

THE MODESTY OF HOMER

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This paper will argue that Homeric epic generally treats other epic traditions respectfully rather than competitively. This should not be surprising, but recent scholarship has strongly emphasized the agonistic aspects of archaic Greek poetry. Homerists trained in oral theory have, of course, paid rich attention to the ways that meaning in epic depends on the contexts made available to poet and audience by all the performances that have gone before.¹ Scholars' awareness of the traditionality of meaning has led them to argue that Homeric poetry does not simply make meaning by its relationship to tradition. It is self-conscious in its relationship to its own sources and its own place within the tradition. Its versions are not just one of many possible versions. Homeric epic deliberately varies and adapts, so that it is meta-epic, an implicit commentary on its sources.² This argument is plausible, but since Greek culture was in general profoundly competitive, interpreters tend to assume that this self-conscious relationship with the tradition must be agonistic. Yet the rhetoric of the epics not only avoids overt competition with earlier poetry, but suggests that Homer, like his heroes, identifies himself as seeking a place in a canon. In many passages, the poet almost announces the inferiority of his own subjects relative to others by having his characters admit their inferiority relative to earlier heroes, even though they also see themselves as worthy of epic memory.

¹ The inherited context of epic is especially the emphasis of J.M. Foley, *Homer's Traditional Art* (University Park, 1999) ('traditional referentiality'), and G. Nagy, *The Best of the Achaeans* (Baltimore, 1979). I have argued elsewhere that the Homeric poems do not require extensive knowledge of earlier songs of their audiences: 'Pseudo-Intimacy and the Prior Knowledge of the Homeric Audience', *Arethusa* 30 (1997), 201-19; *Listening to Homer* (Ann Arbor 2002), 90-123. However, I did not mean to suggest that the *ideal* audience does not have rich experience.

² See M. Finkelberg, 'The Sources of *Iliad* 7', *Colby Quarterly* 37 (2002), 159-61; cf. K. Dowden, 'Homer's sense of text', *JHS* 116 (1996), 47-61. For the *Odyssey*, see R. Martin, 'Telemachus and the Last Hero Song', *Colby Quarterly* 29 (1993), 222-40. I. Malkin, *The Returns of Odysseus. Colonization and Ethnicity* (Berkeley, 1998), shows the importance of alternative *Odysseys* for establishing both Greek and non-Greek identities in the Early Iron Age.

R. Martin argues that the poet, like his characters, competes by telling 'in more detail, about more topics.' Indeed, he seeks to 'obliterate' other performances.³ Others see competing claims to truth in early epic, and their interpretations emphasize passages of overt polemic. So, for example, many see the 'lies like truth' of the Muses in the proem of Hesiod's *Theogony* as marking Hesiod's assertion of the superiority of his own kind of poetry over heroic epic.⁴ Polemic evidently existed. The opening of the Homeric *Hymn to Dionysus*, for example, where the poet dismisses the claims of various locations to be the god's birthplace, has a strong agonistic element. Since rivalry with other poets must have been a basic condition of poetic production—as Hesiod's proverb, 'beggar begrudges beggar, and bard, bard' (*WD* 26) implies—it seems only appropriate to look for more subtle polemic where competitiveness is less overt.⁵ The Homeric poems, in such a view, implicitly claim superiority both to other traditions, while the *Odyssey*, or its tradition, is in contention with the *Iliadic* tradition or the *Iliad* itself.⁶ While Andrew Ford has pointed out that the poems themselves almost entirely suppress the reality of poetic competition or even interaction, for him this is a denial of lateness and thus a competitive gesture.⁷

³ R. Martin, *The Language of Heroes* (Ithaca, 1989), 238–39. The index of G. Danek, *Epos und Zitat. Studien zur den Quellen der Odyssee. Wiener Studien, Beiheft 22* (1998), has eighteen entries for 'Konkurrenz, poetische' (525).

⁴ Homeric poetry as the 'lies like truth': A. Kambylis, *Die Dichtweise und ihre Symbolik* (Heidelberg 1965), 63; H. Maehler, *Die Auffassung des Dichterberufs im frühen Griechentum bis zur Zeit Pindars* (Göttingen, 1965), 40–42; W. Verdenius, 'Notes on the Proem of Hesiod's *Theogony*', *Mnemosyne* 25 (1972), 225–60, especially 234; P. Murray, 'Poetic Inspiration in early Greece', *JHS* 101 (1981), 87–100, 91; E. Bowie, 'Lies, Fiction, and Slander in Early Greek Poetry', in *Lies and Fiction in the Ancient World*, ed. C. Gill and T.P. Wiseman (Austin, 1993), 21–22; earlier bibliography in G. Lanata, *Poetica pre-platonica* (Florence, 1963), 24–25.

⁵ On poetic competitiveness in general, see M. Griffith, 'Contest and Contradiction in Early Greek Poetry', in *The Cabinet of the Muses*, ed. M. Griffith and D. Mastrorarde (Atlanta, 1990), 185–205.

⁶ F. Jacoby, 'Die geistige Physiognomie der Odyssee', *Die Antike* 9 (1933), 159–94, especially 161 (a 'conscious rivalry' with the *Iliad*); W.G. Thalmann, *Conventions of Form and thought in Early Greek Epic Poetry* (Baltimore, 1984), 157–84 (arguing that the *Odyssey* defines itself and its hero by competition with the *Iliad*, but does not necessarily ask that its claim of superiority be taken seriously); Nagy, *Best of the Achaeans*, 35–41; A. Edwards, *Achilles in the Odyssey*, *Beiträge zur klassischen Philologie* 171 (Königstein, 1985); K. Usener, *Beobachtungen zum Verhalten der Odyssee zur Ilias*, *Scripta Oralia* 21 (Tübingen, 1990), 205–7.

