BATR. 240: TOWARD THE STYLISTIC ANALYSIS
OF THE BATRACHOMYOMACHIA

Batrachomyomachia 240 reads as follows:

κείμενον ἐν δαπέδῳ λίθον ὄβριμον, ἄχθος ἀρούρης

Ludwich, in his commentary ad loc., adjoins the following two Homeric comparanda: Od. 9.305, with the phrase λίθον ὄβριμον, and Il. 18.104, with the phrase ἄχθος ἀρούρης. But there is much more we can say about the Homeric background of Batr. 240, speaking purely in terms of meter and formula.

Consider first the phrase ἄχθος ἀρούρης. Ludwich in fact cites the entire line Il. 18.104, in which ἄχθος ἀρούρης appears in final position; the metrical and phraseological correspondence with Batr. 240 is therefore evident. It is interesting to note, however, that five of the six occurrences of ἄχθος in Homer appear precisely in the metrical position ἄχθος - #; in addition to the two instances of ἄχθος ἀρούρης just cited, note ἄχθος ἐπείτε: # Il. 12.452, ἄχθος ἄροιτο # Il. 20.247, ἄχθος ἄρεται # Od. 3.312. (I return to the sixth Homeric occurrence of ἄχθος below.)

Similarly, Ludwich cites the first four words of Od. 9.305 (# χεριν ἀπώσσασθαι λίθον ὄβριμον), which allows us to see that λίθον ὄβριμον in Batr. 240 appears in the same position in the line. But again, this is not an isolated fact, but part of a larger network of correspondences: note the position of λίθον in Il. 7.264 ἅλλ’ ἀναχασσόμενος λίθον εἴλετο χειρὶ παχεῖτ, with the variant ἅ ἄναχασσομένη λίθον εἴλετο χειρὶ παχεῖτ at Il. 21.403. Both of these lines, significantly, are followed by an identical line that begins # κείμενον ἐν πέδιο.

As for the # κείμενον ἐν δαπέδῳ of Batr. 240: the same line-initial phrase appears in Od. 11.577; cf. Od. 22.188 # κομβὲ, ἐν δαπέδῳ and Il. 4.2 # χρυσόν ἐν δαπέδῳ, both with ἐν δαπέδῳ in the same metrical position, and further Od. 4.627 = 17.169 # ἐν τούτῳ δαπέδῳ, with line-initial ἐν and identically positioned δαπέδῳ. In terms of ‘subliminal verbal patterning’ it is noteworthy that the consonantal sequences preceding δαπέδῳ in all of these phrases show phonetically similar inventories, consisting of the voiceless velar stops [k] and [kh], the sonorants [m], [n], and [r], and the voiceless dentals [t] and [s]; the near phonetic identity of kouriks and khruseôi, which extends to the nature and sequencing of the non-consonantal segments (here cf. tuktôi), is particularly striking.

The status of ὄβριμον, finally, deserves special mention. In Homer, apart from the λίθον ὄβριμον at Od. 9.305 (already cited) and a lone line-initial # ὄβριμον at Od. 9.241, ὄβριμος shows remarkable regularity in its...
metrical and formulaic behavior. The remaining twenty-two occurrences (not counting repeated lines) all show the pattern ἐβριμός/ἐβριμον — ≠ # (once with the variant ἐβριμ’ — ≠ #). These can be subdivided, in turn, into two categories, which occur with approximately equal frequency. The first involves ἐβριμός plus the names "Ἀρτης or "Ἐκτωρ (8 x), cf. the variant ἐβριμ" Ἀχιλλέες # Il. 19.408. Second, one finds ἐβριμον plus neuter noun (13 x), of which the phrase ἐβριμον ἔγχος # is the most frequent (11 x). The two remaining cases of this type are ἐβριμον ὕδωρ # Il. 4.453, and ἐβριμόν ἔγχος # Od. 9.233, here with the sixth (and deviant) occurrence of ἔγχος, referred to above. This last collocation reveals, finally, the intricacy of the nexus of correspondences underlying Batr. 240: the poet has reproduced (whether consciously or not) both the metrical pattern ἔγχος θ — ≠ # (in its most frequent incarnation ἔγχος ἀρωφίτις #), as well as a lexical reminiscence of the unique line-final occurrence of ἔγχος in Homer (with contiguous ἐβριμον, which is nevertheless syntactically unconnected with ἔγχος in Batr. 240). We have, then, an associative overlapping ‘chain’ λῆθον ὕδωρ # / ἐβριμόν ἔγχος / ἔγχος ἀρωφίτις; each link, moreover, has its own Homeric pedigree of fixed metrical and formulaic behavior. Lastly, it is not without interest that all of the occurrences of ἐβριμός in the Odyssey surface within the relatively short span of Od. 9.233-305, namely (a) ὕδωρ ἔγχος # (with unique line-final ἔγχος # in Homer), (b) ἔγχος # ὕδωρ (unique line-initial # ἐβριμον in Homer), and (c) λῆθον ὕδωρ (the phrase appearing in Batr. 240). The commonplace assumption that the Batrachomyomachia shows an “obvious dependence on the Iliad”6) is clearly correct, grosso modo. But Hansjörg Wölke’s important discussion of the varied genres in the fabric of the poem7) has shown that the literary patrimony of the Batrachomyomachia is quite varied; the precise phraseological contributions of works other than the Iliad should thus be studied in this light.

The Batrachomyomachia, to be sure, is a parodistic pastiche, the literary and comic merits of which are not very highly regarded nowadays, to the extent that they are regarded at all.8) But we do not enhance our understanding of the poem merely by disparaging it; specifically, we are not justified in neglecting the interesting stylistic issues the poem raises, many of which concern the precise nature of the poet’s imitative and allusive art. Previous analyses have submerged this perspective, in favor of vague and superficial discussions of the mixed ‘vocabulary’ and ‘diction’ of the poem. Such treatments are generally used to support dating theories, given alleged Attic or Hellenistic elements in the poem.9) But there is so far not the slightest agreement as to the use of such criteria for dating the poem, and I suggest that the real stylistic interest of the Batrachomyomachia lies elsewhere.10) These remarks on Batr. 240 (which is an altogether typical line) show that the imitative and allusive processes at work in the poem, on a minute level of meter and phraseology, are extremely complex. One must emphasize, moreover, that the question of the poet’s ‘conscious awareness’ of the imitative technique just described—however