

Chapter 4: Homer and *The Iliad*

I. An Introduction to Homeric Epic

A. *The Cypria*: The Background to *The Iliad* and the Trojan War

The stories we'll review below once comprised an ancient Greek epic called *The Cypria*. Like all such works except Homer's *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, this poem consists now of only a few random fragments. Termed as a group the **epic cycle**, these three along with several other long narrative poems told the complete story of the Trojan War, episode by episode.

1. The Plot of *The Cypria*

The myth of the Trojan War begins long before the hostilities erupted. Like so many extended conflicts, it starts at a wedding, actually a bit before the nuptials themselves with the reason for the wedding, an oracle which proclaimed that the male who sired offspring by **Thetis**, the sea nymph, would procreate a son greater than himself. It was essentially a warning to Zeus not to dally with Thetis, as he was wont to do among lesser female deities and mortal women. To universal surprise and acclaim, Zeus saw the wisdom in this and managed to contain himself for once. He decided instead to give Thetis in marriage to a mortal. After all, who cares if she gives birth to a son who's greater than some mere mortal, right?

A good idea, but it didn't turned out well. Zeus bestowed the sea nymph as bride on **Peleus**, a Greek king. The gods held a magnificent wedding for them on Olympus and invited everyone except **Eris**, the goddess of discord. Being by nature a rather unpleasant individual, Eris took the rejection badly. She crashed the wedding and threw into the midst of the celebrations a golden apple inscribed "For the most beautiful." Immediately three goddesses claimed it: Hera, Athena and Aphrodite; that is, power, brains and beauty. After some squabbling, they turned to Zeus to decide who should have the apple. Seeing that it was a no-win situation—in other words, if he chose one, he would make enemies of the other two—Zeus refused to be the judge and again passed the buck to mortals. He told the goddesses to present themselves to a chosen man who'd award the apple to the most beautiful of them. After all, who cares if two goddesses hate some mere mortal?

Another good idea fraught with problems. The first was which mortal should be the lucky judge. He couldn't be smart because he'd be biased for Athena. He couldn't be a king who'd naturally prefer a queen like Hera. What was needed was a simple, honest, unpretentious middle-of-the-road voter. Having recently visited Asia Minor and knowing all things anyway, Zeus chose as judge a simple shepherd who was actually a royal prince, abandoned at birth—Hera would like that and she was, after all, the goddess Zeus slept with—because an oracle had declared that he'd bring about the end of his native city Troy. His name was **Paris**, sometimes known as **Alexander**. The three goddesses

contending in this, the primordial Miss Universe pageant, appeared before him and strutted their stuff.

The question-and-answer part of the pageant turned out to be crucial, since the question Paris posed to the goddesses was basically "If I pick you, what will you do for me?" Each offered him a special gift in exchange for the apple. First, Hera promised him kingly power, but what does a shepherd care about being a king? He's probably never seen a city or government, and he's a king already—of sheep! Second, Athena vowed to make him wise, but that wasn't really a very wise choice because, if he'd been wise enough to see the wisdom of her gift, why would he have needed wisdom?

Finally, Aphrodite swore to give him the most beautiful woman in the world as his wife, a very savvy bribe since women are a commodity in short supply among shepherds and the most beautiful women in the world are seldom ever seen in shepherd circles. Paris' choice was clear. He handed Aphrodite the apple and earned for himself and his native city Troy Hera and Athena's unending enmity. But even as she walked the walk, weeping, waving and hugging the apple, Aphrodite must have known there was a catch. Helen, the reigning Miss This-World, was presently the wife of a Greek king, Menelaus of Sparta.

How this had come to be is a story in itself, one that begins like many Greek myths which oracles don't launch, with Zeus' libidinous proclivities, in this case his special interest in a mortal woman named **Leda**. As so often happened to him, things didn't begin with a bang for the king of the universe because, when he first approached the lovely Leda, she rejected him. Apparently, she had very high standards. But a little later Zeus spotted her embracing a pet bird, which gave him an idea. He turned himself into a beautiful white swan and made a second try. Seeing the lovely bird, Leda stretched out her arms to embrace it—and nine months later she laid two eggs. The laws of biology aren't always fully enforced in Greek myth.

From each of these eggs came a set of twins—four children total—one pair mortal and one immortal: Helen and Pollux, immortal; and Clytemnestra and Castor, mortal. Pollux and Castor later became the Gemini still seen today in astronomy and astrology. The female duo were no less famous in antiquity. When Helen grew up, for instance, she was so beautiful that many men wanted to marry her. It was decided that in order to prevent a terrible fight and much bloodshed over who would have her hand in marriage a drawing would be held to determine her husband, and all the suitors would swear to protect the winner's right to have her, the so-called **oath of the suitors**. At this drawing Menelaus of Sparta won, his brother Agamemnon coming in second and receiving Helen's sister Clytemnestra as his prize—a booby prize if ever there was! Clytemnestra would later kill the victorious Agamemnon upon his return home from Troy.

So, at the time of the Judgment of Paris, Helen was married to Menelaus. But to secure the golden apple, Aphrodite had promised Paris the most beautiful woman in the world, and that was Helen. Now the goddess had to deliver the goods. She took Paris to Sparta and made Helen fall in love with him. Then she helped them run off to Troy together,

leaving Menelaus alone and angry. He and his brother Agamemnon mustered all the suitors who had sworn to defend Menelaus' conjugal rights at a port in northeastern Greece called **Aulis**. There they gathered and prepared their ships for an assault on Troy and the treacherous wife-stealer Paris.

A problem developed, however. The winds constantly blew toward shore and wouldn't let the Greek fleet sail. After a long delay, prophets were consulted who revealed that Agamemnon was to blame because he had wronged Artemis, the goddess of the hunt—Greek myth vary about the exact nature of his crime but it was a serious one—and she demanded in atonement that he sacrifice his eldest daughter **Iphigenia**. Only after that would she allow the winds to blow so that the ships could sail.

At his wit's end and with thousands of troops sitting idly on the beach, Agamemnon had no choice but to trick his wife Clytemnestra into bringing the girl to Aulis. He claimed falsely that he'd arranged for Iphigenia to marry the greatest of the Greek warriors **Achilles**. Instead, when Iphigenia arrived, Agamemnon slew his daughter with his own hands on what was to be her wedding altar. Clytemnestra never forgave her husband for deluding her and sacrificing Iphigenia, but Artemis did. On this inauspicious note the Greek fleet sailed to Troy.

2. Achilles

That brings up Achilles who, if anyone, is the central figure of the Trojan War. He's the child whom Thetis bore to Peleus, the son the oracle said would surpass his father. It was at Peleus' and Thetis' wedding that Eris threw the golden apple and the whole problem began culminating in the Trojan War. Thus, the oracle literally created Achilles.

And likewise another oracle would later destroy him, the divine revelation that Achilles would be instrumental in bringing about the fall of Troy but, in order to do so, would have to die there. When his mother Thetis heard this second oracle, she tried to subvert it by dipping the baby Achilles in the Styx, the river of death in Hades, which rendered his flesh impenetrable to puncture or wound. But because she couldn't put her own hand in the Styx—presumably she was a sea nymph and her waters didn't mix with the waters of Death—she held him by the ankles leaving him vulnerable to attack only there, hence the tendon at the back of the foot is called the "Achilles tendon." And indeed Achilles eventually died when of all people Paris shot him with a poisoned arrow in the ankle.

It's also worth noting that Achilles' life encompasses almost all of this period of time. He was born from the union of Peleus and Thetis and he died just before the fall of Troy. That is, he originated from the principal cause of the Trojan War—the oracle and the wedding at which Eris tossed out the apple of discord—and perished just before the war ended, having killed Hector, the best of the Trojan warriors, and thus providing the Greeks with the means of resolving the conflict. In many ways, then, this half-god half-man is the embodiment of the War itself, a conflict among mortals as well as immortals. Given this, it's no wonder Homer focused *The Iliad* on Achilles, a figure central in the

epic cycle of the Trojan War.

3. Conclusion

There's another important feature to note about the plot of *The Cypria*. Even though this story constitutes the background to *The Iliad*, it probably wasn't written first. Close analysis shows that *The Cypria* is not a coherent, independent story but a patchy collection of tales most likely forged later to explain certain peculiarities which go unaccounted for in *The Iliad* and other parts of the Homeric cycle.

For instance, the oath of the suitors shows why all the Greek chieftains are in Troy fighting over one man's wife, something Homer neglects to clarify. Likewise, the sacrifice of Iphigenia at Aulis gives Clytemnestra a strong motivation to kill Agamemnon upon his return, another essentially mysterious dimension of Homeric epic. Achilles' baptism in the Styx justifies his seeming invulnerability in *The Iliad* where, in fact, he's never seriously injured. And finally the Judgment of Paris explicates Athena's and Hera's hostility to the Trojans, a bias on which Homer fails to comment. The real reason why the Homeric epics included these seemingly inexplicable features is lost in time—and already was, no doubt, soon after their author's age—but the presence of a pre-quel like *The Cypria* demonstrates the high esteem in which Homer's work was held very soon after his lifetime.

