct, who are lord in strength over Tenedos,
Smintheus, if ever it pleased your heart that I built your temple,
if ever it pleased you that I burned all the rich thigh pieces
of bulls, of goats, then bring to pass this wish I pray for:
let your arrows make the Danaans pay for my tears shed.”

⁴ Quotations of passages from the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are from the standard Oxford editions by Monro and Allen. All English translations are from Lattimore 1951 and 1965, with slight changes made for emphasis.

This passage consists of a prayer mentioning Chryses' past services to Apollo. Within the Homeric epics, there are thirteen such prayers that detail services performed in the past either by or for the petitioned god, and in each case the prayer is successful.⁵ Therefore, the mentioning of these past services seems to be a strong traditional indicator of the success of the request to follow, and the phrase *εἰ ποτε* dovetails with this indicator. We need not ask whether *εἰ ποτε* is the primary signal that the following appeal will be successful; instead, we must simply realize that the phrase is an important part of the reference to past services and therefore inextricably associated with the success of the prayer, whether or not it is the root cause.⁶

Another example of the inclusion of *εἰ ποτε* in an important epic prayer is in the plea that Diomedes makes to Athena after he has been wounded by Pandaros (*Iliad* 5.115-20):

“*χλῦθί μευ, αἰγιόχοιο Διὸς τέκος, Ἀτρυτώνη,*
εἰ ποτέ μοι καὶ πατρὶ φίλα φρονέουσα παρέστης
δηὖω ἐν πολέμῳ, νῦν αὐτὸν ἐμὲ φίλαι, Ἀθήνη.
δὸς δέ τέ μ’ ἄνδρα ἐλεῖν καὶ ἐς ὁρμὴν ἔγχεος ἐλθεῖν,
ὅς μ’ ἔβαλε φθάμενος καὶ ἐπεύχεται, οὐδέ μέ φησι
δηρὸν ἔτ’ ὄψεσθαι λαμπρὸν φάος ἡελίοιο.”

“Hear me now, Atrytone, daughter of Zeus of the aegis:
if ever before in kindness you stood by my father
through the terror of fighting, be my friend now also, Athena;
grant me that I may kill this man and come within spearcast,
who shot me before I could see him, and now boasts over me, saying
I cannot live to look much longer on the shining sunlight.”

Because this prayer involves a reference to the past employing *εἰ ποτε*, the audience is once again able to recognize that this prayer will be successful and that Pandaros will indeed die. In addition, the poet also uses the imperative *κλῦθι* (“hear”), another apparent traditional signal of successful prayers since all eleven occurrences of *κλῦθι* within Homeric prayers are

⁵ *Iliad* 1.37-42, 1.451-56, 5.115-20, 8.236-44, 10.278-82, 10.284-94, 10.462-64, 15.372-76, 16.233-48; *Odyssey* 4.762-66, 6.324-27, 17.240-46, 20.98-101.

⁶ Note that in the line after *εἰ ποτε* we have the only occurrence in the epics of the phrase *εἰ δή ποτε*. While this phrase may or may not be an actual compositional formula in its own right, at the very least it amplifies the previous *εἰ ποτε* and thus imparts even more significance to Chryses' past services—an added sign that the fulfillment of this prayer will have such dire consequences for the Greeks throughout the epic.

followed by successful requests. However, even with such important indicators having been provided to the audience, Athena, when she hears Diomedes' prayer (5.121), does not help him to kill Pandaros until nearly 170 more lines have elapsed (5.290ff.). Instead, the poet uses this significant prayer to launch the lengthy and important sequence of the raging of Diomedes.

As a final example of the way in which *εἴ ποτε* may function in a successful prayer, consider *Odyssey* 4.762-67. In this passage, Penelope asks Athena to keep Telemachos safe during the voyage he is undertaking to gain information about his father:

“Κλῦθί μεν, αἰγιόχῳ Διὸς τέκος, Ἀτρυτώνῃ,
εἴ ποτέ τοι πολύμητις ἐνὶ μεγάροισιν Ὁδυσσεὺς
 ἢ βοὸς ἢ ὅϊος κατὰ πίονα μηρία κῆε,
 τῶν νῦν μοι μνήσαι, καὶ μοι φίλον υἱα σάωσον,
 μνηστήρας δ’ ἀπάλαλκε κακῶς ὑπερηγνορέοντας.”
 “Ως εἰποῦσ’ ὀλόλυξε, θεὰ δέ οἱ ἔκλυεν ἀρῆς.

