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Françoise Letoublon

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# Homer's Use of Myth

*Françoise Létoublon*

## Epic and Mythology

The Homeric Epics are probably the oldest Greek literary texts that we have,<sup>1</sup> and their subject is select episodes from the Trojan War. The *Iliad* deals with a short period in the **tenth** year of the war;<sup>2</sup> the *Odyssey* is set in the period covered by Odysseus' return from the war to his homeland of Ithaca, beginning with his departure from Calypso's island after a 7-year stay.

The Trojan War was actually the material for a large body of legend that formed a major part of Greek myth (see Introduction). But the narrative itself cannot be taken as a *mythographic* one, unlike the narrative of Hesiod (see ch. 1.3) - its purpose is not to narrate myth. Epic and myth may be closely linked, but they are not identical (see Introduction), and the distance between the two poses a particular difficulty for us as we try to negotiate the the mythological material that the narrative on the one hand *tells* and on the other hand only *alludes to*. Allusion will become a key term as we progress.

The Trojan War, as a whole then, was the material dealt with in the collection of epics known as the 'Epic Cycle', but which the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* allude to. The Epic Cycle however does not survive except for a few fragments and short summaries by a late author, but it was an important source for classical tragedy, and for later epics that aimed to fill in the gaps left by Homer, whether in Greek - the *Posthomerica* of Quintus of Smyrna (maybe 3 c AD), and the *Capture of Troy* of Tryphiodoros (3 c AD) - or in Latin - Virgil's *Aeneid* (1 c BC), or Ovid's '*Iliad*' in the *Metamorphoses* (1 c AD). It also fuelled the

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<sup>1</sup> The Linear B tablets of the Mycenaean age are in no sense literary and, apart from presenting us with certain names of gods or heroes, contain no mythological matter. Otherwise Homer's epics are the oldest Greek text altogether, provided we follow the traditional chronology rather than, for instance, Martin West (Com. to the *Theogony*, Oxford 1966: 41; see also *The Date of the Iliad*, *MH* 52, 1995, 203-19).

<sup>2</sup> On the chronology of the war, see *Il.2.134 ennea de bebaasi Dios megalou eniautoi*: nine years passed by, so we are in the tenth year of the war.

prose accounts of 'Dictys of Crete' (1 c AD) and 'Dares of Phrygia' (unknown date AD), allegedly eye-witnesses to the Trojan War and particularly popular from the Middle Ages to the 17th century. So our task is to study how Homer *uses* Greek myth even though we have no direct evidence of Greek myth before Homer, rather an uncomfortable and paradoxical challenge.

Evidently, a body of Greek myth did exist in the oral tradition before the time when the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were in the process of composition, and the oral tradition itself may be seen depicted in the epic through such figures as Demodokos. The epics even show us that some divergent traditions circulated about some episodes of the Trojan War: the *Odyssey* alludes to a quarrel between Odysseus and Achilles (*Odyssey* 8.75, and maybe *Iliad* 9.347 with the corresponding scholia), instead of the *Iliad*'s quarrel between Agamemnon and Achilles; an expedition of Odysseus with Diomedes to the town of Troy is alluded to in the *Odyssey*, but is rather different from the spy mission to the camp of the Trojan allies of *Iliad* 10, where the Trojan spy Dolon and the king Rhesus are killed and Rhesus' horses stolen.

Scholars such as Kakridis and Severyns (see also Willcock, Kullmann, Andersen, Schein, Danek, Burgess **\*\*see my footnote**)<sup>3</sup> opened the way to the critical approach we refer to as 'neoanalysis', which is based on the idea that Homer already knew the traditions which later authors told in the *Cypria*, *Aethiopis*, *Iliou Persis* and the other Cyclic Epics. This means that he may be *alluding* to 'texts' we do not know, for instance an *Argonautica*, as we can see from the *Odyssey*'s mention of the ship *Argo*, *pasi melousa* 'known by everybody' (*Odyssey* 12.69-70). A significant proportion of myth may only be known to us in written form through late texts, but its presence in vase-paintings guarantees that it was already told in the Archaic Age.

So this chapter starts from the mythological material which the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* utilise, and begins with the episodes of the Trojan War in chronological order (as known from the whole ancient tradition, from the summary of the Epic Cycle by Proclus, via the Byzantine patriarch Photius in the 9th century, to Tryphiodorus and the Latin authors mentioned above). At the same time we will do well to remember that there is a certain methodological inconvenience in this approach: we are not sure that such or such events were told in one part of the Cycle rather than in another; furthermore, it is not even agreed that the different parts of the Epic Cycle - whether oral or written - existed in the

Archaic Age (before the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*) in the form that they later took and which is known to us.