B. Milman Parry and Oral Poetry

An important breakthrough in modern Homeric studies came in the first half of the twentieth century. As most readers quickly discover, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* are constructed in a curious fashion. First, Homer constantly uses repetitive phrases or **formulas**. For instance, when someone is making a response, Homer frequently says, often in exactly the same words: "And he answered in winged words."

Second, taken as a whole, the epics don't always make sense. In *The Iliad*, for example, there are several instances in which the same warrior dies twice. Likewise in *The Odyssey*, Circe tells Odysseus to visit the dead in order to find out from the deceased seer Teiresias how to get back to Ithaca, but when Odysseus does, Teiresias doesn't inform him about that. Odysseus then returns to Circe's island and she explains to him how to get home, leaving readers to wonder why she didn't just tell him in the first place. In the long run, these so-called **weak joins** seem a bit clumsy, certainly uncharacteristic of poetry so carefully disposed in other respects.

"In the long run," however, that, as it turns out, is the point. It's true that, if one compares parts of Homer's epics across large stretches, the pieces sometimes don't fit together well, but they always make sense in the immediate vicinity. Why? Was Homer a sloppy but talented writer, whizzing off these epics like repetitive romance novels? Did he have poor long-term memory? Was he really a committee of epic poets who couldn't agree on details and patched together their own favorite bits without regard for others' work? The

basic coherence and excellence of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* argue strongly against any such hypothesis.

The best answer to these questions—and very likely *the* answer—resulted from the research of **Milman Parry**, an American scholar who worked on Homeric epic in the 1920's and 1930's. Parry studied a type of poet called an **oral bard** whom he discovered in the former Yugoslavia. In particular, he noted that these bards were capable of composing poems "orally," meaning they made up verse on the spur of the moment for public performance. It's hard for us to imagine such a thing in an age of music videos and "concrete" poetry, arts which are as much a treat for the eye as the ear and which in one way or another the artist prepares prior to their presentation.

Parry showed, however, poets could generate epic verse spontaneously by using **oral formulas**, closely resembling those repetitive phrases so prevalent in Homer. When Parry began analyzing Homer and comparing him to Yugoslavian bards, he realized that *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* contained even more formulaic phrases than had been noticed before because Homer deployed such a wide and subtle range of formulas. Sometimes he deployed exact reproductions of earlier phrases, sometimes adaptations modulated to fit a slightly different slot in the verse, sometimes formulas which are only distant reflections of each other. The immediate implication of these findings was that Homer must have been an oral poet who worked in much the same way as the Yugoslavian bards Parry studied.

This **oral theory** also shed light on other anomalies in Homer. The weak joins in the story, such as cases where characters die twice in *The Iliad*, would have been all but imperceptible to an oral audience. Amidst the many warriors who die in that epic it's unlikely Homer's listeners remembered a passage several thousand lines ago where the same person had perished. Moreover, since it would have taken days to recite an epic the scope of either of Homer's—it's very doubtful *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* were meant to be sung as whole poems at one sitting—those passages wouldn't necessarily have been presented at the same performance.

Moreover, Homer's characters themselves seem not to be literate. They talk about singing poems, dancing to music, weaving, building, forging armor but never reading or writing. Only once are written letters even mentioned in Homer, when the unfortunate Bellerophon carries "baleful signs," a message which he himself can't read and which tells the addressee to kill the bearer. This accords remarkably well with Homer's position in history. There had indeed been a form of writing used in the Mycenaean period (pre-1100 BCE), but this sort of knowledge was lost by Homer's day. During the dark age of 1100-800 BCE, Greek civilization had relapsed into illiteracy. Thus, reading and writing were in the eighth century only distant memories, and probably rather intimidating ones at that.

And finally, because he lived so long ago, history has preserved next to nothing about Homer the man. We don't know for sure where or when he was born, if he traveled much

or how he died. What little biographical information comes down to us from antiquity seems for the most part to be later invention. That is, those who lived in antiquity after Homer appear themselves not to have known much about the poet's life, except for one thing.

Homer, they tell us, was blind and that small detail jibes well with oral theory. For one, literacy would have mattered little to a blind man. Whether or not reading and writing existed in his world, a blind Homer would have to have been an "oral" poet. For another, in the harsh, primitive living conditions of pre-classical Greece the blind had few ways of functioning within a community, but one of those ways was as a society's—especially an illiterate society's—oral poets, rememberers, historians and entertainers.

Parry's theory that Homeric epic was at heart **oral poetry** made such wonderful sense of the form of Homeric verse that it seemed it had to be right. But it also left behind serious questions, many as yet not fully answered. For instance, if Homer is an oral bard, how did his poetry come to be preserved in the written record of Greek literature? And if he didn't write down *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, how do we know we have Homer's exact words?

To the former question, Greek history itself offers a possible answer. Homer happened to have lived some time after 800 BCE, just when writing was being re-introduced to Greece. During this renaissance he could have dictated his verses to scribes. In other words, he was coincidentally in the right place at the right time to be an oral poet whose poems were written down.

The latter question—are the epics as we have them Homer's real words?—poses a much more difficult and troubling problem. It's very possible the poems which have been handed down to us as Homer's are only distant and imperfect reminiscences of the eighth century poet's actual verse. Indeed, there's good evidence the Homeric epics existed in multiple forms even as late as several centuries after Homer's lifetime. That would make *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* collective texts based on a tradition of oral poetry recited and carried through time over many generations—and, no doubt, altered in that process—echoes at best but not recordings of Homer's poetry. But how much precision is it fair to ask of a culture emerging from illiteracy and a dark age? Considering the ravages of time which all but obliterated the rest of Greek epic as it did *The Cypria*, we should remember how great a miracle it is that we have any Homer at all.

Terms, Places, People and Things to Know

<i>The Cypria</i>	Aulis
<i>The Iliad</i>	Iphigenia
<i>The Odyssey</i>	Achilles (oral)
Epic cycle	Formulas
Thetis	weak joins
Peleus	Milman Parry
Eris	oral bard
Paris/Alexander	oral theory
Leda	oral poetry
oath of the suitors	

II. *The Iliad*, Books 1-9

A. Book 1

The major characters of Book 1 of *The Iliad* include many already introduced—Achilles, Agamemnon, Odysseus, Thetis, Zeus, Hera, and Hephaestus—but there are a few more to be aware of. **Chryses** is a priest of Apollo, whose daughter **Chryseis** the Greeks have captured and allotted to Agamemnon as a "spear-prize," i.e. a slave-girl. **Priam** is the aged king of Troy and **Hector** his son, the best Trojan warrior and principal defender of the city.

In reading Book 1, there are other names to be familiar with. Troy is often called by an alternate name, **Ilion** or **Ilium**. The Greeks are occasionally mentioned according to sub-groups or nationalities which dominated at this point in history: **Achaean**s, **Danaan**s, **Argive**s and **Pelasgian**s. Likewise, the Trojans also go by **Dardanian**s, because their founder was Dardanus. Menelaus and Agamemnon are sometimes called the **Atreides** or **Atreidai**, literally "the son(s) of Atreus."

Some English versions of *The Iliad* transliterate names directly from Greek rather than using the conventional Latinized versions of the names. Below are several simple

equations which show how to translate between them:

Latin	=	Greek	Example(s)
<i>c(h)</i>	=	<i>k(h)</i>	Hector = Hektor; Calchas = Kalkhas
<i>oe</i>	=	<i>oi</i>	Phoebus = Phoibos; Phoenix = Phoinix
<i>ae</i>	=	<i>ai</i>	Achaean = Achaian
<i>-us</i>	=	<i>-os</i>	Patroclus = Patroklos; Hephaestus = Hephaistos
<i>-es</i>	=	<i>-eus</i>	Achilles = Akhilleus
<i>-ium</i>	=	<i>-ion</i>	Ilium = Ilion

Two names don't fit into clear-cut categories: (Latin) Hecuba = Hekabe (Greek); (Latin) Ajax = Aias (Greek).

1. Overview of Book 1

At the opening of Book 1, Agamemnon has sacrificed his daughter Iphigenia and led the Greeks to Troy. They've spent the first nine years there unable to break inside the city because of its huge fortification walls. No matter how bad things ever went for them, the Trojans could always withdraw inside them and wait until the Greeks had to leave for reinforcements or supplies. *The Iliad* opens in the tenth year of the War, with the Greeks worn out by fruitless efforts to take Troy and the Trojans too beginning to feel the strain of almost a decade of siege.

Having learned from Homer, the Roman poet Horace instructs prospective writers and story-tellers to leap *in medias res*, "into the middle of things". That is, don't back up all the way in the story at the beginning—if readers or listeners need to know background, tell them in a flashback or let them gather what they need to know from dialogue—and Homer provides a quintessential example of why story-tellers should do this. He assumes his readers know the basic story, but he'll also tell them most of the background anyway, only not right at the start of the poem. Rather, he vaults the audience *in medias res*.

And what a superb place he chooses to launch into the story! Nine years into the war, the Greeks are exhausted and depressed. They're fighting among themselves over essentially nothing, having all but forgotten why they came to Troy. Amidst the bitter in-fighting and self-recriminations, Agamemnon dishonors Apollo by stealing Chryseis, the daughter of one of Apollo's priests, which reveals an important pattern and a persistent problem in Agamemnon's character. Like the paranoid, spotlight-hugging politician he is, he tends to overstep his rightful place.

