

## EPIC NARRATIVE STYLE IN THE ESCORIAL *DIGENIS AKRITIS*

Stylianos Alexiou's edition of the Escorial *Digenis Akritis* has made that poem accessible for the first time to a wide circle of readers<sup>1</sup>. The poor manuscript and difficult content had relegated Escorial to relative obscurity and low esteem. Alexiou has reversed that by publishing a superior text and critical notes of equal quality. He has also demonstrated that Escorial is our oldest and most authentic version. The most important categories of evidence are these: Escorial's accurate memory of details that could not have survived a long oral transmission, these being (A) Byzantine military terms<sup>2</sup> and (B) historical events<sup>3</sup>, social customs<sup>4</sup>, geography<sup>5</sup>, language<sup>6</sup>, and proper names<sup>7</sup> from the Arab world; (C) the relatively inaccurate record of the same in Grottaferrata (Escorial's only serious rival for primacy among the versions); (D) Escorial's integrity of language and style compared with the generally derivative quality of Grottaferrata (henceforth G)<sup>8</sup>. This evidence is sure to find acceptance by an increasing majority of scholars. The relative age and importance of the two versions has, then, finally been established, and Alexiou's dating to the twelfth century also seems certain.

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1. Βασίλειος Διγενής Ἀκρίτης καὶ τὸ ἄσμα τοῦ Ἀρμούρη, Κριτική ἔκδοση (Ἐρμῆς, Ἀθήνα, 1985). Cited henceforth as Alexiou<sup>1</sup>.

2. See S. Alexiou, Ἀκριτικά. Τὸ πρόβλημα τῆς ἐγκυρότητας τοῦ κειμένου E - Χρονολόγηση, Ἀποκατάσταση χωρίων - Ἑρμηνευτικά, Ἡράκλειο - Κρήτης, 1979, pp. 31-2. Cited henceforth as Alexiou<sup>2</sup>.

3. A striking example is mention of the Καίοιοι at 245. These were sectarian terrorists, mentioned in only three other medieval sources, all from the twelfth century. This gives a *terminus ad quem*, since a moslem sect would scarcely have been remembered in Greek song long after its demise. Their center in Persia was destroyed by the Mongols in 1256. Their last strongholds in Syria fell in 1273, after which they became vassals of the Franks. See Alexiou<sup>1</sup>, p. 99 and Alexiou<sup>2</sup>, 30-1.

4. E.g. the utterance or writing of curses in sacred places (248); see Alexiou<sup>2</sup>, pp. 33-5.

5. *Ibid.*, 17 ff. A striking example is found in verse 732, where the place-names Herakleion, Iconium (Κόνιον) and Amori appear in that order as cities overrun by the emir. Assuming he attacked from south to north, the order is correct. Grottaferrata (I. 294-5) jumbles them. See Alexiou<sup>2</sup>, p. 59.

6. E.g. μούλε (31). See Alexiou's note *ad loc.* The word occurs in no other Greek text.

7. See Alexiou<sup>2</sup>, pp. 24 ff.

8. To cite just two examples, see Alexiou's discussion of Grottaferrata's use of the verb ἐκπίπτω at VI. 96, and his comparison of Digenis' song to his beloved at Escorial 839 ff. and Grottaferrata IV. 401 ff. - Παρατηρήσεις στὸν Ἀκρίτη, Ἀριάδνη 1 (1982), 47-8 and 49-51.

The style of Escorial (henceforth E) confirms Alexiou's conclusions. What I mean is that it reveals certain techniques of composition (and I do *not* refer to formulaic expressions) that associate it, on the one hand, with the epics of ancient Greece, the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and, on the other, with the epics of roughly contemporary medieval Europe – the *Nibelungenlied* and *Chanson de Roland*. This assertion will surprise, given the humble nature of E in comparison with these monumental epics. To explain: a striking feature of the Homeric epics, besides formulaic diction, is their orderly and methodical composition of single scenes. This same characteristic obtains in the great epics of medieval Europe. They reveal the same kind of symmetrical arrangements, both in the narration of events and construction of speeches. The epic poets are, above all, *orderly*. Their narratives are sustained by a close taxis<sup>9</sup>.

