

1. Describe Parry's theory of epic compositional technique (as it is described by Visser), then describe Visser's contribution. How, in your opinion, do the theories of Parry and Visser influence our approach to the literary appreciation of the homeric poems?

Visser, Edzard. "Formulae or Single Words? Towards a New Theory on Homeric Verse-Making" *Würzburger Yearbuch für die Altertumswissenschaft* 14 (1988) 21-37.

Visser describes Parry's theory of epic compositional technique as instructive but flawed. The instruction comes as the recognition of a system of versification integral to oral verse production. But where Parry considers the epithet and noun two components of a fixed formula, Visser objects on the grounds that Parry's definition could not comprehend all the varieties of so-called "formulae" later found in Homer. Visser's contribution begins with his observation that there is an inconsistency between ET and Studies I: prefabricated formulae vs. one fixed element and one variable (i.e., the substantive and the epithet). Visser then distinguishes between the semantic and metrical constituents of the Homeric hexameter, arguing that the semantic use of a particular noun does not limit the epithet to an analog subset; rather, he says, the particular noun limits the epithet to a metrically restricted subset with some semantic variety. His limited contribution is to exemplify a broader application of the revised theory by analyzing one-line kill scenes in the *Iliad*—an extremely limited subset of the *Iliad*—where he shows nouns, verbs, and conjunctions forming the semantic foundation for a line of poetry and adverbial and adjectival modifiers added for *variatio*. Both Parry and Visser attempt to allow for the dismantling of Homeric verse with a view toward showing certain elements to be improvised or based on traditional elements which were themselves improvised. Visser is helpful to the extent that he liberates and expands Parry's approach; but, in my opinion, Homer's *poetic* genius and internal consistency transcend both men's formulae.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This is simply here for use in class discussion: To say that the Homeric corpus was likely composed orally because rote formulae were used simply as structural facilitators is to perilously ignore both the subtlety of the audience's ear and the ready genius of a great poet. What this means to us after Visser is what it should have meant to us well before Visser: Homer's epics are subtle works of art which can, fruitfully, be given careful attention both semantically and structurally. Visser's own samples are less than ideal, as they deal with little more than one thousandth of the Homeric corpus and are likely skewed. He assumes that, given a multitude of potential variations, Homer has limited himself to formulae because of the exigencies of extemporaneous composition. I propose we examine the corpus of literary epic to see if this phenomenon is not also reproduced in literary epic.