When Chryses comes to him and requests his daughter back and even offers a hefty ransom, Agamemnon refuses. The glory of owning Chryseis is worth more money to him. Angry and rejected, Chryses goes out to the seashore and prays to his patron deity for vengeance. Apollo answers by sending a devastating plague on the Greeks. To address the issue, they convene an emergency assembly which under Achilles' fiery leadership rules that Agamemnon must return Chryseis to Chryses and end the plague. Now deprived of his booty which in his mind equates with his honor and prestige,

Agamemnon demands compensation and, when none is forthcoming, he claims Briseis, a captive girl belonging to Achilles, a double compensation in that he restores his honor and at the same time insults Achilles, the instigator of the dispute.

The great warrior is furious at being stripped of his spear-prize and refuses to continue fighting. Since Achilles is the best Greek fighter, this gives the Trojans a great advantage. Stung with pain, he goes down to the shore and calls out to his mother Thetis, the sea nymph, who appears from the mist of the sea. Achilles asks her to go to Zeus and beg him to help the Trojans so that the Greeks will feel pain equal to his. Thetis, happy just that her son has stopped fighting and is thus in less danger of being killed at Troy, agrees and goes off to Olympus.

The gods happen to be having a banquet when Thetis arrives. She approaches Zeus privately and begs him to help her son. Zeus consents to help the Trojans, but Hera sees them conspiring. She hates the Trojans—it will be a long time before she forgets the Judgment of Paris!—and besides that, is jealous of any woman who attracts Zeus' attention. She and Zeus get into a fight which their lame son Hephaestus tries to stop. His antics, as he limps around serving the gods, makes everyone laugh, and the book ends on a chord of uneasy joy and festivity.

2. Notes

Now read Book 1 of *The Iliad* and keep one eye on the notes below.

Line Numbers (in Homer)

1-7 In Greek the first word of *The Iliad* is "**anger**," meaning Achilles' wrath. It's appropriate in that the storyline of *The Iliad* will encompass only the forty or so days in which Achilles refuses to fight and then returns to the war. In reality, it includes much more through flashbacks and references to other parts of the Trojan saga.

The "immortal one"—also translated "goddess"—is Calliope, the Muse of epic poetry. Here Homer beseeches her for inspiration. As an oral poet, he needs a constant flow of verse but we'll also see below that he doesn't rely on Muses solely. He uses certain mnemonic devices (i.e. aids to memory) to guide his recollection of the story. In this case, the Muse helps those who help themselves.

The "will of Zeus" refers to the ancient interpretation of the Trojan War as part of Zeus' plan to relieve the Earth of her burden of men and decrease the world's population. In other words, the population-control theory of war had proponents even this early in human history.

8-52 The "son of Zeus by Leto" is, of course, Apollo.

Akhaia (Achaea) is Greece.

The "plague of arrows" doesn't refer to arrows literally. The ancients saw the convulsions of a sick person as instigated from invisible outside sources. Here Homer suggests that the sudden contractions caused by pain are like arrows shooting through his body.

53-303 Note that the prophet Calchas is quite familiar with Agamemnon's harsh temper and makes sure that, if he points to Agamemnon as the reason for the plague, Achilles will protect him.

Homer is a master of insulting **epithets**. The terms of abuse which Achilles uses on Agamemnon are particularly inventive: "Most insatiate of men!" "You thick-skinned, shameless, greedy fool!" "Insolent boor!" "Dogface!" "Leech! Commander of trash!" "Sack of wine, you with your cur's eyes and your antelope heart!" But note that Agamemnon doesn't return Achilles' insults. He's rightfully wary of getting into a violent quarrel with Achilles, a far better fighter.

Phthia is Achilles' homeland.

The **Myrmidons**, "The Ant-men," are Achilles' special troops. Presumably, they either look like ants because of the shape of their armor or have armor as tough as an ant's exoskeleton, perhaps both.

Homer often depicts a god as a personification of a person's mental activity. In Book 22, for instance, Hector imagines that his brother has come down from the walls of Troy to help him, but as it turns out, it's only a delusion of the mind fostered by the gods. Likewise, Aphrodite in Book 3 represents the embodiment of Helen's lust for Paris. Here in Book 1, Achilles' decision not to leap up and kill Agamemnon is depicted as Athena coming to him, grabbing him by the hair and stopping him. Simply put, where we would say that common sense held him back, Homer says the goddess of wisdom did it.

Nestor is the oldest and wisest of the Greeks at Troy. He's also one of the most long-winded, sharing with another aged hero (Phoenix) the dubious distinction of delivering the lengthiest speeches in *The Iliad*. But Nestor's intrusion here is also a wonderful character piece, revealing much about the old man, indeed old men in general. At first he rambles, recalling the "good old days"—or does he just love the sound of his own voice?—then lists some old friends, remarking on how important he was at that time, then seems to forget what he was talking about, repeats himself, and finally remembers what was going on, ending his speech with the not-so-startling conclusion that Agamemnon should cool down, advice which has almost nothing to do with what he said before. Old people have changed little in three millennia.

After Agamemnon's admirably short reply to Nestor, Achilles breaks into the conversation and resumes the quarrel. Gods forbid that Nestor should start up again!

304-427 Homer briefly introduces Patroclus, Achilles' closest friend. Patroclus will be very important later in Book 16. A hecatomb is the sacrifice of a hundred cattle to a god,

here Apollo.

The appearance of Thetis from the sea is equivalent to the special effects so common in modern cinema. Notice how she rises from the sea "like mist from the inshore grey seaface," her dewiness matching the tears on her son's cheeks. A wet and wonderful moment!

Homer is a consummate entertainer and as such obeys one of the prime directives of sound storytelling: Recapitulate! There are always some dunces in the audience who fall asleep or come late or daydream or haven't the mental power to focus for more than a minute or two but whom the oral poet can't afford to lose, for if he does, they'll start talking or belching or worse. A good entertainer accommodates this segment of his audience, just as Shakespeare repeats himself for the "groundlings." Here Homer takes the opportunity to have Achilles quickly recap the plot up to this point.

The **recapitulation** also arises perfectly naturally from the story at the halfway point of the book, exactly where the inattentive in the audience will surely start having problems with the plot. Also, as one might expect of an oral poet, Homer reuses some of his oral formulas in this recapitulation, e.g. "the god's white bands on a golden staff." One part of Achilles' speech—"All of our soldiers murmured . . ." (376–379),—is, in fact, an exact duplicate of an earlier passage (22–25), but it's the only example of this and it's very short. What's remarkable here is that in the recapitulation Homer deftly changes the original, a much longer text. Oral poets with less talent would simply repeat the previous text word for word, which would amount to hundreds of lines in this case. Homer, instead, skillfully accommodates the narrative and his poetic formulas to what the situation demands.

Inside Achilles' plea to his mother, Homer imbeds a very old myth about a rebellion within the gods against Zeus. This story serves several purposes at once: it tells a fine traditional tale, probably an audience favorite, it gives Thetis a lever to use on Zeus to encourage him to help Achilles, and it also draws a subtle parallel between Achilles' and Zeus' resistance to wrongful displacement.

Thetis bemoans Achilles' fate, because it is important for Homer to establish Thetis' primary motivation in *The Iliad*, that is, the vain hope that she can save her doomed son.

428-487 The elaborate description of the ships landing is probably a stock bit in oral poetry, which a bard could use in some form whenever he came to a point in his story where ships were landing. The preparation of the barbecue (458-466) is another such trope. These, no doubt, gave the poet a chance to rest his Muse and think ahead in the poem.

488-567 Thetis assumes the classic pose of a suppliant beseeching a noble person for a favor (500-501). She kneels before the seated Zeus, with her left hand on his knee and her right on his chin.

It's interesting that Thetis does not recapitulate Achilles' whole story, even though Zeus has been away and presumably hasn't seen the fight between Agamemnon and Achilles. Homer assumes you know Zeus is omniscient, and the lazy listeners in the audience have already had their chance to catch up on the story. If they have missed it twice, let them go back to sleep! Zeus sees wisely that the problem with granting Thetis' request is Hera's determination to help the Greeks against Paris and his fellow Aphrodite-loving Trojans. Intentionally comical, the constant, cosmic-level, marital squabbling of Zeus and Hera is used by Homer more than once as a source of humor.

When she sees Zeus and Thetis talking, Hera immediately figures out exactly what her husband's up to. From that, a fight typical of comedy erupts between the angry nagging wife and her scheming spouse. In this case, of course, the wife is right. Ultimately, Zeus retreats to the last refuge of married scoundrels and threatens to beat her, "to lay his inexorable hands" (567) on Hera, if she doesn't shut up and leave him alone.

568-611 In the face of such violence, Hera pouts. In Book 14 of *The Iliad* Hera will get her revenge on Zeus for this insult to her dignity.