The origins of this style lie, I believe, in the realm of the practical, namely in the circumstances of oral composition – although I do not believe that *Digenis* is an oral creation. We have to do with a phenomenon intrinsic to living heroic poetry, whether composed extemporaneously before a live audience, or merely recited to it. Repetition in fixed progressions, incessant use and re-use of certain details, orderly disposition – all this had practical value for a singer assembling a piece and for the audience hearing it. Systematic composition was born from the exigencies of oral delivery imposed on poet and audience alike.

It is because of this fundamental similarity in genetic inheritance, so to speak, that the epics of ancient Greece and medieval Europe share a stylistic habitus. I do not mean that they are oral compositions. The *Nibelungenlied* and *Digenis* are surely not, and the origins of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* remain murky. What I do mean is that the scrupulous scene-design they all share descends ultimately from basic techniques of oral performance<sup>10</sup>.

But if this style originated in every-day practice, it eventually outgrew its utilitarian beginnings. All the epics in question, and I include the Escorial *Digenis* among them, refined orderly composition into a vehicle of artistry. Whether this was ever an accomplishment of the pure oral style, or was attained only by literate poets who knew the oral manner first-hand and adopted its mannerisms – I leave that question in abeyance because I do not know how to answer it. Nor is it the most fruitful question right now.

Escorial *Digenis* shows, then, strong and precisely identifiable stylistic affinities with Homer and medieval European epic. It is of little importance that *Digenis* is not composed at the same level of mastery as, say, the *Iliad*. What matters is that the two share fundamental stylistic traits. They construct narrative, at the level of scene and episode, in the same manner. Significantly, G does not. Where E shapes and articulates, G flows

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9. For the orderliness of epic narrative in general, see A. B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Harvard, 1960), pp. 92 f. For this same feature in Homer and medieval European epic, see B. Fenik, *Homer and the Nibelungenlied* (Harvard, 1986), *passim*.

10. Similarly, Mark Edwards emphasizes the style of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* as a product of centuries of development by epic singers. Their oral techniques are so visible that, no matter what the circumstances of their composition or writing, they must be considered «oral» poems. *Homer, the Poet of the Iliad* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), p. 3, 21-3.

with looser constraint. E holds itself to the primal rules of its genre. G has lost contact with these roots. It is a more free and idiosyncratic creation. Whatever learned sources helped shape it, E feeds from a living tradition of heroic poetry. G has retained little beyond the irreducible kernel of plot and cast of characters.

I shall present here several examples from a full-length study in progress, confining myself to *speeches* in E, because limitations of space preclude examining longer narrative episodes. I shall cite a few parallels from ancient and European epic, but my main effort will be to illustrate from E itself.

### 1. *The emir returns to Syria*

E's characters often say the same thing twice in succession and in the same order, but at greater length the second time. It is a basic stylistic feature, and examples range from the simple to the complex. Lines 373-81 demonstrate the manner at its most plain: the emir promises his bride that he will return after a brief visit with his family:

Ἡ ἀγάπη γὰρ μὲ ἀνάγκασεν, πρὸς ὀλίγας ἡμέρας,  
τῆς ταπεινῆς μου τῆς μητρὸς καὶ ὄλων τῶν συγγενῶν μου,  
θέλω νὰ πάω νὰ τοὺς ἰδῶ καὶ πάλι νὰ ὑποστρέψω. 375

«Love for my mother and family compel me: I will visit them for a few days and come back». Having said that once, the emir now says it again, binding himself this time with an oath and setting an exact term for his absence:

Εἶδασι γὰρ < τὰ > ὀμμάτια μου τὰ δάκρυα τῆς μητρὸς μου  
καὶ ὡς δι' αὐτὸν ὑπαγαίνω.  
Καὶ μὰ τὸν φοβερὸν κριτῆν, τὸν τρέμει πᾶσα ἡ κτίσις,  
τὸν τρέμουν οἱ Σαρακηνοὶ καὶ οἱ Χριστιανοὶ < καὶ οἱ > πάντες,  
δώδεκα νυκτοῦμερα νὰ ποιήσω εἰς τὰ ἐδικὰ μου 380  
καὶ ἄλλα εἰκοσιτέσσερα ὥστε νὰ πάγω νὰ ῥθῶ.