⁷ A. Ford, *Homer: the Poetry of the Past* (Ithaca 1992), 94–117. Ford is strongly influenced by Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence*, and sees Homer as the 'strong poet' who seeks to overcome his predecessors by presenting his poem as early rather than late.

There is no question that an agonistic attitude is important in archaic poetry, and the Homeric poems are surely the product of a desire to outperform others. Still, claims that other versions are false are not actually as common in archaic poetry as the ubiquity of rival versions might lead us to expect. They appear when the difference among versions has moral or political weight.⁸ Nowhere does a poet claim that a traditional story about one hero is better than an unrelated story about another, only that one is more appropriate to a particular occasion. The common *aporia*-motif implies that there are many attractive possibilities, and that the poet regrets that he must choose. One is most appropriate now, but all are worthwhile. In the epic, where the genre does not permit overt polemic, and so traces of competition must be subtle, an emphasis on such traces disguises how often the epics make overt gestures of deference towards other traditions.

Archaic and classical Greek works frequently stress the magnitude of their themes, because theme and expression are assumed to match each other, so that if the poet is competent enough, the greater hero will always have the best song. Claims about the importance of the subject are also claims about the work. The two mirror each other. Yet Homeric epic, although it certainly has totalizing, hegemonic qualities, also, even as it appropriates other traditions, acknowledges their excellence and even superiority. The epics do not usually criticize other heroes and traditions. Instead, assuming that heroic glory is not a zero-sum contest, they place their own heroes within a traditional canon that has room for them all.⁹ Although they insist that their heroes and stories deserve attention, they do not claim that other songs are unworthy.

The *Odyssey* does not even imply, less alone declare, that its hero is the best hero in any absolute sense. Instead, it claims—even this tentatively—that he is the most fortunate, the most deserving of *makarismos* (and fittingly celebrated also for his cunning). The *Odyssey* does not thereby claim to be the best poem, since there is no traditional association between the excellence of a song and whether its hero is happy, or most deserving of emulation. In fact, since struggle and suffering are the usual themes of song, this claim is potentially paradoxical. If

⁸ See L. Pratt, *Lying and Poetry from Homer to Pindar* (Ann Arbor, 1993), esp. 115–16, 131–56.

⁹ Even the competition of heroes with their contemporaries is not zero-sum, as D. Cairns has pointed out (*Aidos* [Oxford, 1993] 56 n. 42 94 n. 141).

Odysseus were too fortunate, he would not be worth singing about. Insofar as Odysseus is fortunate because of his *arete* and because Athena loves him, his story has a powerful claim to corresponding excellence; but this claim does not take a form that would detract from the claims of other heroes and their stories. Instead, the poem stakes out its own territory—effectively implying that its genre is not the same as the *Iliad*'s—without criticizing other songs.

For Homer's rivalry with other traditions, a comparison among Homer, Herodotus, and Thucydides is instructive. The proems of both *Iliad* and *Odyssey* stress the magnitude of the subject at hand: Achilles' wrath brought *innumerable* sufferings, and sent to Hades *many* mighty souls, ἡ μὲν Ἰφιδίω ἄλγε' ἔθηκε· πολλὰς ἰφθίμους ψυχὰς ... (*Iliad* 1.2–3). The *Odyssey* is even more insistent:

...πολλὰ / πλάχθη, ἐπεὶ Τροίης ἱερὸν πολίεθρον ἔπερσε / πολλῶν δ'
ἀνθρώπων ἴδεν ἄστεα καὶ νόον ἔγνω, / πολλὰ δ' ὅ γ' ἐν πόντῳ πάθεν ἄλγεα
ὄν κατὰ θυμόν (1.1–5)

... [who] wandered *much*, after he sacked the holy citadel of Troy. He saw the cities of *many* men and learned their minds, on the sea he suffered *many* griefs in his heart

While these proems thereby point not only to the length of the poem to come (since no brief performance could accommodate this mass of material), but also its importance, they are remarkable for the absence of hyperbole. The poet in no way suggests that no other hero ever had an anger so devastating, or that no one wandered and suffered as much as Odysseus.

Homer is hyperbolic about the magnitude of his subject only in the *recusatio* of the proem of the Catalogue of Ships (2.484–93); the number of Achaeans is beyond speech, and the poet will therefore not attempt it.¹⁰ Many times Homeric characters say that particular events, deeds, or heroes will win *kleos* or deserve to be remembered. Such events are essential to the overall outcomes of the plot and to the stories to which the plots belong.¹¹ They are not, however, greater than all other

¹⁰ Martin, *Language of Heroes*, 223–25, argues that Achilles is Homer-like at *Iliad* 9.379, when he says he could not be persuaded if Agamemnon gave him ten or twenty times as many gifts. Homer's hyperbole, however, accepts human limits; Achilles uses a similar trope to deny limits.

¹¹ M. Finkelberg, *The Birth of Literary Fiction in Ancient Greece* (Oxford, 1998), 73–85, discusses all the examples and shows that 'historical' importance is their common feature.

deeds or events, because there is no attempt to create a hierarchy of stories. When Agamemnon offers his daughter in marriage to Achilles, he promises more gifts than anyone has ever given with his daughter (9.147–48)—but he will, of course, never actually give these marriage-gifts.

Herodotus' rhetoric is not unlike Homer's. At the beginning, he defines his topic as great and wonderful accomplishments, ἔργα μεγάλα τε καὶ θαυμαστά, and so accepts the association of an important *logos* with important subjects. Later, indeed, he says that he will examine small cities as well as great ones, because greatness is subject to vicissitude:

... going equally through small and great cities of human beings. For most of those that were great long ago have become small. Those that were great in my time, formerly were small. Therefore, recognizing that human prosperity never stays in the same place, I shall mention both alike. (1.5.3–4)

He feels the need, apparently, to apologize for sometimes treating what might appear to be small places. At the same time, he does not seem to feel any need to argue that other, earlier topics were any less great or wonderful. He is not overtly competitive.

