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, 1993) (“traditional irreversibility”), and O. Nagel, The Art of the Archaics (Baltimore, 1979). I have argued elsewhere that the Homeric poems do not require extensive knowledge of earlier songs for their audience: Pseudo-Hesiod and the Prior Knowledge of the Homeric Audience, Jhth 32 (1995), 311–19. Listening in Homer (Ann Arbor 2004), 99–123. However, I did not mean to suggest that the ideal audience does not have this experience.

R. Martin argues that the poet, like his characters, competes by telling "to more detail, about more topics." Indeed, he seeks to "obliterate" other performances. Others see competing claims to truth in early epic, and their interpretations emphasize passages of overt polemic. So, for example, many see the "lies true" of the Muse in the proem of Hesiod's Theogony as marking Hesiod's assertion of the superiority of his own kind of poetry over heroic epic. Polymics evidently existed. The opening of the Homeric Hymn to Demeter, 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 beguiles beggar, and bard, bard" (W 26) implies—it seems only appropriate to look for more subtle polemic where competitiveness is less overt. 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 Hesiodic tradition or the Iliad itself. 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 laconis and thus a competitive gesture.1


3 On poetic competitiveness in general, see M. Grifith, "Context and Confrontation in Early Greek Poetry", in The Cabinet of the Muse, ed. M. Griffith and D. Mauenhauer (Atlanta, 1990), 199-205.

4 F. Jacoby, "The psychic Physiology of the Odyssey", Die Arist 9 (1933), 179-94, especially the "conscious rivalry" with the Iliad; W.G. Thalhammer, Composition of Erins and Sjodar in Early Greek Epic Poetry (Baltimore, 1986), 13-134 (arguing that the Odyssey defines itself and its hero by competition with the Iliad, but does not necessarily ask that claim of superiority be taken seriously); N. D. S. of the Iliad, 35-47; A. von Wiese, Asche in the Odyssey, Beiträge zur klassischen Philologie 171 (Königstein, 1962), 41, K. Uerpm, Jueditdarzig zur Verhältn der Odysse zu Ilii, Scripta Ordina 21 (Tiibingen, 1994), 285-7.

5 A. Ford, Homer: the Poetry of the Past (Ithaca 1995), 94-117. Ford is strongly influenced by R. Blooms The Anatomy of Influence, and sees Homer as the "strong poet" who seeks to overcome his predecessors by presenting his poems as earlier rather than later.

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. 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 "historical" 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.

Archae and classical Greek works frequently stress the magnitude of the their themes, because them and expression are assumed to match each other, so that if the poet is competent enough, the greatest 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 its 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. 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 malignance (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.
Odysseus were too fortunate, he would not be worth singing about. Insofar as Odysseus is fortunate because of his omnia 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 immemorial sufferings, and sent to Hades many mighty souls, δῆμος Ἀχιλλος δέκα Θέμελις πολλά κρίσιμως τριχώς. ... (Iliad 1.2–3). The Odyssey is even more insistent:

...πολλά / πλαθήνετε, λατρεύειν τινας πολλοίς ἐποίησαν ἔτεραν / πολλά δ’ ἀνθρώποις δέν ἔσκειν καὶ νόμος ἄγει, / πολλά δ’ καὶ ἐν τοῖς πάντες ἄλογα ἐν κατάθεν θείῳ...

...[who] wandered much, after he sacked the holy city 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 proem of the Catalogue of Ships (2.48–93); the number of Achaeans is beyond speech, and the poet will therefore not attempt it.11 Many times Homeric characters say that particular events, deeds, or heroes will win kílas 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.12 They are not, however, greater than all other

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10 Martin, Language of Homer, 223–25, argues that Achilles is Homer-like at Iliad 9.379, when he says he could not be persuaded if Agamennon 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. Finkeberg, 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.