Reasons for leaving (373-4; 376-7) are followed by a promise to return (375; 378-81). The second round amplifies the first. There is no equivalent to these lines in G.

### 2. *The brothers apologize*

For a longer and more impressive example, we turn to 439-54. The girl's brothers ask forgiveness for their harsh language and guarantee the emir his freedom to leave -if he promises not to desert his family for good. (1) Pardon us our bitter words (439). (2) Go to Syria, but swear not to forget your wife and son (439-42):

Καὶ μὴ μᾶς μέφεσαι, γαμπρέ, διατὶ σὲ ἀγριομιλοῦμεν.  
Καὶ ἂν θέλης πᾶν εἰς τὴν Συρίαν, θέλομεν νὰ ὀμόσης,  
τῆς κόρης νὰ μὴν λησμονῆς, τῆς ἡλιογεννημένης,  
καὶ τοῦ παγκάλου σου υἱοῦ, τοῦ Διγενῆ τ' Ἀκρίτη. 440

They now make the same two points again, but at greater length. (1) Do not take our rebuke to heart:

Καὶ μηδὲν σοῦ φανῆ κακὸν διατὶ ὄνειδίσασμέν σε,  
ἄμῃ ἔβγαλέ την τὴν κακὴν καρδίαν ἀπὸ τὸν νοῦν σου  
καὶ ἔχε ἡμερότητα, μᾶλλον δὲ καὶ πραότην, 445  
νὰ εἶσαι καὶ πανεύφημος ᾗ ὄλην τὴν οἰκουμένην.

## (2) Swear to return:

Καὶ ἔμεῖς νὰ σὲ ἀποβγάλωμεν καὶ ὁ Θεὸς νὰ σὲ βοηθήσῃ,  
 ὅπου τὸν κόσμον διακροατεῖ καὶ πάντας ἐπιβλέπει·  
 καὶ πάλιν νὰ ὑποστραφῆς, νὰ ἔλθῃς διασυντόμως.  
 Εἰ δὲ καὶ βούλεσαι, γαμπρέ, ἄλλον < νὰ > μὴ ὑποστρέψῃς 450  
 καὶ ν' ἀρνηθῆς τὸ ἀδελφί μας  
 ἢ τὸ ἄνθος, τὸν ἀγγελινόν, τὸν Διγενή σου παῖδαν,  
 ἐλπίζομεν εἰς τὸν Θεόν, ὅπου τοὺς πάντας βλέπει,  
 < ἄλλον > νὰ μὴ ἴδῃς τὴν Συρίαν, ἃν οὐδὲν ὑποστρέψῃς.

Both these examples depict solemn moments: departure, promise, and oath. Repetition makes for emphasis; repeats in a fixed order even more so. G has none of this. The brothers' apology is reduced to three lines (II. 346-8), and the emir's exuberant thanks (E 457 ff.) becomes a prayer to Jesus (II. 251 ff.).

Sequential repetition of block units is found in all the great epics. Limitations of space prevent little more than bare mention of the parallel *laissez* in the *Chanson de Roland*, the repeated patterns, one after the other, there and in the *Nibelungenlied*, and the repeated ideas in a single speech, more insistent and marked even than those in E, in the *Chanson de Roland* and *Rolandslied*<sup>11</sup>. The feature is deeply rooted in the epic manner. I cite just one example from the *Chanson de Roland*<sup>12</sup>. When Oliver dies (*laisse* 150, lines 2010-20), Roland sees him and weeps:

Morz est li quens, que plus ne se demuret.  
 Rollant li ber le pluret, sil duluset,  
 Jamais en tere n'orrez plus dolent hume!

The count is dead, he lingers no more.  
 Noble Roland weeps over him and laments him,  
 You shall never see a sadder man on earth!