“Hear me, Atrytone, child of Zeus of the aegis,
 if ever here in his own palace resourceful Odysseus
 burned the rich thigh pieces of an ox or sheep in your honor,
 remember it now for my sake and save for me my beloved
 son, and fend off the suitors who are evilly overbearing.”

She spoke, and raised the outcry, and the goddess listened to
 her praying.

Once again, we see *εἴ ποτε* being used in combination with both **klu'qi** and the goddess's hearing of the prayer, and this harmony of traditional signals therefore provides us with every indication that Penelope's prayer will be successful in its intent. Nevertheless, the granting of her request does not occur until much later (Book 15), when Telemachos finally arrives safely in Ithaka. In fact, Book 4 actually ends with the suitors lying in wait to ambush Penelope's son. However, since the poet has provided the necessary signals to his audience that nothing will happen to Telemachos, he is able to transfer his narrative to the exploits of Odysseus without the audience worrying about the safety of the hero's son. This ability of the poet to rely upon his audience's understanding of the indexed meaning of his words reveals the self-referential nature of the components of oral traditional poetry and the ability of these components to close gaps of indeterminacy that would otherwise exist in the narrative.⁷

⁷ See also Foley 1995, esp. chapters 1-3, for a discussion of the ways in which traditional elements may help to bridge these gaps of indeterminacy.

Another way in which the poet may use the indexed meaning of *εἰ ποτε* to his benefit is demonstrated at *Iliad* 1.498-510 as Thetis seeks to supplicate Zeus for the sake of her son:

εῦρεν δ' εὐρύοπα Κρονίδην ἄτερ ἥμενον ἄλλων
 ἀκροτάτη κορυφῇ πολυδειράδος Οὐλύμποιο·
 καὶ ὁρα πάροιθ' αὐτοῖο καθέζετο, καὶ λάβε γούνων
 σκαιῆ, δεξιτερῇ δ' ἄρ' ὑπ' ἀνθερεῶνος ἐλοῦσα
 λισσομένη προσέειπε Δία Κρονίωνα ἀνακτα·
 “Ζεῦ πάτερ, εἰ ποτε δή σε μετ' ἀθανάτοισιν ὅνησα
 ἦ ἔπει ἡ ἔργῳ, τόδε μοι κρήνον ἐελδωρ·
 τίμησόν μοι υἱόν, ὃς ὀκυμορώτατος ἄλλων
 ἔπλετ· ἀτάρ μιν νῦν γε ἀναξ ἀνδρῶν Ἀγαμέμνων
 ἡτίμησεν· ἐλὼν γὰρ ἔχει γέρας, αὐτὸς ἀπούρας.
 ἀλλὰ σύ πέρ μιν τεῖσον, Ὁλύμπιε μητίετα Ζεῦ·
 τόφρα δ' ἐπὶ Τρώεσσι τίθει κράτος, ὅφερ' ἀν Αχαιοὶ¹
 υἱὸν ἐμὸν τείσωσιν οφέλλωσίν τέ ἐ τιμῆ.”

She found Kronos' broad-browed son apart from the others
 sitting upon the highest peak of rugged Olympos.
 She came and sat beside him with her left hand embracing
 his knees, but took him underneath the chin with her right hand
 and spoke in supplication to lord Zeus son of Kronos:
 “Father Zeus, if ever before in word or action
 I did you favour among the immortals, now grant what I ask for.
 Now give honour to my son short-lived beyond all other
 mortals. Since even now the lord of men Agamemnon
 dishonours him, who has taken away his prize and keeps it.
 Zeus of the counsels, lord of Olympos, now do him honour.
 So long put strength into the Trojans, until the Achaians
 give my son his rights, and his honour is increased among them.”