Her son, Hephaestus tries to patch things up and recapture the quickly fading spirit of conviviality at the gods' banquet. He decides to serve the gods himself, and they laugh as he hobbles around. In ancient society spry young boys and girls usually waited on tables, so this is an inversion of the norm. A manifestation of its times, no doubt, Homeric humor will seem rather low-brow to some today, at least to judge by his characters who laugh at cripples, people's heads being chopped off, frightened babies howling and so on.

The book ends with calm and quiet on heaven and earth, but it's an uneasy peace with the thunder of future strife rolling off in the distance.

3. Ring Composition

Given Homer composed his epics spontaneously for public performance—and to be enjoyed and appreciated fully they are best read aloud—one must concede that Homer is an amazing juggler, able to keep so many balls in the air at once. He tells a story, composes verse on the spot, individualizes each character's speech and, on top of all that, he doesn't forget where he is in the story, even though he has no written text or notes in front of him. How does he do it?

By backing up and looking at the general structure of Book 1, it's possible to see one way he manages to keep the story on track. He arranges the general course of action in what is called **ring composition**. It might be better called "bilateral symmetry," a biology term that means the symmetrical balancing of analogous body parts, such as hands, feet, eyes and ears. Close analysis of Book 1 reveals a similar design of compared or contrasted parts.

The opening scene, for example, entails the rejection of Chryses by Agamemnon and the

subsequent plague, while the final scene describes the gods' feast and joy, making in this instance a strong contrast to the grim opening. The second major episode of Book 1 is a council of men in which Achilles and Agamemnon quarrel, and the next-to-last episode is the banquet of gods in which Zeus and Hera quarrel. The latter quarrel is a direct consequence of the first. Inside those episodes, Odysseus leaves the Greek camp with Chryseis and later arrives at her father's home and gives her back to him. And finally sandwiched inside those is the scene where Achilles goes down to the seashore and begs his mother to help him.

Drawn out schematically, this is how the book is structured:

1. PRAYER AND PLAGUE (1-52): Chryses begs Apollo to harm the Greeks with a plague in revenge for their wronging his daughter Chryseis.
2. COUNCIL OF MEN (53-303): Agamemnon and Achilles quarrel over what to do about the plague and Chryseis; Agamemnon decides to return the girl but take Achilles' girl Briseis.
3. Odysseus and Chryseis (304-348): Odysseus leaves with Chryseis and goes to Chryses. Sacrifice.
4. ACHILLES AND THETIS (348-430): divine mother and mortal son discuss the situation; Thetis promises to help Achilles.
5. Odysseus and Chryseis (430-492): Odysseus delivers Chryseis back to her father Chryses. General festivities.
6. COUNCIL OF GODS (493-570): Thetis extracts a promise from Zeus to help the Trojans against the Greeks; Hera tries to interfere and Zeus stops her.
7. FEAST AND JOY (571-611): The Olympians feast and laugh at Hephaestus who tries to patch things up between his father and mother.

While the separate parts aren't exact reflections of each other, just a loosely analogous configuration of sections, such an outline benefits an oral poet in performance who needs to remember where he is and is headed. This sort of arrangement also gives a pleasant sense of coming full circle. That is, it's clear to listeners that this section of *The Iliad* is ending because the last scene reflects the first, the same way we know *The Wizard of Oz* is coming to a close when Dorothy gets back to Kansas because that's where the story began. By the time Homer's gods turn in for the night at the end of Book 1, the poem has raised and advanced certain problems and, even if things are still far from resolved, there's a sense of closure. It's interesting to note that Greek art, especially vases from pre-classical Greece, reflects a similar fascination with symmetrical patterns and balanced groupings of geometric configurations.

B. Overview of Books 2-9

Lacking the time to scrutinize all twenty-four books of *The Iliad* in the depth that we have studied Book 1, let's skim over the action of the next few books, noting only some of the more famous and notable passages.

Book 2: Agamemnon calls the Greeks together and the army marches against Troy, as Homer lists the Greek warriors in a long "catalogue of heroes."

Book 3: The Greek and Trojan armies meet but don't fight. Instead, Menelaus and Paris, the rival husbands of Helen, fight one-on-one. As the soldiers put down their arms, Priam and the Trojans, including Helen, watch from the walls of Troy in amazement. Paris is about to lose, when Aphrodite magically whisks him off the battlefield and back to Troy. Menelaus is declared the winner and acknowledged as the rightful husband of Helen. Meanwhile, back at Troy Aphrodite assumes the guise of one of Helen's servant and prepares Helen to receive Paris as a proper wife should. Seeing through the goddess' disguise, however, Helen objects and refuses to make love to Paris. Aphrodite lowers her mortal mask and forces Helen to submit to Paris.

Books 4 and 5: The Greeks and Trojans stand for a moment on the verge of peace, but Athena and Hera, hating Troy and wanting to see the city fall, induce a cowardly Trojan to break the truce by shooting an arrow at Menelaus. The fighting erupts again. The fortune of battle seesaws back and forth, amidst much death and carnage.

Book 6: Enter Hector, the prince of Troy and the greatest Trojan fighter. Returning to Troy from the battlefield, he finds Paris sitting at home with Helen and gives his brother a serious dressing-down after which Paris sheepishly agrees to rejoin the fighting. Then Helen seductively encourages Hector to sit down with her, but he refuses. On his way out of town and back to battle, Hector runs into his wife Andromache with their son Astyanax. She begs him not to go back into battle, not to die and leave her a spear-prize for some Greek, to which Hector responds with the famous "Warrior's Creed," a speech outlining a soldier's duty and fate (6.440-465). He reaches out to take little Astyanax and hug him, but the baby frightened by his father's flashing, plumed helmet recoils in terror. His parents laugh(!), and Hector blesses the child. With a final word of consolation for Andromache, Hector and Paris return to war.

Books 7 and 8: Zeus turns the battle in favor of the Trojans, as he had promised Thetis he would do for Achilles' sake. The Trojans fight so well they're able to camp near the Greeks' ships. If they were to burn the ships, the Greeks would have no way home.

Book 9: The Greeks panic. They desperately need to have Achilles return to the fighting. Agamemnon decides to give back Briseis, Achilles' spear-prize and, in addition, offers Achilles much ransom in compensation for the dishonor of taking the girl. He organizes an embassy of three heroes—Ajax, Phoenix and Odysseus—to implore Achilles to return to the battle.

When these ambassadors arrive at Achilles' tent, the crafty tactician Odysseus speaks first, pointing out the Greeks' distress and all that Achilles can gain from Agamemnon by returning to battle. Achilles coldly turns him down. Second, Phoenix, an old friend of Achilles' family, calls on the young man's sense of family honor, recalling such delightful home-scenes as the time baby Achilles retched all over him. He fails to persuade

Achilles, too. Finally Ajax, the stout fighter nicknamed "The Bulwark" because of his determination to stand his ground, makes a succinct appeal to Achilles, warrior to warrior, a plea to give the beleaguered Greeks some sorely needed help. If any request were going to succeed, it would be this one, but Achilles adamantly refuses to return to the fighting a third time.

He sends the embassy back, their mission a failure. This marks an important turning point in the story. Although Agamemnon has offered to repair the damages done to Achilles' pride, the great hero's wrath won't allow him to relent, and for this overbearing passion he will pay dearly. The price will be the life of his closest friend Patroclus, a story told in Book 16.

Terms, Places, People and Things to Know

Chryses	Dardanians
Chryseis	Atreides/Atreidai
Odysseus	<i>in medias res</i>
Priam	anger
Hector	epithets
Ilion/Ilium	Myrmidons
Achaeans	Nestor
Danaans	recapitulation
Argives	ring composition
Pelasgians	

[Click here for a copy of the slides and notes presented during the lecture in class \(Chapter 4.III\)](#)

III. *The Iliad*, Books 10-22

A. The Mythological History of Troy

As the focus of *The Iliad* shifts to the Trojans, we should look briefly at the mythological background of Troy. The Trojans, we noted above, are sometimes called Dardanians. The Dardanus for whom they're named was the ancestor of Priam, the king of Troy at the time of the Trojan War. As a young man, Priam married **Hecuba** and had one-hundred children—fifty boys and fifty girls—though only nineteen were Hecuba's. Oriental potentates were expected to keep concubines who regularly produced children considered secondary to the primary wife's offspring. The first-born and foremost of Priam's children by Hecuba was Hector.

Another son of Priam and Hecuba, Paris/Alexander was the shepherd who gave the golden apple to Aphrodite in return for the opportunity to marry the most beautiful woman in the world. In antiquity, the tale of how a son of the king and queen of Troy came to be a shepherd was best known from a play written by Euripides, the Athenian

tragedian whose work we will study later. Though the play itself entitled *Alexander* is lost, we know the plot from an ancient hypothesis, a summary of the story. It's interesting to note that, just like the author of *The Cypria*, poets living centuries after Homer's lifetime were still filling in gaps or unexplained circumstances in the Homeric epics, in this case why a Trojan prince was raised a shepherd and had two names, Paris and Alexander.