Thucydides, by contrast, devotes considerable space and energy to demonstrating not just that the Peloponnesian War was important and worthy of study, but that it was the biggest war ever, more significant than the Persian War or the Trojan War. He began to write, he says

Expecting that it would be *great* and most worthy of being narrated of those that had occurred up to this time, basing this conclusion on the fact that both sides were at the highest level in every kind of preparation, and seeing the rest of the Greek world attaching itself to one side or another, some doing so immediately, others considering it. For this was the *greatest* disturbance among the Greeks and a significant number of non-Greeks—practically among the *most numerous* part of humanity. (1.1–1.2)

Earlier cities and their deeds, he extensively argues, were on a lesser scale: "Those that took place before them and those from remote times ... I do not believe were great" (1.3; cf. 1.21.2).¹² Thucydides is the author of a single book on a single subject, and he confronts an incipient

¹² Scholars have discussed Thucydides' polemic here, but they have given relatively little attention to why he conducts it about the *scale* of events. C. Macleod, *Collected*

canon (Herodotus, Hellenicus) within which he fights for his position. Therefore, even though he argues that the stability of human nature guarantees the value of his work (1.22.4), which would surely imply that even small matters could be worthy of attention for their exemplary value, he does not rely on this paradigmatic value for his assertion that his book is important. Instead, accepting the conventional association between the importance of the subject and the importance of the corresponding account, he insists that his subject is, indeed, greater than all others.

Homer is not Thucydidean. The *Iliad* proem insists only that the wrath of Achilles caused an immense number of griefs, $\mu\upsilon\upsilon\tau\iota$... $\alpha\lambda\gamma\epsilon$ ' (1.2). The *Odyssey* is even more restrained, stating only that the hero's wanderings were 'many' ($\pi\omicron\lambda\lambda\acute{\alpha}$, 1.2). There are no claims, explicit or implicit, that these griefs or wanderings were more than any others, ever. In fact, his heroes acknowledge the greatness of their predecessors. The Homeric narrator, to be sure, does not compare his heroes to their own predecessors in his own voice, whether positively or negatively, though he does repeatedly stress that they were stronger than his own contemporaries. Heroes in the *Iliad*, however, do not claim to be the best within the tradition. Of course, they compete vehemently with each other. It is not only Achilles and Agamemnon who quarrel; Idomeneus and his own *therapon* Meriones are evidently in competition with each other, for example (13.246–94). Within the *Iliad*, Homer offers a ranking in his own voice, straightforwardly stating that Achilles was best, Ajax second (2.768–69).

However, nothing in the poem suggests that its overall topic is better than others. The only allusion to poetic competition is the *Iliad* implies that bards need to show some restraint in their competitiveness. The short narrative about how Thamyris said that he could defeat even the Muses in song (2.594–600), who lamed him and deprived him of song, shows the dangers that bards, like others, can extend their urge to primacy too far. Too be sure, this passage has been read as evidence for Homer's competitiveness with other traditions. Thamyris met the Muses as he came from Eurytus' city, Oechalia, and R. Martin has suggested that this detail implies that the poetic tradition of the Sack of Oechalia is impaired by Thamyris' loss of song, so that the

Essays. (Oxford, 1983), 153, points out how in the Funeral Oration (2.64.3), Thucydides' Pericles repeats the word $\mu\epsilon\gamma\iota\sigma\tau\eta$, 'greatest.'

poet here points to the superiority of his own tradition.¹³ The Homeric poet, however, never acknowledges that he depends on tradition for his material. The Muses provide it directly.¹⁴ Thamyris' failure thus says nothing about the story of Oechalia. Instead, perhaps, the mention of Oechalia associates the god-challenging singer with god-challenging heroes, for both Eurytus and Heracles, the sacker of Oechalia, challenged Apollo in archery (*Odyssey* 8.224–25). The poet may thus have in mind a Thamyris who resembles Ovid's Arachne in not just challenging gods, but in simultaneously using narrative material that they resent (*Met.* 6.103–28). If there is an implicit criticism of the Sack of Oechalia as a subject of song, therefore, it is not directed at the accuracy of the tradition, but at telling the story in a way that is offensive to the gods.

More fundamentally, the anecdote points to a basic limit in the poet's possibilities of polemic against other poetic subjects. As the proem to the Catalogue of Ships stresses (*Iliad* 2. 484–86), the Muses possess all possible knowledge, as no mortal can do. The poet must be somewhat humbled even in respect to his competition with other mortals by his recognition that he cannot master the entire possible repertory, while the Muses guard it all. Too much praise of his own subject would risk offending them.

Many familiar passages show how Homeric heroes accept the excellence of the protagonists of other songs. Athena/Mentes urges Telemachus to emulate Orestes, who has achieved fame among all humanity (*Odyssey* 1.298–300). When the character praises Orestes, the narrator reminds his audience of the continuing glory of this hero, whom he has already mentioned at 1.30.¹⁵ While Telemachus certainly achieves heroic standing in the poem, it is not entirely clear that he reaches the level of an Orestes—that an independent *Telemachy* could ever have had the popularity of an *Oresteia*. Athena's praise is thus potentially praise of a song different from this one.

Paradigmatic tales often imply an *a fortiori* argument. The heroes of former times were greater than those 'now', and they are therefore to be imitated. Nestor explicitly says that he is the survivor of an era of greater heroes than his contemporaries, and that their opponents, the Centaurs, were mightier than his contemporaries' opponents. Overtly,

¹³ Martin, *Language of Heroes*, 228–30.