But the next *laisse*, and the lines immediately following, repeat the same action:

Or veit Rollant que mort sun ami,  
 Gesir adenz, a la tere sun vis.  
 Mult dulcement a regreter le prist:

11. I refer especially to: *laissez* 40-42 of the *Chanson de Roland*, where the Saracen king, Marsile, asks the same question three times and receives the same answer three times from Ganelon; to Sivrit's battle against the giant and dwarf, who guard his treasure, in two successive and mirrored combats (*Nibelungenlied* 489-499), and to the habit of the *Rolandslied* of developing scenes and speeches in two parallel stages—cf. 2415 ff., 1636 ff., and 1760-2264. For a discussion of these various scenes, see B. Fenik, *Homer and the Nibelungenlied*, pp. 132-5, 51, 146-9.

12. Text and translations from the *Chanson de Roland* and from G.J. Brault, *The Song of Roland, an Analytical Edition*, Vol. 2, Oxford Text and English Translation (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1978).

Now Roland sees that his friend is dead,  
Lying prone, his face toward the earth.  
He begins to lament him very softly.

Roland's lament is completed only in the second instance. We first hear of it in short form (2021-3). Then, at 2024 ff., as if Roland now learned of his friend's death for the first time («Now Roland sees that his friend is dead»), he proceeds to lament him in full. The long version follows the short. Patterned repetition creates emphasis, solemnity, and elevation.

### 3. *The maiden's despair*

Speeches in E are often built around simple but highly regular patterns. A good example are the maiden's cries of despair at the threats of the ἀπελάτες (1161-7):

τὰ λόγια ταῦτα ἐπίστευσεν καὶ ἔμην τοιαῦτα ἐλάλει:  
«Ὅϊμέν, ἀφέντη μου καλέ, βέβαιον νὰ μᾶς χωρίσουν  
σήμερον ἀπ' ἀλλήλων».

Σφικτὰ σφικτὰ μὲ ἐφίλησεν καὶ οὕτως μὲ συντυχαίνει:

«Αὐθέντη μου, ἄς φιλήσωμεν τῆς ἀποχωρισίας».

1165

Κλαίουσα γὰρ μὲ ἔλεγεν ἐκ στεναγμοῦ καρδίας:

«Σήμερον χωριζόμεθα, τίς νὰ τὸ ὑπομένη;».

The verses alternate between one-line introductions (1161, 1164, 1166) and one-line speeches (1162, 1165, 1167). The six-plus verses thus comprise three *couplets*. In the introductions, we observe the variation of words «to speak»: ἐλάλει (1161), συντυχαίνει (1164), ἔλεγεν (1166). The second distichs of 1161 and 1164 are strongly parallel. All three one-line speeches emphasize impending separation. Note as well ἀφέντη μου and αὐθέντη μου at 1162 and 1165. Thus, three almost hysterical outbursts are held to a clock-work regularity. This is a disciplined expression of high emotion. G omits it almost entirely, giving the girl only two lines: one speaks of separation, the other develops a rhetorical conceit. VI. 140-1:

«ὄτι», φησί, «πρὸ τῆς ψυχῆς τέθνηκεν ἡ φωνή μου·  
ἰδοὺ γὰρ χωριζόμεθα καὶ ζῆν οὐ θέλω φέρειν».

### 4. *The emir admits his abduction of the maiden*

The emir begins (145-7) and ends (158-9) the first part of his speech on the subject of ancestry: first, the names of his father, uncle, and grandfather, and their honorific burial<sup>13</sup>; then, at the close, the disgrace he has brought them:

13. The burial of distinguished persons near the tomb of Mohammed was an Arab custom. This is an important example of authentic historical tradition preserved in E (G has no trace of the detail – I. 284 and IV. 37), as are the forms of the Arab names. See Alexiou<sup>2</sup>, 24-8, 93. and Alexiou<sup>1</sup> *ad loc.*

τὰ φουσάτα ἐντροπίασα καὶ ὄλην μου τὴν γενεάν.

Σήμερον νὰ ἀπόθανα καὶ οὐ θέλω τὴν ζωὴν μου.