The Hypothesis of Euripides' *Alexander* (with some additions from a story preserved by Hyginus, a compiler of myths, Fable 91)

The pregnant Hecuba, Queen of Troy, had a nightmare that she gave birth to a burning torch out of which came many serpents. It was interpreted as a premonition of her child's destructive nature, that he would bring about the fall of Troy. So when the child was born, a boy they called Alexander, his father Priam, King of Troy, gave the child to shepherds to abandon on a mountain so that the child would die without bloodguilt on his father's hands. The shepherds didn't have the heart to kill the child and so they raised him as their own, calling him Paris. Hecuba in grief for her son persuaded her husband Priam to establish athletic games in the "dead" boy's honor.

Twenty years later, the boy, who acted nobler than his rustic breeding, began to irritate the other shepherds because of his high-class arrogance. This boy named Paris had a favorite bull, which, as a prank, they stole and gave to the city as a reward for the winner of the games played in the boy's honor. When Paris complained, they brought him tied up before the King. Paris begged to be allowed to play in the games, which usually excluded common people, in order to win back his prize bull. Priam consented. Paris beat all the other contestants—including Priam's other sons, Paris' brothers unbeknownst to them—and enraged them who thought they had been beaten by no better than a slave. Deiphobus, another son of Priam and Hecuba, urged his mother to kill the insulting intruder. When Paris appeared, Deiphobus drew his sword on him, but Paris sought refuge at the altar of Zeus. Cassandra, the mad prophetess and another child of Priam and Hecuba, recognized Paris as Alexander and called him "the torch" of Troy, but as always her words were not understood and her warning went unheeded. Although Hecuba wanted to kill him, Priam prevented her and, guessing at what Cassandra meant by "torch," sent for the shepherd to whom he had given the baby Alexander twenty years ago. When the old shepherd arrived, he was forced to admit the truth. So Priam recognized and accepted his son.

Ironically, this romantic play with its seemingly happy ending was, in fact, the first play in the dramatic trilogy which ended with Euripides' famous depiction of the horrors of the war, *The Trojan Women*.

One other royal Trojan to be aware of is **Cassandra**, the mad prophetess mentioned in the hypothesis above. She was a very beautiful and pious girl with whom Apollo fell in love. The god promised her the gift of prophecy, if she would go to bed with him. She agreed, but as soon as he bestowed on her the ability to tell the future, she refused to

make love to him. While Apollo couldn't take back the gift of prophecy—she'd already seen the future—he could take away from her the power of persuasion. Thus, poor Cassandra was left knowing the fate of Troy but unable to convince anyone to do anything about it. Consequently, she went mad.

B. The Homeric Simile

Before leaping back *in medias res*, we should address another important feature of Homer's style. The entire *Iliad* takes place in the vicinity of Troy—twenty-four books of poetry in any single location, even one as beautiful place as the northwest coast of Turkey, is bound to pall—so to give his listeners a break from the monotony of locale, Homer frequently sweeps us off for a moment to another place by using a **simile**, an explicit comparison introduced by "like" or "as" or some such expression. An example of a simile is "He swims *like a fish*." In Homer, similes add a dimension of fantasy to what could otherwise be a relentlessly dire war-story and enrich the poetry by the collocation and comparison of things that listeners might never have thought to compare. It's interesting to note that in his other great epic, *The Odyssey*, a story full of adventure and travel and magic, Homer uses fewer similes than in *The Iliad* because he doesn't need to relieve the tedium of always being in one place all the time.

The similes in *The Iliad* are in some ways the best part of the poem, in part because they're rarely simple or straightforward comparisons. More often Homer compares things that on the surface aren't very similar at all. For instance, at 8.306-8 of *The Iliad* he compares a hero falling in battle to a poppy drooping in the rains of spring. The hero is most like the flower because his bent figure resembles the flower's curved stem. In other ways they're different: the hero is an aggressive warrior, while the flower is passive vegetation; the hero is dying, while the flower will thrive after the rain; the hero is in a noisy, dirty field of battle full of death and destruction, where the flower is in a serene rainfall in spring full of rejuvenating life. In sum, the dissimilarity ironically dominates the simile.

But such differences don't make the simile inept; to the contrary, they make it brilliant. Into the midst of combat and carnage, Homer suddenly injects a peaceful scene of springtime and a fertile rainfall that lift us momentarily from din and destruction of Troy. Then after only two lines—in performance, that's only a few seconds—the serene simile evaporates and the noise of war returns. Like the crash of tympani and horns following a few quiet bars in a symphony, the clangor of deadly battle is so much more effective when contrasted with the bloom of a soft, nourishing rainfall.

Here's another example of such a simile in Homer. At Book 4.104-147 of *The Iliad*, Menelaus has just won a one-on-one contest with Paris who was at the last minute rescued from death by his divine patroness Aphrodite. In the confusion following Paris' sudden disappearance, Athena inspires a cowardly Trojan to break the truce and start up the fighting again by shooting an arrow at Menelaus. Read this passage now and look for two similes.

Did you find them? First, Athena deflects the arrow from Menelaus "the way a mother would keep a fly from settling on a child when he is happily asleep" (6.130-131). An exquisite comparison, the virgin goddess and the mortal mother both protect their "little ones" by swatting away the sting of an aggressor, the small fly and the small-minded Trojan both of whom are trying to take advantage of an unsuspecting innocent. However, the scenes contrast also: a peaceful mother with her child asleep versus the war-goddess protecting her favorite in the midst of battle. The juxtaposition of such opposites, just as with the hero and the poppy mentioned above, is called an **oxymoron** ("sharp-blunt"), examples of which are "bittersweet," "a deafening silence," "the living dead," and "sophomore," literally "a wise fool," i.e. a dunce who thinks he knows everything after only one year at school.

Second, Homer compares the blood dripping from Menelaus' wound to "when a Meionian or a Carian woman dyes clear ivory to be the cheekpiece of a chariot team" (6.141ff.). Another oxymoron, the bleeding wound and the dyed cheekpiece contrast at least as much as they coincide. Indeed, their only real point of similarity is the red color dripping over the ivory and the thighs. But the contrast is the point. It makes the simile all the more startling: the humiliating wound from a guerilla shooting out of the blue in the midst of a truce as opposed to the glorious cheekpiece of a great lord's horse in splendid military pageant. Similes and oxymorons like these in Homer are always interesting. Always examine them closely!

C. Overview of Books 10-15

The sections of *The Iliad* following Book 9 are sometimes called the "battle books" because a large portion of the story concerns the fighting which takes place near the Greek ships. For the most part, it's indecisive because every time the Greeks start to rally and get ahead Zeus helps the Trojans fight back. Rather than besieging the Trojans, the Greeks end up fighting to save their own lives. If the ships are destroyed, they have no way home, no *nostos*.

In Book 14, however, comes the turning point of the epic, a famous passage called the *Dios Apate* ("The Seduction of Zeus"). Here Hera takes matters in hand, so to speak. With her husband Zeus unfairly favoring the Trojans, her sworn enemies, she desperately looks for ways to help the Greeks. If she's to be effective at all, she has to get Zeus out of the way, while the gods who favor the Greeks can subvert his will and turn the war in their favor. But how is anyone, even the queen of heaven, to distract the all-seeing Zeus long enough to accomplish her mission?

The answer to that ought to be obvious by now: use what always distracts him, sex. His insatiable appetite for carnal pleasure is the bane of Hera's existence since it drives Zeus to philander indiscriminately with goddesses, demi-goddesses, nymphs, mortal women, even the occasional young man. So she decides to turn his lust to her own advantage and seduce the lecher herself. A fitting payback for his indiscretion, she'll entice him into bed, and while he's sleeping soundly afterward—that *is* what men do after sex, isn't it?—she

and her allies can work their will on earth and turn the tide of the war in favor of Hera's beloved Greeks.

But she can't go unarmed in battle with her husband, so she seeks out Aphrodite and asks to borrow "a little longing," fabricating some reason for wanting it so that Aphrodite who's on the Trojan side won't refuse her request. The unwitting Aphrodite lends her a special girdle guaranteed to drive males crazy. Hera then visits the god Sleep to make sure Zeus will stay unconscious after they make love, but Sleep at first refuses to help her. As it turns out, Hera tried this trick once before but Zeus woke up unexpectedly and, when he realized what was going on, nearly beat Sleep to death. Hera assures him that this won't happen again and to sweeten the deal throws in a nubile Grace—an attractive species of demi-goddess—whom she says he can marry, and Sleep agrees to try again.

Finally, armed and ready, Hera goes to Zeus who's watching the war from atop Mount Ida near Troy. She puts on Aphrodite's love-girdle which does its job. When he sees her, Zeus feels great desire. He asks her where she's going. She makes up some story about visiting relatives of hers down south who are fighting and refuse to go to bed with each other, craftily bringing up the subject of sex in a casual manner—as if planting *that* in his mind were necessary.

Zeus stops her and says, "Not so fast, woman! Before you make someone else's bed, make your own first! Come now, be a proper wife! Why I've never felt desire so great for any woman. Not even with Danae or Europa or Semele or Alcmene or Demeter—love those braids, who doesn't? . . ." That is, he recites a catalogue of his mistresses and the children they've born him. Even through Homer's formal verses you sense Hera about to split open with rage. If it weren't part of her plan to seduce him, she'd probably re-ignite the quarrel they were having in Book 1.