¹⁴ R. Scodel, 'Bardic Performance and Oral Tradition in Homer', *AJP* 119 (1998), 171–94.

¹⁵ See Danek, *Epos und Zitat*, 40–41.

he is explaining why Agamemnon and Achilles should listen to him, since mightier heroes than they did so:

Those were the mightiest of heroes who have been nurtured on the earth. They were mightiest and they fought with the mightiest, the mountain-dwelling bears, and destroyed them violently. And I mingled with them, having come from Pylos, from a far-off, distant place. For they themselves summoned me. And I fought along with them on my own. With those men nobody could fight among men who are now alive on the earth. (*Iliad* 1.266–72)

Implicitly, he may be trivializing Achilles' and Agamemnon's dispute about who is superior in the here-and-now by reminding them that neither can be as great as these heroes of the past. Even though Agamemnon and Achilles are the best of the Greeks at counsel and fighting (258—an obvious piece of flattery, since in counsel Nestor far surpasses them both), Nestor says that he has never seen such heroes as these and never will (262). When he says that no present mortals are their equals, he echoes the language the narrator uses to contrast his own contemporaries with the heroes of the *Iliad* (5.304, 12.449, 20.287).¹⁶

When the heroes are initially hesitant to accept Hector's challenge to single combat, Nestor evokes Peleus, who was impressed when he heard their genealogies but would be so deeply disappointed by their present timidity that he would pray for death: the heroes are failing to live up to the excellence of their ancestors (7.124–31). Although seven men then answer the challenge, their response cannot entirely cancel the effect of this speech. To be sure, Nestor surely chooses Peleus to represent the older generation in order to imply that Achilles would not hesitate to fight Hector, so that there may be a single exception to the present generation's inferiority. Nonetheless, the overall impression is one of decline.

Achilles seems to accept that Heracles was a greater hero than himself, for he was dearest to Zeus:

Not even the mighty Heracles escaped the death-demon, the one who was dearest to the lord Zeus; but fate overcame him, and the harsh anger of Hera. (18.117–19)

The emphatic οὐδὲ γὰρ οὐδέ, 'not even', marks the implicit *a fortiori* of the motif of consolation, explicit when Achilles tells Lycaon that he

¹⁶ Nestor's authority is beyond question; see M. Alden, *Homer beside Himself: Para-Narratives in the Iliad* (Oxford, 2000), 74–111, and N. Austin, 'The Function of Digressions in the *Iliad*', *GRBS* 7 (1966), 295–312.

should not lament his imminent death (21.106–13): after all, Patroclus has died, who was better than Lycaon, and Achilles himself will die, too. If Heracles was not at least the equal of Achilles, Heracles' death is no reason for Achilles to accept his own mortality.

There is, of course, a rule-testing exception to the pattern of heroes' acceptance that earlier heroic generations were greater than themselves. Sthenelus replies passionately to Agamemnon's rebuke of Diomedes, which compares Diomedes unfavorably with his father Tydeus: 'It was not dear to Tydeus to cower like this, but rather to fight with his enemies far out in front of his dear companions.' Sthenelus insists that the Epigoni are greater than their fathers were, since they took Thebes, while their fathers failed:

Son of Atreus, do not tell falsehoods when you know how to speak the truth. We claim to be much better than our fathers. We actually took the citadel of seven-gated Troy leading a smaller army beneath a more powerful wall, obeying the portents of the gods and the help of Zeus: But they perished by their own recklessness (4.404–10)

Strikingly, however, he does not say that he and his comrades succeeded because they were better in battle, but because they obeyed the portents of the gods, while their fathers had attacked although the gods did not support them. In saying this success makes them 'better', Sthenelus is using a 'persuasive definition.'

Sthenelus is himself a relatively minor hero, while his father Capaneus—the most impious of the Seven throughout the tradition—is a far more significant figure. Capaneus is a frequent topic precisely because of his awesome defiance of the gods and consequent dramatic death by the thunderbolt. The heroes who are the greatest topics of song are usually those who are closest to the gods, whether in enmity or love. In describing the success of the Epigoni as the result of their confidence in divine favor, though, Sthenelus does not imply that the Epigoni were extraordinary recipients of divine favor, who would thus be unequivocally better than their fathers. He avoids grandiose claims. Furthermore, Diomedes rebukes his companion on the grounds that Agamemnon is right to rouse his troops, though when Agamemnon himself shows cowardice, Diomedes shows that he too resents Agamemnon's insult (9.34–36). Diomedes himself uses his father's greatness as a source of his own authority (14.110–32).

Athena also rebukes Diomedes as inferior to his father:

Truly, Tydeus begot a son little like himself. Tydeus was small in build, but a warrior. And once I forbade him to make war, and to throw himself

into battle, when he came, without the Achaeans, as a messenger to Thebes, so that he was among many Cadmeians. They urged him to dine at peace in their halls. But he, having that mighty spirit he had had previously, challenged the young men of the Cadmeians, and defeated everyone easily. Such a helper I was to him. But you—I stand by you and protect you, and I bid you eagerly fight the Trojans. But you—either rushing exhaustion has entered your limbs, or maybe spiritless fear holds you. So then, you are not the son of Tydeus, the fierce-minded son of Oeneus. (5.800–13)

Here, as often, exceptional divine favor is linked with exceptional heroism; Diomedes, however, lacks either strength or courage to use the divine help offered. The goddess' reproach is unfair, as Diomedes' reply shows, for he has held back only because she herself told him to fight with no gods other than Aphrodite. Diomedes is in the midst of a spectacular *aristeia*. Still, the poet consistently evokes an earlier generation of heroes who were less cautious than those he himself sings. Dione consoles Aphrodite with a catalogue of gods who suffered at the hands of mortals, and a warning that Diomedes may suffer a similar fate (5.381–415). Diomedes himself, though only a direct warning from Apollo makes him end his attack on the divinely-protected Aeneas (5.433), soon reverts to the more careful style of a Homeric hero and tells the story of Lycurgus. Patroclus similarly refuses to fight Apollo (16.710–11), while Achilles expresses his resentment that he cannot take vengeance on the god (22.20). Homer's heroes reach the limits of human daring, but do not quite cross them.