Here we see *εἰ ποτε* and its reference to past services (described previously by Achilleus in another passage involving *εἰ ποτε* at *Iliad* 1.393-412) employed in tandem with a very full description of supplication gestures in order to constitute a plea that a tradition-aware audience will recognize as a plea that should be answered favorably. However, Zeus remains silent after Thetis' entreaties and Achilleus' mother is once again forced to request the favor before the king of the gods finally agrees to grant her appeal for help. Therefore, a heightened feeling of suspense intrudes for a moment upon this scene—although by means of a method quite different from any found in a purely literary tradition—as the audience wonders if Zeus will indeed act in a way contrary to tradition. Of course, no such degree of suspense would even be possible without the metonymically indexed meaning of *εἰ ποτε* and of the rest of the supplication's important constituents.

Perhaps the most fascinating usage of εἰ ποτε in the epics occurs in the following scene, in which Hekabe begs Hektor not to continue fighting against Achilleus outside the walls of Troy (*Iliad* 22.79-89):

μήτηρ δ' αὐθ' ἔτέρωθεν ὀδύρετο δάκρυ χέουσα,
κόλπον ἀνιεμένη, ἔτέρηφι δὲ μαζὸν ἀνέσχε.
καὶ μιν δάκρυ χέουσ' ἔπεια πτερόεντα προσηγόρισα.
“Ἐκτορ, τέκνον ἐμόν, τάδε τ' αἴδειο καὶ μ' ἐλέησον
αὐτήν, εἰ ποτέ τοι λαθικηδέα μαζὸν ἐπέσχον.
τῶν μνῆσαι, φίλε τέκνον, ἄμυνε δὲ δῆϊον ἀνδρα
τείχεος ἐντὸς ἐών, μηδὲ πρόμοις ἵστασο τούτῳ,
σχέτλιος· εἰ περ γάρ σε κατακτάνῃ, οὐ σ' ἔτ' ἔγωγε
κλαύσομαι ἐν λεχέεσσι, φίλον θάλοις, ὃν τέκνον αὐτή,
οὐδὲ ἄλοχος πολύδωρος· ἀνευθε δέ σε μέγα νῷν
Ἄργειων παρὰ νηυσὶ κύνες ταχέες κατέδονται.”

And side by side with him his mother in tears was mourning
and laid the fold of her bosom bare and with one hand held out
a breast, and wept her tears for him and called to him in winged words:
“Hektor, my child, look upon these and obey, and take pity
on me, if ever I gave you the breast to quiet your sorrow.
Remember all these things, dear child, and from inside the wall
beat off this grim man. Do not go out as champion against him,
o hard one; for if he kills you I can no longer
mourn you on the death-bed, sweet branch, o child of my bearing,
nor can your generous wife mourn you, but a big way from us
beside the ships of the Argives the running dogs will feed on you.”

The emotional content of this scene is tremendous, especially since it is coupled with a preceding passage in which Priam also tearfully attempts to persuade his son not to do battle alone. However, in addition to the more obvious emotional elements depicted here in detail, we once again find εἰ ποτε as a crucial dimension of Hekabe's words. This phrase, undeniably linked to successful supplications in the Homeric epics, demonstrates by its appearance that Hekabe has now done everything within her power to persuade Hektor to cease from his fighting outside the walls of Troy, and that according to traditional usage she has every reason to expect her plea to carry the day. Nevertheless, this model supplication's predictable success is at odds with the fact that fate has already ordained Hektor's imminent death at the hands of Achilleus.⁸ These two conflicting forces add both suspense

⁸ Although Hektor's death is alluded to throughout the *Iliad*, it becomes a main focus of the epic in Book 18 and is even foretold miraculously at 19.408-17, where Xanthos (a horse) tells Achilleus of his own approaching death, which may occur only after he has killed Hektor.

and importance to Hekabe's plea, and the scene ends dramatically with Hektor necessarily rejecting his mother's supplication and continuing his march toward death.⁹ The poet has once again used the enriched traditional meaning of εἰ ποτε to add even more significance to an already emotion-filled scene.

Now that we have explored the metonymically indexed nature of εἰ ποτε within the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, two final points should be made to demonstrate even more fully the significance of this simple formulaic component in Homeric poetry. First, since the indexed meaning of εἰ ποτε is intertwined with its ambient oral tradition (for this phrase is at the same time both an enabling cue and a generated product of this tradition), a bit of doubt concerning our theory of this formula's metonymic meaning might arise if a dissimilar usage of εἰ ποτε occurred elsewhere in the ancient Greek *epos*, particularly in the Homeric Hymns. As Foley has stated, "because both Hymn and epic phraseologies stand in a symbiotic relationship to the same hexameter prosody, and therefore follow the same traditional rules, they are unlikely to have developed into wholly separate linguistic idioms" (1995:155). Thus, it is necessary that we investigate εἰ ποτε in reference to the Hymns and compare any additional developments of the phrase to that found in the Homeric epics.