In between, two ideas alternate: (1) nobody ever withstood me before, for I have overcome countless Persians and Greeks alike (149-52); (2) I will never forget the disgrace I suffered at your hands today (153); (1) since I started to campaign, no one ever equalled me or stopped my advance (154-6); (2) but I will never forget what I suffered from you (157). In outline:

- A. Ancestry, 154-7.
- B. Nobody ever withstood me before, 149-52.
- C. τὸ θέαμα τὸ ἔπαθα εἰς ἐσᾶς ποτὲ οὐκ ἔλησμονῶ το. (153)
- B. Nobody ever equalled or stopped me, 154-6.
- C. καὶ ἐδάριτε τὸ ἔπαθα εἰς ἐσᾶς ποτὲ οὐκ ἔλησμονῶ το. (157)
- A. I have disgraced my army and my family, 158-9.

The corresponding section of G shows no trace of this<sup>14</sup>.

##### 5. *Digenis' farewell*

The hero's last words to his men show a firm pattern (1709 ff.), at least up to verse 1749. The pious admonitions after that (1750-8), with their ecclesiastical flavor and biblical reminiscences, belong to a different style.

Digenis recalls his exploits and asks his friends' remembrance. He does this in two stages, each in the same sequence of anecdote and sentiment.

- I A. Remember how three-hundred Arabs surrounded me, and I scattered them before you could arm yourselves and mount, 1709-14.
- B. Remember how you all fled the lions by the Euphrates; I slew the lioness and drove away the others, 1715-28.
- C. I am reminding you so you will always remember me. You never achieved what I accomplished alone. I guarded you and my beloved single-handedly, 1729-32.

The second set of reminiscences follows immediately, and in the same order:

- II A. I endured fierce trials protecting my bride from the freebooters, 1733-9.
- B. The two of us met the dragon alone. He wanted to take the maiden and devour me, but God saved us and we came to no harm, 1740-7.
- C. You see what trials I endured, but you were not with me, 1748-9.

14. G I. 284 ff. G garbles the proper names (see preceding note) and confuses the geographical relation of Herakleia, Amorion, and Iconium (294-5). E puts them in proper order in a different context at 732. This is an important detail - Alexiou<sup>2</sup>, 59.

A clear pattern, then: I, how he rescued his men, II, how he rescued his bride. There are two examples for each: the first (A) against men (Arabs in the first instance, freebooters in the second), the second (B) against beasts (lions against his men, the dragon against his bride). Each series is summed up (C) with emphasis on how he did it himself:

1733-4, Καὶ εἶς τὰ ἄλλα οὐδὲν ἐφθάσετε, τὰ μόνος μου ἐπολέμουν,  
καὶ ἐγὼ μόνος σᾶς ἔβλεπα ἐσᾶς καὶ τὴν καλήν μου.

1748-9, Καὶ εἶδετε, παλληκάρια μου, μόνος πῶς ἐπειράσθη  
καὶ ἐσεῖς ἄλλοῦ ἠύρῖσκεσθε καὶ μετ' ἐμὲν οὐκ ἦσθε.

Verbal repetitions articulate the single parts: θυμᾶσθε (1709), ὡς διὰ νὰ μοῦ θυμᾶσθε (1732), νὰ μοῦ θυμᾶσθε (1762). These mark sections of the speech: (1) reminiscence about his men, (2) about his bride, (3) final words<sup>15</sup>. The encounter with the lion is introduced by εἶδετε (1715), and that same verb stresses the men's witness to the deed at 1723 and 1725. That sets the exploit in contrast to what they did *not* see (1733-4, 1748-9, above). The whole series is rounded off with another εἶδετε at 1748-9. This is mature epic style.

G substitutes a generally equivalent farewell by Digenis to his wife (VIII. 64 ff.), recalling their elopement, the dragon, the lion, the brigands, and Maximou. G may be holding to a source here, for it builds a refrain. Most of the exploits are introduced by «Do you remember?» (69, 77, 81, 90, 104), and concluded with «I did all this out of love for you» (79-80, 88-9, 102-3, 115-6, 121-2). But the repetition is mechanical and excessive. G cannot imitate the true epic manner even when it tries, and the speech is also disfigured by G's usual verbosity and trivial sentiment.