Strikingly, the *Odyssey* once does proclaim its subject superior to all others, but this claim is made not for the hero, but for Penelope. Antinous complains of her in the assembly:

And cunning tricks, such as do not hear that any woman ever performed, even those of old, those who were beautiful-haired Achaean women in the past—Tyro, Alcmena, Mycene of the lovely crown. None of these knew ideas like Penelope's ... (2.118–22)

Although Odysseus refers to his own fame for cunning (*Odyssey* 9.19–20), probably with the implication that he is the most cunning man alive, he does not compare himself to earlier cunning heroes. The narrator implies that Odysseus' skills are inherited from his grandfather Autolycus, who surpassed all human beings in theft and oath-taking through the beneficence of Hermes (19.398–95). In this case, Odysseus' skills seem to be wider and more impressive than his grandfather's, just as the divinity who helps him, Athena, is more powerful than

Hermes. She says at 13.299 that she is famous among all the gods for intelligence and schemes; this is surely an implicit claim to superiority. She adds that Odysseus surpasses all mortals in planning and speaking (13.297–98). That Odysseus is best in this respect of all his contemporaries seems plain enough, and no hero of the past is ever cited who could equal him. Yet while Penelope is overtly called the most cunning heroine known from tradition, Odysseus does not receive such an explicit evaluation. To be sure, Athena says that another man would have rushed home to see his wife and children (13.333–34), and Odysseus complains that another woman would not hold away from her husband when he returned in the twentieth year (23.168–70). It is easy for the hearer to apply these generalizations, not only to the speakers' contemporaries, but to all humanity. Odysseus and Penelope probably excel all other mortals, past and present, in controlling their impulses in order to act with cunning. The poet, though, does not quite say so.

Of bowmanship, Odysseus says straightforwardly that, while he was inferior to his own contemporary Philoctetes, he would not even compete with the great archers of the past, Heracles or Eurytus:

Only Philoctetes was superior to me with the bow, in the country of the Trojans, when we Achaeans shot with the bow. I declare that I am much better than all other grain-eating mortals who are now alive. I have no desire to compete against former heroes, not with Heracles nor Eurytus of Oechalia, who used to compete even against immortals in archery. Therefore great Eurytus died quickly, and he did not reach old age in his halls. For Apollo in anger killed him, because he challenged him to a shooting contest. (8.219–25)

Since Odysseus' skill with the bow is so crucial to the plot, this is not a trivial concession. His bow was a guest-gift from Eurytus' son Iphitus, killed by Heracles soon after (21.13–38), so that he is closely linked with these heroes even as he accepts their superiority. These heroes' closeness to the gods is hostile rather than friendly; in Odysseus' version, Apollo killed Eurytus (226–28). Like Sthenelus, Odysseus rejects the earlier heroes' willingness to fight against gods. The poet also implies that Odysseus, unlike Heracles, respected the sacred ties of guest-friendship.¹⁷ Unlike Sthenelus, however, Odysseus does not say

¹⁷ See I. F. de Jong, *A Narratological Commentary on the Odyssey* (Cambridge, 2001), 506–8.

that his greater respect for the gods makes him 'better' than they; on the contrary, he implies that their impiety was the natural corollary of their excellence.¹⁸

Circe in effect says that Jason was a greater hero than Odysseus.

The only sea-crossing ship to pass through there was the Argo, known to everyone, sailing from Aietes. And in fact the sea would quickly have thrown that ship against the great cliffs; but Hera conveyed it past, since Jason was dear to her [ἐπεὶ φίλος ἦεν Ἴήσῳν] (12.69-72)

Odysseus will not be able to sail through the Planctae, and must choose another route. The Argonaut's feat is inimitable. Here again, the unsurpassable heroic action is based on exceptional love from a god.

Odysseus himself, of course, has extraordinary divine support, but it is lacking during the Adventures. Since having good relations with the gods is typically a point on which Odysseus and the *Iliad*-heroes are greater than their predecessors, his inability to match Jason because he lacks divine help is striking. Odysseus, of course, angers Poseidon, and his men bring the wrath of Helios on themselves. The poet seems to be aiming at a careful balance that will sufficiently motivate Poseidon's anger, and Zeus' acquiescence in it, without making the hero an antagonist of the gods like Locrian Ajax.¹⁹ Instead, he stresses Athena's help where he can. Nestor compares Athena's help for Odysseus only to other instances he knows from personal experience:

For I never saw the gods showing their affection so openly, as Pallas Athena openly stood beside that man. (3.221-23)

Since Nestor is so old, this remark extends Odysseus' closeness to the goddess beyond his own contemporaries, but it is still only the closest another man has seen. There is no claim that Athena loved him more than a god has ever loved anyone, or more than this goddess has loved anyone.

Heroes acknowledge inferiority in specific areas even relative to their peers, as Achilles admits at *Iliad* 18.105-6 that while he is best at fighting, others are superior in council. Odysseus makes this very point back to him:

¹⁸ Ford, *Poetry of the Past*, 98-99 discusses this analogy, but thinks that the *Iliad*-poet, because he ignores his predecessors, is hybristic.

¹⁹ I think that R. Friedrich, 'The Hybris of Odysseus' *JHS* 111 (1991), 16-28, is basically right that 9.525 is the moment Odysseus goes too far, but overstates Odysseus' offense.