Instead, she acts outraged at his suggestion that they make love in the open where everyone might see and suggests they go home to the privacy of their bedroom, which she adds as a side note was built by his son Hephaestus—Hephaestus being one of his few children who is also hers—but Zeus has another idea. He draws up a golden cloud and makes a bed of soft grass and flowers grow under them. The next thing we know, Zeus is snoring away with Sleep by his side, and Hera's plan has worked. The Greeks will finally have a moment of respite.

D. *The Iliad*, Book 16: The Death of Patroclus

1. Overview of Book 16

Although at the end of Book 14 the gods begin helping the Greeks, Zeus wakes and rouses the Trojans back into action. They've already made such progress that by the end of Book 15 they're poised to burn the Greeks' ships. Desperate, the Greeks must have Achilles back on the battlefield, but he still refuses to fight raging over Agamemnon's insult.

As Book 16 opens, Achilles' dear friend **Patroclus** goes to him and says that, if he won't fight, at least he can let Patroclus wear his well-known armor so that the Trojans will think Achilles has returned to battle—the helmet will cover Patroclus' face—and by doing this, frighten the enemy away from the ships. Achilles reluctantly consents but warns Patroclus not to be carried away with killing Trojans, only to push them back from the ships.

Patroclus dons Achilles' armor and the Myrmidons gather for battle. At first sight of Patroclus, the Trojans retreat in panic, thinking Achilles has returned. Many Trojan heroes die in the initial onslaught, including one of Zeus' own sons, Sarpedon.

With Patroclus leading the way, the Greeks push the Trojans back all the way to the walls of Troy, but Apollo finally intervenes and stops their progress at the walls. He wounds Patroclus and knocks Achilles' helmet off his head. Seeing only Patroclus in Achilles' armor and knowing he's not the warrior Achilles is, Hector moves in for the kill. He gloats over the dying Patroclus: "Achilles who stayed behind must have told you to kill me but look what happened to you!" With his last breath Patroclus predicts Hector's own death at Achilles' hands.

2. Notes

Now, read Book 16, keeping an eye on the notes below.

Line Number (in Homer)

1-100 Note the two similes comparing Patroclus' tears to a "shaded mountain spring" and the weeping Patroclus to a "small girlchild who runs beside her mother." The first illustrates the extent of Patroclus' sorrow, and the second foreshadows the childish insistence in Patroclus' upcoming request. Both hint at the purity and simplicity of his mind which can't foresee the doom unfolding before him.

Menoetius (Menoitios) is Patroclus' father; Peleus is Achilles' father. It's ironic that Achilles assumes Patroclus' tears indicate the death of one of their fathers, since his tears do portend death, but not one of their father's deaths, rather Patroclus' himself. There was a saying in ancient Greece that "in peace sons bury fathers, but in war fathers bury sons." Achilles' words echo this saying, underscoring the sense of foreboding in this scene. Ironically, the fathers of Patroclus and Achilles will, indeed, hear about the deaths of their sons eventually, as is sadly customary in war.

Patroclus hits Achilles at his weakest point, as only a very close friend can do. He plays on Achilles' semi-divine heritage and accuses him of being the child not of a sea-goddess but of the cold sea itself. Then striking at Achilles' pride, Patroclus interprets Achilles' reluctance to fight as a fear of the oracle which predicts his death at Troy. As one might expect, this makes Achilles' hackles rise.

Achilles denies the existence of any such oracle, but he must suspect he will die at Troy, It is, after all, Thetis' primary motivation in this epic to keep her son from death. Achilles' life is the paradigm of the short, glorious life, a conscious choice for a great rather than a long life.

Achilles tells Patroclus specifically not to slaughter Trojans wantonly but only to save the ships and give the Greeks a brief rest. Patroclus' failure to obey this injunction will prove his undoing.

101-129 Every once in a while Homer reinvokes the Muse(s) in order to keep the poetic inspiration streaming in. Usually these invocations come at the beginning of a long sequence of events, such as the death of Patroclus here.

Telamonian means "the son of Telamon."

130-256 Homer's audiences must have relished the listing of all the pieces of armor a warrior put on, since fairly lengthy "arming scenes," or so they're called, occur more than once in *The Iliad*. It's an interesting variation here that Patroclus doesn't take Achilles' spear.

Achilles' horses are supernatural. Later in this book they will actually talk!

Note the simile comparing the Myrmidons and the wolves "carnivorous and fierce and tireless" (157). But these "wolves" are exhausted and fighting for their lives, not hunting for food. These carnivores are more prey than predator.

The genealogy of the Myrmidons' leaders (168-197) accomplishes several purposes at once. It ennobles those heading into battle, gives a break from the main story and heightens the tension of Patroclus' upcoming tragedy by holding it off momentarily. Homer often makes passing references to longer stories, giving only a brief summary of their action. For instance, in Odysseus' journey to the underworld in *The Odyssey* Homer glances over the tales of many heroes and heroines, such as Oedipus, whose legends are treated more fully elsewhere. In this case, the story of Eudorus (16.179-192) is one such reference to what was, no doubt, a longer story elsewhere in the epic cycle.

Note the simile comparing the Myrmidons in rank and the tight-fitting stones of a building. The contrast of an offensive battle line and a defensive wall makes an interesting oxymoron.

Automedon is Achilles' charioteer. He drives the hero into battle and carries him to wherever he's needed along the battle line. At Dodona there is an oracle of Zeus, just as at Delphi there is an oracle of Apollo.

257-418 Of particular note is the simile comparing the advancing Myrmidons to angry hornets which have been stirred up by "small boys, as boys will do, the idiots" and attack

passers-by. The displacement of the hornets' anger from the teasing boys to a traveler reflects—though it doesn't parallel it exactly—Patroclus' displacement of Achilles as leader of the Myrmidons. This sort of apt but not strictly logical assimilation is part of the artistry of Homeric similes.

As Patroclus and the Myrmidons rage forward, Homer recounts the carnage of battle with an almost medical fascination, for example, at 16.345-50 when Erymas takes a spear in the mouth and his "white brain-pan" spills out.

The simile comparing the Trojans' retreat with the ferocious storm sent from Zeus is paradoxical, when one considers that the Greek advance is contrary to Zeus' wish to help the Trojans.

419-683 The "Death of Sarpedon" is another famous passage in *The Iliad*. Patroclus' slaughter of **Sarpedon**, a Lycian hero and a son of Zeus, begins a chain of deaths and melee around heroes' bodies that culminates with Hector's death in Book 22. That is, Patroclus kills Sarpedon, and the Greeks strip his armor from his body, which was both an insult and a way of preventing others from reusing the armor. Hector, then, kills Patroclus and strips Achilles' armor from his corpse. Given new armor, Achilles subsequently kills Hector, strips his armor, takes his body and refuses even to let it be buried.

Homer adds a nice touch to the first death in this sequence by showing Zeus' deliberation over whether or not to let his own son Sarpedon die. Hera steps in and reminds him that, if he protects his favorites, the other gods will want to protect their favorites, too. Her words are not, however, born of only a sense of universal justice. She's also out for revenge. During the *Dios Apate* in Book 14 Zeus had dared to insult her by listing all his girlfriends and their bastard children in front of her. Now, Hera points out that one of these illegitimate children must die. Zeus is forced to agree with his wife, but as he nods assent to Sarpedon's death, he weeps tears of blood for his doomed son. An extraordinary image!

There are two men named Ajax fighting on the Greek side. One is the son of Telamon, the other the son of Oileus. The simile at 16.641-3 compares the melee around Sarpedon's body to flies around a milk pail. By contrasting the heroes in combat to a common barnyard scene, Homer heightens the grandeur of the battle and explicitly calls to his audience's attention the distance between everyday life and the lofty Trojan enterprise set in the glorious past. It elevates the battle by juxtaposing it to common existence and the barnyard scene by collocation with the epic struggle.

There's another nice touch on Homer's part at the end of this passage. Sleep, who along with Hera had deceived Zeus, now helps his master honor the body of his fallen son. It restores the normal hierarchy of power as Zeus reasserts his control over lesser gods, the very political structure which that had been undermined during the *Dios Apate*.

684-867 Patroclus disobeys Achilles' earlier warning not to wreak havoc on the Trojans for the mere joy of slaughtering them. The ancient Greeks called this sort of transgression of one's rightful position *hubris*. In our terminology *hubris* encompasses a wide range of crimes like sin, pride, rape and other acts of overstepping one's legal or moral boundaries. "As pride goeth before the fall," Patroclus' overwhelming passion for carving up Trojans leads him to his demise. It's appropriate, then, that it's Apollo, the god of reason and rationality, who stops him, just as Athena, the goddess of wisdom, stops Achilles from killing Agamemnon in Book 1. Apollo here seems to symbolize the rational side of Patroclus' mind which suddenly paralyzes him as he advances out of control.

There's a notable irony at the end of Apollo's speech (16.725). Disguised as Hector's uncle, he encourages the great Trojan warrior to return to the fight and says, "May Apollo grant you the glory!"