There is, in fact, only a single instance of εἰ ποτε in the Homeric Hymns, and it occurs in the *Hymn to Demeter* as Demeter herself implores Helios to reveal to her what has happened to her daughter Persephone (64-73):¹⁰

Ἡέλι' αἰδεσσαί με θεὰν σύ περ, εἰ ποτε δὴ σευ
 ἦ ἔπει ἡ ἔργῳ κραδίην καὶ θυμὸν ἔηνα.
 κούρην τὴν ἔτεκον γλυκερὸν θάλος εἴδει κυδρήν
 τῆς ἀδινὴν ὅπ' ἀκουσα δι' αἰθέρος ἀτρυγέτοιο
 ᾳς τε βιαζομένης, ἀτὰρ οὐκ ἴδον δφθαλμοῖσιν.
 ἀλλὰ σὺ γάρ δὴ πᾶσαν ἐπὶ χθόνα καὶ κατὰ πόντον
 αἰθέρος ἐκ δίης καταδέρκεαι ἀκτίνεσσι,
 νημερτέως μοι ἔνισπε φίλον τέκος εἰ που ὄπωπας
 δς τις νόσφιν ἐμεῖο λαβὼν ἀέκουσαν ἀνάγκη
 οὔχεται ἥε θεῶν ἡ καὶ θνητῶν ἀνθρώπων.

⁹ Although it may be observed that one of Hekabe's wishes within this supplication speech (being able to mourn her son on the deathbed) does come to fruition, it should be stressed that the actual request that she makes of Hektor (that he refrain from fighting outside the Trojan walls) is indeed unsuccessful in its intent.

¹⁰ Quoted from Allen 1936. The English translation is from Athanassakis 1976, with slight changes made for emphasis.

"Helios, do have respect for me as a goddess, if ever I cheered your heart and soul by word or deed.
 Through the barren ether I heard the shrieking voice
 of my daughter famous for her beauty, a sweet flower at birth,
 as if she were being overcome by force, but I saw nothing.
 And since you do gaze down upon the whole earth
 and sea and cast your rays through the bright ether,
 tell me truly if you have seen anywhere
 what god or even mortal man in my absence
 seized by force my dear child and went away."

Since the request bears fruit and Helios tells Demeter all that he knows, this occurrence provides more support for the association of εἰ ποτε with successful scenes of prayer and supplication.

Finally, one additional item further illustrates the significance of εἰ ποτε in Homer—the clearly unrelated usage of the elided version of what is lexically the very same phrase: εἰ ποτ'. Although there are nine occurrences of εἰ ποτ' in the epics,¹¹ only one of them is even involved in a prayer or supplication (*Odyssey* 17.240). Furthermore, even though εἰ ποτ' of course has precisely the same denotative, lexical meaning as its unelided equivalent εἰ ποτε, it is impossible to find any evidence of its involving the same indexed meaning. This discrepancy demonstrates the arbitrary nature of the relationship between signs and their meanings in oral-derived poetry, and provides just one more piece of evidence that εἰ ποτε is indeed a significant element in Homeric poetry that, just like any other Homeric formula, relies upon its metonymically indexed nature to function as an enhanced compositional unit with a greatly extended connotative meaning. By understanding this tradition-enhanced signification, we can therefore gain a much greater appreciation not only of traditional phraseology but also of the Homeric poems themselves as narrative wholes.¹²

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¹¹ *Iliad* 2.97, 3.180, 11.762, 24.426; *Odyssey* 2.342, 15.268, 17.240, 19.315, 24.289.

¹² This note is adapted from an unpublished honors thesis completed at the University of Missouri-Columbia in May 1995. The thesis itself was the direct result of research which I began in the summer of 1994 under the mentorship of John Miles Foley and the sponsorship of the University of Missouri's Undergraduate Research Mentorship Program.

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