Achilles, son of Peleus, by far mightiest of Achaeans, you are more powerful and mightier than I am by no small amount with the spear. But I would exceed you in thought by a great deal, since I am older and I know more. Therefore, let your heart put up with my advice.

(*Iliad* 19.216-20)

Such arguments and admissions do not lower the hero's overall claims to heroic standing. When a hero boasts that he is best in one field, he still allows others also their own justified claims in others.²⁰ This qualification of the boast makes it more plausible and acceptable. This generosity towards contemporaries thus emphasizes the heroes' underlying competitiveness. Even from the poet's point of view, as characters in the same songs they would directly compete for his attention and praise. Heroes of different generations, however, do not need to compete so directly, because the tradition has room for them all, and the heroes of earlier stories provide exempla by which to measure and understand the heroes of the tale at hand. Achilles and Odysseus do not need to displace Jason and Heracles. Odysseus does not need to displace Achilles, either. For the *Odyssey*, Achilles is already canonical.²¹

Ajax is the rule-testing exception. Ajax in the Underworld is still angry over the arms of Achilles. The Contest of the Arms was not a contest in one heroic quality or another, but in general superiority, between contemporaries. Ajax' anger at losing is not surprising for a living hero fighting for his *timē*; what makes his anger remarkable is that it survives his death. Odysseus-as-narrator acknowledges that Ajax was best after Achilles in both looks and deeds, *erga*, (11.550-51), and wishes that he himself had not won such a victory. His wish, however, could as easily imply that no such contest had ever taken place as that he would prefer that Ajax have won it. He does not quite acknowledge that Ajax was more deserving of the arms, since he implicitly continues to claim superiority in counsel. Instead he presents the contest from

²⁰ Nagy, *Best of the Achaeans*, 45: 'these words are used of or by a hero to express his superiority in a given area of heroic endeavor'; cf. L. Muellner, *The Meaning of Homeric εἶχμα through its Formulas* (Innsbruck, 1976), 79-83.

²¹ I do not agree with Nagy, *Best of the Achaeans* 42-58, that *Odyssey* 8.72-82 reflect an epic tradition of enmity between Achilles and Odysseus, and so an old tradition of competition between their traditions. The quarrel is meaningful precisely because Achilles and Odysseus are traditionally friends. On this passage, see W. Marg, 'Das erste Lied von Demodocus', in *Navicula Chilonensis. Festschrift Felix Jacoby* (Leiden 1956), 16-29; J.S. Clay, *Wrath of Athena* (Princeton, 1983), 96-103; O. Taplin, 'The Earliest Quotation of the *Iliad*?' in *Owls to Athens: Essays on Classical Subjects Presented to Sir Kenneth Dover*, ed. E.M. Craik (Oxford 1990), 109-12.

an epic, retrospective viewpoint from which the participants need no longer compete, since both are securely within the story. His address to Ajax concedes nothing about the merits:

Such a tower of defence for them, you perished. And we Achaeans grieved without stopping for your death as much as we did for the life of Achilles, son of Peleus. And no one else was responsible, but Zeus extraordinarily hated the army of Danaan spear-fighters, and he laid fate upon you. (11.556–60)

By referring to the will of Zeus, praising Ajax formally, and reminding Ajax of the grief of the Achaeans (equal to that for Achilles!), Odysseus tries to persuade Ajax to see the Judgment of the Arms as he himself does, as a tragic story whose placement in the epic canon will give both heroes their due. Even dead, Ajax does not see himself as a figure of epic whose place in song is secure, but as someone who must still contend for his position.

The *Iliad* does set its hero in direct contrast with the *Iliad*'s when it comes to blessedness, however.²² Odysseus in the Underworld declares Achilles most blessed of all men:

Achilles, no man in the past was more blessed than you, nor will any be in the future. For before, when you were alive, we honored you equally with the gods, and now that you are here, you are a great ruler among the dead. So do not be upset that you are dead, Achilles. (11. 482–86)

Odysseus does not confine himself here to his own experience, but claims that Achilles is the most fortunate, even among those not yet born. Achilles, of course, rejects the blessing, insisting that he would rather be alive as the hired hand of a poor man than rule the dead (487–91). Implicitly, he thus prefers Odysseus' fate to his own—although Odysseus, too, is mortal, so that this preference may not be permanent: once Odysseus dies, he may lose his superiority to Achilles. While the *Iliad* (or Odysseus) thus makes it possible for Odysseus to 'win' against Achilles by placing him within a competition for 'most blessed', the grounds on which Odysseus blesses Achilles still mark his heroic superiority. Achilles was deservedly most honored in life and death.

In the second Nekyia, Achilles and Agamemnon compare their fates. Achilles contrasts Zeus' apparent affection for Agamemnon with Agamemnon's wretched death (24.24–34). Agamemnon answers: ὄλβιε Πηλέος υἱέ, θεοῖς ἐπιείκελ', Ἀχιλλεῦ, / ὅς ἔθανες ἐν Τροίῃ ἐκὰς Ἄργε-

²² See S. Dova, 'Who is μακάριτος in the *Odyssey*?' *HSCP* 100 (2000), 53–65.

ος (24.36). This death far from home, which ought to be a source of sadness, is in fact the basis of Agamemnon's *makarismos* of Achilles in contrast to himself (since he died at home, but miserably). Agamemnon details the extraordinary honor Achilles received in death, and comments on his everlasting fame. 'For you were very dear to the gods', he says (24.92). After Agamemnon hears Amphimedon's account of the slaughter of the suitors, however, he delivers a parallel *makarismos* for Odysseus, beginning ὄλβιε Λαέρταο πάι, πολυμήχαν' Ὀδυσσεῦ, / ἦ ἄρα σὺν μεγάλῃ ἀρετῇ ἐκτίσω ἄκοιτιν, 'Blessed son of Laertes, much-contriving Odysseus, truly it was with great excellence that you obtained a wife' (24.192–93)...