I append two examples of repeated patterns and symmetrical composition from the *Odyssey*. In Book 5, Odysseus suffers shipwreck and battles a heavy sea to reach the island of Scheria. This desperate struggle is described in orderly and repetitive sequences<sup>16</sup>.

1. Odysseus reflects on his plight in a monologue, 297-312.
2. The sea shatters his raft, 313-23.
3. He clings to the timbers, 324-32.
4. The goddess Ino helps him, 333-55.

These same events now repeat themselves in order.

1. Odysseus reflects on his prospects in a second monologue, 356-64.
2. Another wave shivers the remains of his raft, 365-70.
3. He drifts on the debris, 370-5.
4. The goddess Athena quiets the waves, 382.

Both sequences begin with a monologue. These, in turn, are introduced by the same verse (299 = 356). Odysseus holds two more monologues in the sequel, at 408-23 and 465-73. These also serve as mark-points in a large narrative structure. In both these

15. Compare the repeated (ἐν)θυμᾶσθε in the letter from the emir's mother: 236, 238, 240, 249, 254, 257, 264.

16. See Fenik, *Homer and the Nibelungenlied*, p. 66.

later monologues, Odysseus weighs two alternatives, *each of them bad*. First (408-23): If I try to make land, I may perish in the surf; if I remain offshore, I may be swept away and fall prey to a creature of the deep. Second (465-73): If I sleep by the river, I may die of cold; if I seek the thicket, I may be attacked by an animal. Between these two deliberations, Athena saves the hero *twice*, and in the same terms. He *would* have been ground against the cliffs, but the goddess inspires him to seize a rock until the wave flows by (425-9). But when flung from his perch by the ebb of that same wave, he again *would* have drowned had Athena not inspired him to swim parallel to the beach for an easy landfall.

Second example: in Book three of the *Odyssey* (130 ff.), Nestor describes for Telemachus the Greeks' departure from Troy. There are many single persons to tell about, but mere listing would make for a dull and shapeless account. Homer's solution is simple and elegant. Nestor bases everything on personal experience and relates as follows. After the sack, the Achaians hold an assembly in which the army falls into *two* opposed camps: (1) those following Menelaus who want to sail immediately, (2) those siding with Agamemnon who remain to complete the sacrifices. The force with Menelaus sails to the island of Tenedos and there splits *in two*: (1) some, under Odysseus, return to Agamemnon; (2) the rest continue on their way. These last now divide again *in two*: (1) Diomedes and Nestor sail ahead in one squadron; (2) Menelaus embarks a little later and overtakes them at Lesbos. Here they consider *two* possible routes home, and choose one after a sign from the gods. Nestor and Diomedes cross as *one* pair; of the *rest*, Nestor can report only from hearsay. The procedure is methodical and tidy. It has obvious convenience for the storyteller. Selection and distribution reduce a jumble of events to orderly stages with direction and even a modest story-line<sup>17</sup>.

Examples like these from the *Odyssey* are impressive for their length and complexity, but also for their quiet operation. They lie beneath the surface, giving shape, direction, emphasis, and order, but they remain unobtrusive. Homer employs the technique at a high level. The point of comparing him to *Digenis* is not that the latter achieves the same virtuosity, but because it is, nevertheless, composed in a basically similar manner. And E does, in fact, attain a considerable mastery of its own.

There is an identifiable epic style in the narration of scenes and episodes. It descends from oral composition, but it is not exclusively oral. E has it. These similarities of style between the epics result from a process analogous to what natural scientists call «convergent evolution». This is the development of similar characteristics in unrelated species evolving in similar environments. The similar environments here are the singer, a listening audience, and the need for a lucid story-line with order and transparency. The techniques developed to meet these needs acquire complexity and reveal artistic potential far exceeding the practical demands that summoned them into being. They assume a life of their own and pass into the repertory of literate composers.

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17. For more examples, see B. Fenik, *Studies in the Odyssey* (Wiesbaden, 1974), pp. 143 ff.