12 Scholars have discussed Thucydides’ poetic love, but they have given relatively little attention to why he conducts it about the sole of events. G. MacRae, Colossi
canon (Herodotus, Hellenics) 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 Thucydides. The Iliad, however, insists only that the wrath of Achilles caused an infinite number of griefs, μοῖρας...�ὶπτερά 
(1.2). The Odyssey is even more restrained, stating only that the hero’s wanderings were ‘many’ πολλὰδε...1.2. There are no claims, explicit or implicit, that these griefs or wanderings were more than any others, even, in fact, more than older heroes. Thamyris acknowledges the greatness of his predecessors. Homer, however, does not compare his hero 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 in the tradition. Of course, they compete vehemently with each other. It is not only Achilles and Agamemnon who quarrel. Idomeneus and his own son Euphorion are evident in competition with each other, for example (13.24.6-94). Within the Iliad, Homer offers a ranking in his own voice, straightforwardly stating that Achilles was best. Ajax second (2.268-69).

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 (2.554-600), who lacked 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 Thamyris’ song has already mentioned at 1.30. While Telemachus has been a heroic standing in the poem, it is not entirely clear that he reaches the level of an Orestes—that an independent Telemachus could ever have had the popularity of an Orestes. Athena’s praise is thus potentially praise of a song different from this one.

Paradigmatic tales often imply a forti ortum 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. Overly,

16 See Derricke, Eneids and Iliads, 40-41.
he is explaining why Agamemnon and Achilles should listen to him, since mightier heroes than they did so.

Those were the mightier of heroes who have been nurtured on the earth. They were mightier and they fought with the mightiest, the mountain-dwelling.beasts, and destroyed them violently. And I mingled with them, having come from Pylos, from a far-off, distant place. But 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 2:566–70)

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 (5:58—five obvious piece of battery, since in counsel Nestor far surpasses them both), Nestor says that he has never seen such heroes as these and never will (562). 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 (5:504, 12:449, 20:387).61

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 (2:124–31). 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.

The emphatic ἔα ἔοικ ὁ ἔος ὁ ἔος, ‘not even’, marks the implicit a fortiori of the motif of consolation, explicit when Achilles tells Lycaon that he should not lament his imminent death (21:267–73): 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 conquer 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 Aeacus, 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 Thebes 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 (4:409–10).

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 (14:110–12).

Athena also rebukes Diomedes as inferior to his father:

Truly, Tydeus begot a son little like himself; Tydeus was strong in bold, but a warrior. And since I forbade him to make war, and to throw himself...
into battle, when he came, without the Acheans, as a messenger to Tithes, so that he was among many Cadiemans. 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 Cadiemans, and defeated everyone easily. Such a helper I was to him. But you—I stood by you and protect you, and I bid you eagerly fight the Trojans. But you—either rushing exhaustion has entered your limbs, or maybe spirits faint hold you. So then, you are not the son of Tydeus, the heroic-minded son of Oeneus. [5,800-12]

Here, as often, exceptional divine favor is linked with exceptional heroism; Diomede, however, lacks either strength or courage to use the divine help offered. The goddess' reproach is unfair, as Diomede's reply shows, for he has held back only because she herself told him to fight with no gods other than Aphrodite. Diomede is in the midst of a spectacular artsis. 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 Diomede may suffer a similar fate (5,388-415). Diomede himself, though only a direct warning from Apollo makes him end his attack on the divinely-protected Aeneas (5,438), soon reverts to the more careful style of a Homeric hero and tells the story of Lycurgus. Parthenos similarly refuses to fight Apollo (6,710-15), while Achilles expresses his resentment that he cannot take vengeance on the god (6.20). 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 claims 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-hearted Achean women in the past—Tyro, Akrene, Mycene of the lovely crown. None of these knew ideas like Penelope's. [2.118-122]

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 (9.356-55). 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 13.269 that she is famous among all the gods for intelligence and schemes; this is surely an explicit claim to superiority. She adds that Odysseus surpasses all mortals in planning and speaking (13.267-98). 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 twelfth year (23.660-79). 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 Eurytos:

Only Philoctetes was superior to me with the bow, in the country of the Trojans, when we Acheans 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 Eurytos of Oechalia, who used to compete even against immortals in archery. Therefore great Eurytos 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. [8.429-25]

Since Odysseus' skill with the bow is so crucial to the plot, this is not a trivial concession. His bow was a gift from Eurytos' son Iphitus, killed by Heracles soon after (9.13-35), 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 Eurytos (224-26). 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. Unlike Sthenelus, however, Odysseus does not say...

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that his greater respect for the gods makes him 'better' than they; on the contrary, he implies that their impetuousness was the natural corollary of their excellence.16

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

The only sea-crossing ship to pass through was the Argo, known to everyone, sailing from Alcides. 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 [not 416; 48 140020]

(2.59–70)

Odysseus will not be able to sail through the Phaestos, 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 Helius 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 Lycian Ajax.17 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 showed 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 only the closest another man has seen. There is no claim that Athena loved him more than a god has 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:

16 Ibid., Poetry of the Rival, 69–191199 discusses this analogy, but thinks that the Iliad-poet, because he ignores his predecessor, is heterodox.
17 I think that R. Eckard, 'The Hybrid of Odysseus' JHS 111 (1996), 18–28, is basically right that 9.545 is the moment Odysseus goes too far, but deteriorates Odysseus' defense.

18 Nest. Rhet. of the Acheans, 45: 'these words are used of by a hero to express his superiority in a given area of heroic endeavor'; cf. L. Moirbr, 'The Meaning of Homeric epinomia through its Formulae' in Studia Homerica, 1950, 79–85.
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 Daedalean spearmen, and the laid fate upon you. [11.482-86]

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 herolessness, however. 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 upstart 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 (489-91). 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 vengeful death (12.4.23-74). Agamemnon answers: δε αυτόν τό θεόν θερών έχων. Άγαμε, ἐγώ δέ τοι τινής ἐν τρόπω ἀπάντας Άγαμενον. [22]


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that they will escape troubles (23.495-87). 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 reader to see Odysseus as Heracles' equal (11.617-25). If the *kataphasis* was the most difficult labor of Heracles, and Odysseus also successfully completes a *kataphasis*, Odysseus must be equally great. Indeed, he may be by some standards more admirable.26 Heracles, however, is actually on Olympus, according to the received text (11.620-24); he is more fortunate than Odysseus will ever be.27 What they share is marked by Heracles' expression of pathos, ὁ δὲ ἢκ, 'unfortunate man' (11.616)—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 (11.630-35). The narrator reminds the reader 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.28 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

26 Danskin Elpis and Φιλονεία, 245-49; following Cline, *The Wrath of Athena*, 90-96, in arguing that the text shows the violence, imprisons Heracles, with whom Odysseus is positively contrasted; he then sees competition between the *Odysseus* and singers of rival *Heracles*-epics.


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 worthy of 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 jackals (14.255-35), with its explicit comparison between Priam and his own father Pelasgus, and the paradigm of Niobe, whose sufferings were the punishment for her boastings of superiority to Leto (24.602-7). 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, Telamachus is astonished at his implicit boast when Odysseus suggests that Odysseus and Telamachus might fight the suitors alone (21.243). Yet this excessive hero-satisfaction turns out to be based on his confidence that Athena and Zeus will assist him (16.466-69). 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.

This argument, if accepted, points to the two ways the poem seeks to direct its 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 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 theocrasy. The contemporary hearer has no hope of being as powerful as Achilles, and gods do not appear as openly in the 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. Metaphorically, 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.5 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.6 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.


6 See most recently J. Burgess, The Tradition of the Trojan War in Homer and the Epic Cycle (Baltimore, 2000).


Burgess, Tradition of the Trojan War, 157-71.