How noble was the mind in blameless Penelope, daughter of Icarus. How well she remembered Odysseus, her wedded husband. Therefore fame of her excellence will never perish for her, but the immortals will make a delightful song for those on the earth for the benefit of sensible Penelope, not as the daughter of Tyndareus ... (*Odyssey* 24.194–99)

The promise of fame seems to be for Penelope rather than Odysseus, though the pronouns are ambiguous.²³ Within the context of such a *makarismos*, however, there is no rivalry for fame between husband and wife; the wife is famous precisely for 'remembering' her husband—her glory is defined by her preservation of his.

Agamemnon blesses both Achilles and Odysseus. Insofar as the blessings are neatly parallel, the two heroes are equal. Achilles' rejection of Odysseus' own hyperbolic *makarismos*, however, surely tips the balance. Both Achilles, whose death was supremely glorious, and Odysseus, who has achieved both heroic glory and a successful return, are blessed compared to Agamemnon; but in the terms of this poem, Odysseus is more fortunate.

Even this good fortune, though, is not expressed hyperbolically, and it has distinct limits. At the opening of 24, Odysseus is implicitly a victorious athlete and a bridegroom, both appropriately objects of *makarismos*.²⁴ Yet when he goes to bed with Penelope, they talk about the wanderings he is yet to undertake, and Penelope comments cautiously that if the gods indeed provide them with a better old age, they have hope

²³ M.A. Katz, *Penelope's Renown*. (Princeton, 1991), 20–21, summarizes differing views. While I take σὺν μεγάλῃ ἀρετῇ | in 193 adverbially (assuming that the poet has in mind a story of how Odysseus won Penelope), I do not see that this interpretation would change the 'natural' understanding of 196–99, which would refer the pronouns to her.

²⁴ On the recognition as a marriage, see U. Hölscher, *Die Odyssee: Epos zwischen Märchen und Roman*. 3rd ed. (Munich 1990), 292–93.

that they will escape troubles (23.286–87). Odysseus does not appear to be quite as fortunate from his own perspective and that of Penelope as he does from that of Agamemnon or Achilles. The *Odyssey* is thus a poem about a fortunate hero, but his good fortune is oddly celebrated in a poem that so extensively details his sufferings. The blessings of the hero are a claim to be a particular kind of poem, but do not imply that it is better than poems about less lucky heroes.

The encounter with Heracles in the Underworld adds a further complication. Heracles commiserates with Odysseus in a way that perhaps invites the hearer to see Odysseus as Heracles' equal (11.617–25). If the *catabasis* was the most difficult labor of Heracles, and Odysseus also successfully completes a *catabasis*, Odysseus must be equally great. Indeed, he may be by some standards more admirable.²⁵ Heracles, however, is actually on Olympus, according to the received text (11.602–04): he is more fortunate than Odysseus will ever be.²⁶ What they share is marked by Heracles' expression of pathos, ἄ δειλ', 'unfortunate man' (11.618)—and pathetic events, as we shall see, are the subject basis of poetry. (Similarly, Menelaus, whose adventures are almost a weak parody of Odysseus', will receive immortality; Menelaus is too fortunate to be a first-rank hero). Furthermore, immediately after seeing Heracles, Odysseus abandons his project of seeing more of the heroes of earlier times, because the arrival of a vast swarm of ghosts terrifies him into flight (11.633–35). The narrator reminds the hearer that Odysseus has not penetrated all the way into Hades, and that he is not fearless. Odysseus may at times emulate the greatest of heroes, but he is not the greatest.

In any case, being blessed does not make a hero the best subject of song. The assumption within the epics that human suffering is a primary subject of song is so blatant and familiar as to demand little discussion.²⁷ Most explicitly, Helen at *Iliad* 6. 357–58 assumes that Zeus has laid an evil fate upon Alexander and herself in order that they become a subject of song in the future. Typically, Odysseus' last

²⁵ Danek *Epos und Zitat*, 247–49, follows Clay, *The Wrath of Athena*, 90–96, in arguing that the text shows the violent, impious Heracles, with whom Odysseus is positively contrasted; he then sees competition between the *Odyssey*-poet and singers of rival (Heracles)-epic.

²⁶ On 602–4, see A. Heubeck *A Commentary on Homer's Odyssey*, vol. II. Books IX–XVI (Oxford, c. 1990), 114 (on 11.601–27).

²⁷ H. Fränkel, *Early Greek Poetry and Philosophy*, trans. M. Hadas and J. Willis (Oxford, 1975), 14.

heroic activity, as the *Iliad* presents it, will serve to reconcile him with Poseidon, and conclude with a hecatomb (11.121–37). Once the hero has made peace with all the gods, nothing remains but a peaceful old age and death—nothing to sing about. Homeric poetics simply do not make the hero's ultimate success or happiness central values in the excellence of songs. While achieving *timê* and *kleos* are essential to being fortunate, the reverse is not true. Paradoxically, the song that celebrates Odysseus' good fortune must concentrate on his sufferings. It can use the difference between Odysseus' successful return and Achilles' heroic death to define the ethical difference between the two traditions, and it certainly implies that it would be more desirable to be Odysseus than Achilles. It thereby implies that it would be a mistake only to listen to songs about Achilles, and not to those about Odysseus.²⁸ It does not, however, imply that songs about Odysseus are better than songs about Achilles; indeed, Odysseus and Achilles seem to need each other—and they both need the heroes who came before them. If the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* each hopes that its audience will accept it as the greatest of all songs, each bases this hope not on a traditional criterion that its hero is better than all others, but on its own qualities as song.