In this passage is another notable simile. Homer compares Hector's chariot-driver Cebriones, whose eyes Patroclus has knocked out of their sockets, to a man diving into water (16.739-743), an odd analogy if ever there was. But then, as if he could hear Homer's words, Patroclus himself picks up on the metaphor and elaborates it (16.743-750). Thus, the poet momentarily blurs the boundaries between character, tale and audience. It's analogous to an actor in a movie suddenly talking to the director behind the camera. This perverse simile, the product of a deranged sense of humor, serves well to underscore Patroclus' frenzy which no longer recognizes human limitations.

In the end, it's Hector's turn to revel in death and commit his own act of *hubris*. He gloats over the body of Patroclus, but in Patroclus' death are sown the seeds of Hector's own doom. Grief for his fallen friend will drive Achilles back to the fighting to avenge Patroclus' death by killing Hector. Hector's refusal to accept Patroclus' prediction of his death at Achilles' hands (16.859-861) is Homer's sign to us that Hector is heading down the same path of *hubris* that led Patroclus to his doom. We see here, at one moment, the end and the beginning of the same type of fateful error.

E. *The Iliad*, Books 17-22: The Death of Hector

1. Overview of Books 17-21

Menelaus and Hector fight over Patroclus' body and Achilles' armor. Hector secures the latter but not the former, as Zeus decides to save Achilles' charioteer Automedon and his chariot with its divine horses. Poor Antilochus, a son of Nestor, is given the unfortunate task of going back to the Greek camp and informing Achilles about Patroclus' death. When Thetis hears her son lamenting his friend's demise, she comes to console him. She also learns that Hector has Achilles' arms, so she promises to have Hephaestus, the blacksmith god, make her son a new set of armor. Meanwhile, back at the battlefield, the fight over Patroclus' body rages. To save his friend from post-mortem humiliation, Achilles appears suddenly on the battlefield without any armor on and scares the Trojans enough that the Greeks are able to seize Patroclus' body.

The next day, Thetis delivers Achilles' new armor, on which Hephaestus has represented the world according to Homer (18.468-616). Arranged in concentric circles on **The Shield of Achilles** are, starting from the innermost circle and moving outward: (1) constellations, including the hunter Orion; (2) two cities, one celebrating a wedding and the other in the midst of a public quarrel; (3) a scene of war and the siege of a city; and finally (4) a scene of peace, prosperity and pastoral tranquillity. On the rim Hephaestus has depicted the Ocean stream which people in Homer's day believed ran around the edge of the earth.

These images are significant, posing a sort of artistic riddle. One way to read it is that the shield is itself a representation of the general story of the Trojan War retold by analogy in pictures. Starting from the outside, it begins and ends in the eternal sea from which all things arise, including, for instance, Aphrodite, the embodiment of desire, and Thetis, the mother of Achilles. Inside Ocean are two scenes of Peace, representing the earlier Golden Age—the idyllic era predating the Trojan War—and the next Age of Peace after the Trojan War when all the heroes have returned home.

Inside these scenes of peace are depictions of battle, an allusion to the Trojan War, which in turn sandwich scenes of a wedding and a quarrel. These could represent the story of *The Iliad* itself, in particular, the quarrel that Agamemnon and Achilles have over who would "wed" Briseis. They could also symbolize the wedding of Peleus and Thetis and the quarrel over the golden apple. It could be either or both, so many unhappy unions are threaded through this tale. Perhaps it's even designed to reflect its creator's own mismatched marriage to Aphrodite, which also lies at the heart of the epic.

Finally, the great hunter Orion at the center of the shield seems clearly to represent Achilles, the central figure of *The Iliad*. Thus, like Achilles' recapitulation of his quarrel with Agamemnon to Thetis midway through Book 1, the shield is another example of Homer retelling the general story, but brilliantly recast as pictures with analogous situations rather than explicit narration.

After receiving his new armor, Achilles goes to Agamemnon and they resolve their differences. They feast together, a common way in Homer for people to renew their ties, and Achilles arms for battle. Homer spends all of Books 20 and 21 describing Achilles advancing on Troy and slaughtering many Trojans. In fact, he kills so many of the enemy that the river Scamander which runs near Troy becomes choked with corpses and rises up against the baleful Greek. Flooding his banks, the river god attacks Achilles, no mere mortal himself. When neither can gain the upper hand, Hera sends Hephaestus in his capacity as god of fire to dry up the river in order to break their stalemate.

2. Book 22: The Death of Hector

The climax of the epic, Book 22 entails one long scene outside the walls of Troy where Hector confronts Achilles. The plot is very simple. In revenge for killing Patroclus, Achilles slays Hector before the eyes of Priam and Hecuba and the rest of the Trojans.

Now read Book 22 with one eye on the notes below.

Line Numbers (in Homer)

1-89 The Scaean (Skaian) Gates are the same ones where Hector said farewell to Andromache in Book 6 (440-465) and explained the duty of a warrior to defend his country until death. Now, sadly, he'll prove the strength of his conviction.

Priam's speech at the beginning of the book produces a powerful series of images projecting Troy's dismal future. The old king envisions the suffering of his city, after Hector's destruction. In particular, his prognostication of "small children (being) hurled to earth in the atrocity of war" (22.63-4) is a ghastly foreshadowing of the death of Astyanax, Hector's son—the same baby who was scared by Hector's helmet crest at the Scaean Gates—the victorious Greeks will throw Astyanax to his death from the walls of Troy the day after they sack the city. Priam goes on to foretell his own death, torn apart by his own watchdogs who "will lap (his) blood with ravenous hearts" (22.70), a grim reflection of the Actaeon myth (see [Artemis](#), *An Introduction to Classical Mythology*). Thus, Homer begins the story of Hector's death by reminding his audience about something they probably already knew, what is to be lost in the grisly aftermath of the great Trojan hero's demise.

90-166 "The way a serpent, fed on poisonous herbs, . . .": The ancients believed that vipers distilled their venom from eating certain poisonous plants.

Hector debates with himself whether to fight Achilles or to run away. These mood swings add dimension to his character, showing us the human being behind the warrior-hero's armor. With this, Homer induces us to sympathize with Hector before he dies.

167-288 It's a nice touch that, after his noble resolution to stand and fight, Hector sees Achilles bearing down on him and decides it's more advisable to run away. The conflict between his desire to be brave and the wisdom to run makes Hector seem more like a real person than a stock hero.

As Achilles chases Hector around the plain of Troy, Homer notes the famous sites they pass. The contrast between the simple sweet scenes of daily life at Troy and the ferocious battle of heroes adds to the tension of the narration by slowing down the chase and reminding us of what's at stake. All this everyday loveliness will die with Hector.

At 22.199-201 Homer compares Achilles' inability to catch the fleeing Hector to a dream in which "a man chasing another cannot catch him, nor can he in flight escape from his pursuer." With this sophisticated and beautiful simile, Homer sweeps us off momentarily from the midst of a terrible, frightening, all-too-real scene into the world of sleep—in Greek myth, Death's brother—and dreamy unreality.

Athena's interference in the chase forces a confrontation between the warriors. As in

Book 1 where she embodied Achilles' good sense and stopped him from killing Agamemnon, here again she embodies a hero's mental processes, in this case, Hector's delusion amidst fear and anxiety. When the goddess takes the guise of Hector's brother Deiphobus, she represents his hopeless wish for help as he faces certain death.

It may seem unheroic or less than courageous that Hector is willing to fight Achilles only when it's two against one—that is, himself and Deiphobus against Achilles—but Homer is showing us the Trojan's reticence and irresolution not in an effort to degrade but humanize him and make his final decision to stand and fight all the more glorious by contrast to his earlier hesitation. Ultimately, Hector will fight Achilles alone. His wavering resolution only points up the importance of the conflict and his native intelligence, since he doesn't go rashly into a deadly confrontation.

Hector asks Achilles to make an agreement with him that whoever wins will return the body of his foe to his friends and family. Achilles refuses. This is important, because after Book 22 Achilles will indeed refuse to give Hector's body back to the Trojans. Priam will have to sneak into the Greek camp and beg Achilles to return it.

289-366 Hector's final words recall Patroclus' at the opening of Book 16, when he accused Achilles of being born not of a sea-goddess but from "the cold grey sea" (16.34). Achilles' indomitable spirit makes him the greatest warrior at Troy but also blinds him to wiser courses of action. The terrible chain of murders that began when Patroclus overstepped his rightful boundaries—that is, committed *hubris*—and slaughtered Sarpedon remains unbroken at the end of this book, because Achilles will not relent in his stubborn campaign to destroy and insult the Trojans.

With the foresight often granted a dying man in Homer, Hector predicts Achilles' death, just as Patroclus had predicted Hector's at the end of Book 16. Although the chain of death won't be broken and Achilles will in turn die at Troy, the spirit of relentless rage and murder will ultimately come to end, halted by none other than its originator, Achilles himself. *The Iliad* will at last resolve with the abatement of Achilles' anger. His death belongs to another epic, at which Hector glances ahead briefly as he dies.

367-515 Book 22 concludes with the lamentations of Hector's father Priam, his mother Hecuba and his wife **Andromache**. Andromache's extraordinarily beautiful lament is the culmination of the tragic sequence of events which began in Book 16, another piece of evidence that the ancient Greeks were willing to look beyond their own national interests to the human suffering all people share. Would modern Americans, for instance, put such a touching lament in the mouth of a British woman whose husband had died fighting against our forebears in the Revolutionary War? Here the Greek poet evokes with consummate beauty and skill the sadness we all have in common when someone dies, that tragedy which recognizes no political or racial boundaries.