This modesty is surprising only if we assume that epic performers rigorously specialized in particular areas of the possible repertory—that a Troy-singer never sang about Heracles, for example, at least never to the same audiences. This is quite implausible. Just as Homeric heroes compete fully only with their contemporaries, the singer fully competed only with those songs with which he was immediately engaged: his present rivals. Implicitly, he had to compete with alternate versions of his own subject-matter that he expected his audiences to know. Beyond that, he did not need to define his heroes as better than others. *Iliad* and *Odyssey* make special efforts to give their own heroes features that distinguish them from all others, and make them obviously worthy of the audience's interest. The *Odyssey* creates a unique heroic niche for Odysseus, as the hero who wins both glory and a return. For Odysseus to be the most fortunate of heroes requires that he have a foil who is as great, if not greater, but less fortunate. Epic poems are thus at the same time competitive and symbiotic. Each song needs to assert its right to a place in memory, but if a song annihilates its rivals, it no longer has meaning. This is especially true of poems that stand in a self-conscious

²⁸ P. Pucci, *Odysseus Polytropos: Intertextual Readings in the Odyssey and the Iliad* (Ithaca, 1987), especially 214–21.

relationship to their own tradition. Indeed, the heroes' modesty relative to their predecessors is a factor in the poet's definition of what makes them worth hearing about.

The *Iliad* presents Achilles' tension with Apollo, but carefully avoids letting him actually fight the hostile god. Ultimately, all the heroes of the *Iliad* recognize mortal limits. The Ransom of Hector shows Achilles' ability to feel sympathy with his enemy, and even to console him, as closely linked with his understanding of human weakness before the gods. He tells Priam both the allegory of the jars (24.525-51), with its explicit comparison between Priam and his own father Peleus, and the paradigm of Niobe, whose sufferings were the punishment for her boasting of superiority to Leto (24.602-17). Yet the comparative piety of Achilles is only significant if the hearers recall the earlier, god-challenging heroes and Achilles' affinities to them. The *Odyssey* is more obviously a warning against ignoring divine power. The poem extensively thematizes divine vengeance from its opening. Here, too, the hero displays excess in his disastrous boast over Polyphemus, (9.502-36)—it is especially notable that he asserts that not even Poseidon will heal Polyphemus (thereby denying the god's power). Elsewhere, he stands in contrast to Heracles and Eurytus, the god-challengers. Indeed, Telemachus is astonished at his implicit boast when Odysseus suggests that Odysseus and Telemachus might fight the suitors alone (λίην μέγα εἶπες, 16.243). Yet this excessive heroic self-assertion turns out to be based on his confidence that Athena and Zeus will assist him (16.266-69). This confidence turns out to be justified. In this particular context, the old problem of the *Odyssey's* combination of gods who enforce justice and gods who are concerned with their own prerogatives is irrelevant. From the point of view of a listener evaluating himself in comparison with the epic character, the issue lies in an awareness of divine power.²⁹

This argument, if accepted, points to the two ways the poem seeks to direct their receptions. First, by representing heroes who do not ordinarily compete with their own predecessors and indeed recognize their greater strength, yet evidently are superior to them in respect for the

²⁹ For Unitarian approaches to the *Odyssey's* theology, see R. Friedrich, 'Thrinakia and Zeus' Ways to Men in the *Odyssey*', *GRBS* 28 (1987), 373-400; C. Segal, *Singers, Heroes, and Gods in the Odyssey* (Ithaca, 1994), 195-227; S.D. Olson, *Blood and Iron: Stories and Storytelling in Homer's Odyssey*. Mnemosyne Suppl. 148 (Leiden, 1995), 205-27. W. Kullmann, 'Gods and men in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*', *HSCP* 89 (1985): 1-23, sees the entire poem as motivated by issues of justice, in sharp contrast to the *Iliad*.

gods, the epics also offer a model for their own reception. Even the most powerful men of the poet's own day are repeatedly reminded that they are inferior to the heroes. Yet these heroes themselves were inferior in might to those who came before them. They were also comparatively more mindful of the gods, presumably because their lesser might made it slightly more difficult for them to forget their mortal limits. Nonetheless, some of them still came dangerously close to outright theomachy. The contemporary hearer has no hope of being as powerful as Achilles, and gods do not appear as openly in his world as they do in song. The heroes of the epic treat their predecessors as models to be emulated for their courage and power, but also as warnings of various kinds of excess, so the poet hints that his audience should hold a complex attitude to its own characters. Implicitly, the poems urge their hearers to accept their own inferiority without allowing this humility to reduce their own efforts and expectations that their own deeds may be memorable.

Characters, I have suggested above, stand for the poem itself: their greatness is its greatness. Metapoetically, then, the poet's depiction of heroes earlier than his own as more powerful, but less aware of human limits, also describes his own poetic and narrative style compared to the Epic Cycle. The Cycle appears to have been more archaic in both content and tone than Homer, even if the actual epics forming it were later compositions.³⁰ Other epic poetry was probably more than like the Cycle than like Homer. Non-Homeric epic was also different in ethos from the Homeric poems. Other epics were freer in immortalizing heroes, and they were richer in supernatural content. Both these features have the same tendency: Homer places his characters in a world more like his own than other poets did.³¹ In his heroes' attitudes to earlier heroes, we can see the poet as commenting on his own difference: as his characters stand in awe of the mighty men of the past, without wishing to emulate their most audacious actions, so the poet views other styles of epic with respect, but humanizes his own.

³⁰ See most recently J. Burgess, *The Tradition of the Trojan War in Homer & the Epic Cycle* (Baltimore, 2001).

³¹ J. Griffin, 'The Epic Cycle and the Uniqueness of Homer', *JHS* 97 (1977), 39-53. Burgess, *Tradition of the Trojan War*, 157-71.