Terms, Places, People and Things to Know

Hecuba
Alexander
Cassandra
simile
oxymoron
Dios Apate

Patroclus
Sarpedon
hubris
The Shield of Achilles
Andromache

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IV. *The Iliad*, Books 23 and 24

A. Overview of Book 23

With the Greeks holding athletic games in honor of the late Patroclus, Book 23 breaks the tone and tension of the preceding story. In antiquity, sporting events such as these served to reunite quarreling parties by giving them an outlet other than warfare for their antagonism. The sharing of the festival and the contests lent even the bitterest rivals common ground to stand on, which it was hoped might open the door to mutual understanding. As such, the games of Book 23 rebind the Greeks broken apart by Agamemnon's *hubris* and Achilles' wrath.

B. Book 24: The Ransom of Hector's Body

Book 24, then, returns the audience to the main story of the epic which one might have expected would have finished with Hector's death, but there is more tale to tell. Indeed the main theme has yet to be resolved, Achilles' anger. While Book 23 heals the dissension among the Greeks, Book 24 concludes the epic itself by resolving the conflict between the Greeks and Trojans, of course not the war itself—that part of the cycle belongs to another epic—but the tensions inflamed by Achilles' wrath.

In this case, the Greeks and Trojans as represented by Achilles and Priam meet and momentarily forget their differences. They eat together, exchange gifts and recognize the sadness which the war has brought on all of them. This scene of Achilles' and Priam's encounter sums up the tragedy of good men caught up in a horrible, impossible situation. Without either abandoning his duty to his own people, they show their mutual respect for each other's rights as humans and the common dignity that all decent persons deserve.

Because so little happens, this meeting of minds may seem to some inconsequential. It is, in fact, far and away the most important—if also the quietest—confrontation in the epic. When for all their differences Achilles and Priam come to realize they share more than they don't, when they understand, for instance, that Achilles will never see his friend Patroclus again in the same way Priam will never again see Hector, that Achilles is a son now lost to his father and Priam a father who's lost his oldest son, and that neither of

them wanted to fight the war but both will die in its finale. When they recognize all this in their ceremonial shared repast, the anger of Achilles, Homer's main theme in *The Iliad*, comes home at last.

Book 24 of *The Iliad* is, for the most part, self-explanatory, requiring little of the annotation the other books demand. The following, however, are few points to bear in mind as you read.

1. At line 24.339 Argeiphontes ("killer of Argus") is Hermes. Argus was a giant whom Hermes bored into a coma with stories and then killed. Perhaps this is a little self-deprecating humor on Homer's part. At the end of this long epic, the poet acknowledges that some might feel a bit like Argus, "storied to death."

2. At line 24.480-2 the simile comparing Priam in supplication before Achilles to a murderer who seeks refuge in another land—exile was the usual punishment for murder in Homer's day—is another example of the poet using a simile to turn a scene on its ear. After all, the murderer in the tent is Achilles, but it's Priam to whom the comparison is explicitly directed. As so often, the simile is most interesting in its inherent irony.

3. Mentioned at lines 24.602-617, **Niobe** is the queen who boasted that she was more fortunate than the divine Leto (mother of Apollo and Artemis), in that Niobe had many sons and daughters but Leto had only two. So Apollo and Artemis slew all Niobe's children to punish her for her *hubris*, likening herself to the gods. Niobe in grief refused to eat and wept for her children so much that the gods turned her into a stone from which rose a gushing spring, her tears (see [Artemis](#), An Introduction to Classical Mythology).

Why Achilles compares Priam to Niobe is unclear, to say the least. He claims that Niobe is an example of why he and Priam should eat—presumably like the grieving king she also lost many children but still remembered to eat in spite of her grief—however, the myth of Niobe itself seems to deny that. Niobe, in fact, is fossilized because of her unquenchable sorrow, a fact that Achilles himself states. Thus, the story seems to undercut his point, and it's unclear why Homer included it. Perhaps the poet merely wanted to analogize Priam's sorrow and remind the audience that the old man has lost not only Hector but many other children just as Niobe had. If so, the parallel serves well to aggrandize Priam's misfortunes, but otherwise it makes a poor fit.

In the end it's hard to tell how Homer means us to read it. Is he saying Achilles is an inept analogist? Perhaps, we're meant to see the hero as making a sly comment about Priam's excessive lamentation: "Stop crying or the gods will turn you into a fountain, too!" While the oxymoron inherent in this comparison is clear, its purpose isn't. All in all, it's one of the craftiest and most intriguing puzzles in all of Western literature.

C. Death Journeys

Among the more important things to note in Book 24 is Homer's use of religious symbols

and iconography. In particular, he casts the story of Priam's journey to Achilles' tent, as if Priam had died and gone to the underworld. This sort of symbolic passage to the beyond is called a **death journey**.

Death journeys may involve a face-to-face meeting between the hero and dead spirits—called in ancient Greek a *nekuia* ("a summoning of the dead")—the sort of journey Odysseus takes in *The Odyssey* when he calls up deceased souls. But a death journey can also be a symbolic sojourn through despair and catastrophe framed in imagery associated with a society's vision of the afterlife. Whether symbolic or not, it invariably ends in a new understanding or a new world, with the central character emerging from this passage a person reborn, having shed with his or her former personality.

We've already seen one such death journey in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, an explicit one wherein the hero Gilgamesh travels across the Waters of Death and visits Utanapishti, the man who survived the Deluge. There, he seeks immortality but fails and returns a broken man, though a better king. In particular, he surfaces from his literal death journey with a fresh understanding of life and the transience of mortality.

Many such passages can be found in literature—we'll see another when we read Vergil's *The Aeneid*—and even more if figurative death journeys are included. For instance, at the other end of literary spectrum is one of the most popular works in the modern American canon, Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With The Wind*. Toward the center of this book, the heroine Scarlett O'Hara is forced to escape Atlanta just as the Union troops are taking it during the last stages of the Civil War. She journeys back to her home through the ravages left in the wake of Sherman's gruesome "March to the Sea" and, when she finally reaches her family's plantation Tara, she finds a world of desolation, the land around her home burnt and her mother dead.

But, according to Mitchell, from these ashes rise a new South, a new Atlanta and a new Scarlett. Of course, Mitchell's heroine doesn't actually die amidst her struggles to get home to Tara, but the old Scarlett, the pampered Southern belle, does as she matures into a tough fighter who "will never be hungry again." Mitchell underscores this transformation with imagery found often in literal death journeys:

There was death in the air. In the rays of the late afternoon sun, every well-remembered field and forest grove was green and still, with an unearthly quiet that struck terror to Scarlett's heart. Every empty, shell-pitted house they had passed that day, every gaunt chimney standing sentinel over smoke-blackened ruins, had frightened her more. They had not seen a living human being or animal since the night before. Dead men and dead horses, yes, and dead mules lying by the road, swollen, covered with flies, but nothing alive. No far-off cattle lowed, no birds sang, no wind waved the trees. . .

In Book 24 of *The Iliad*, Priam embarks on the same sort of figurative death journey when he visits Achilles in his tent. To clarify this, Homer injects several obvious references to the ancient Greeks' way of expressing death and envisioning the world of

the dead. For instance, Hermes escorts Priam to Achilles' tent. One of Hermes' duties in classical myth is to serve as a *psychopompos* who leads souls to the underworld (see [Hermes](#) in An Introduction to Classical Mythology). Priam's journey also takes place at night, adding to the spooky atmosphere, and he rides in a wagon, often used in antiquity to carry a body out to burial. He passes over a stream of water, like the River Styx seen by the ancients as separating the living from the dead, and finally passes unseen like a ghost into the Greek camp.

When Priam arrives at Achilles' tent, the death imagery intensifies. In the process of rescuing his dead son whom he hopes to bring back not to life but proper burial, Priam must confront and appease a sullen, semi-divine being, Achilles who acts much like Hades the keeper of the dead. Before he agrees to release the body, Achilles insists Priam feast with him, the same way Hades fed Persephone (see [Hades](#) in An Introduction to Classical Mythology). After the meal, the old king succumbs to Sleep, in Greek myth the brother of Death. Finally, when Priam returns to Troy bringing the dead Hector back to his living family, he sponsors a funeral feast and eulogies of his deceased son. From all this it's clear that Homer expects his audience to understand Priam's journey as not just a quick commute to the other side of the war, but a symbolic journey beyond life and the boundaries of mortal existence.

There are several good reasons why the poet added such gravity to these final passages of *The Iliad*. For one, by expressing it through a pattern of actions and images which his audience typically related with dying, he raises the importance of the episode, suggesting it's a matter of life and death. More important yet, *The Iliad* begins midway through the story of the Trojan War and ends well before the city's fall. By definition, then, Homer can't finish the story as such. A death journey lends his epic a sense of finality and closure, something it naturally lacks. And what better way to achieve a symbolic end than with a symbolic death journey? Thus, the ritual of death closes the ritual of poetry, foreshadowing the very fall of Troy itself.