## Cosmogony and beginnings

The difference between how Homer and Hesiod narrate myth can best be seen in their presentation of cosmogony and cosmology. In Homer, we 'see' the goddess Thetis living in the sea with her aged father (the 'Old Man of Sea') because her son Achilles needs her help (*Iliad* 1.357-63). Then we learn from her that Zeus is not currently in his usual home on Mt Olympus, but engaged in a 12-day feast amongst the Ethiopian people (1.423-4). Later, when Hera gives an excuse to Zeus for going to the limits of the Earth, we discover that Ocean is the 'origin (*genesis*) of the gods' (14.201) and is constantly quarrelling with his wife Tethys (14.205). This is an alternative cosmogony to that told in the *Theogony*, where Ocean takes the place of Ouranos, and Gaia that of Tethys.

In Book 15, Zeus's commands to Poseidon through the messenger Iris and Poseidon's answer (15.158-67, 185-99) remind the audience how the three sons of Kronos once parted the world, 'but the earth and Olympus' heights are common to us all' (193, tr. Fagles), which scarcely seems consistent with the account of Zeus's law on earth in Hesiod's *Theogony*.<sup>4</sup> One may suspect that the needs of the argument influenced Poseidon's discourse. Another mythical variant may be found in the *Iliad's* account, in a simile, of Earth suffering from Zeus's onslaught on Typhoeus (*Iliad* 2.780-3, told somewhat differently at Hesiod, *Theogony* 821-46).<sup>5</sup> Parallels with Near-Eastern texts may imply either a common Indo-European origin or a borrowing: both hypotheses may be argued for, since those mythologies generally share a common Indo-European origin as far as language is concerned, they may also have inherited mythology. But some of those myths may also have come to Greece through Semitic influences, and then be rather borrowings **\*\*I tried to explain in the former sentence** (see Walcot, Burkert, Haubold, West, Woodard **\*\*Bibliographic note needed**).<sup>6</sup> For the parallel with Indian myth, **see Allen in this volume**.

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<sup>4</sup> As Kerényi already saw (Jung & Kerényi 1941: **\*\*page numbers**). **I could only look at a French edition, so the page numbers are not reliable for English speaking audience...**

<sup>5</sup> See Gantz 1993, 48-51.

<sup>6</sup> P. Walcot, *Hesiod and the Near East*, Cardiff, University Pr. of Wales; W. Burkert, *The Orientalizing Revolution. Near Eastern Revolution in the Early Archaic Age*, Cambridge Mass. 1992; G.W. Most 1997; M.L. West, *The East*

## The War at Troy

It is not easy to decide how Homer's<sup>7</sup> narrative relates to pre-existing myths of Troy, not least because the poems have their own narrative strategy, one focusing on the anger of Achilles and the plan of Zeus, the other on the return of Odysseus. This strategy does not correspond to the events of the Trojan War, or only with a very narrow part of them. But the poet treats those events, well-known by his audience, as a kind of mental map for locating the places, the people and the events of the narrative relative to those of the myths. The narrative seems concerned with chronological order only in respect of Homer's own epics: the mythic elements are only taken into account when they are useful for the frame of the narrative itself. Of course, if we take Hesiod's *Theogony* as the standard for Greek mythology, we might speak of a Homeric 'deviation' from the traditional narrative concerning the first ages of the world. The myth of the ages of mankind explicitly told in Hesiod (*Works and Days* 109-201), usually considered as a borrowing from Near Eastern myth (see West **\*\*1966, 1999, ref. in the former notes?**), may rather correspond to Homeric testimonies if we follow Most (**\*\*1997: former note**)

Turning to the events before the war, we know through other texts that Zeus took the form of a swan to seduce Leda, who then gave birth to Helen, Clytemnestra and the Dioskouroi, be it from one or several eggs. We find no mention of these specific details in Homer, but Helen is sometimes called 'Zeus's daughter': she is (in rather archaic Greek) *Dios ekgegauia*, 'sprung from Zeus' (*Iliad* 3.418) or *koure Dios aigiokhoio*, 'the maid of aegis-bearing Zeus' (3.426).<sup>8</sup> So we may suppose that Homer does know the myth of Helen's birth, but does not need to mention it explicitly, probably because it was generally known. It is not that it is suppressed by Homer in order to avoid extraordinary details, as some scholars have thought, but rather that he does not foreground magical and fantastic detail (see Griffin 1977), or, more generally, irrational events.

The foundation of Troy was probably an important part of the myth, given the number of allusions to this in Homer. The whole genealogy is proudly uttered in Aeneas' challenge to Achilles (*Iliad* 20.215-40), where we can focus on the kings in particular. First, Dardanos founded Dardania in the mountains; then he was succeeded by Erichthonios, whose name

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*Face of Helicon: West Asiatic Elements in Greek Poetry and Myth*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1999; J. Haubold, *Greek Epic: A Near Eastern Genre?* *PCPS* 48, 2002, 1-19; Woodard 2007: 92-104.

<sup>7</sup> By 'Homer' I mean the poet or poets of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.

<sup>8</sup> See also *Odyssey* 23.218.

seems to imply a chthonian myth (one of birth from the earth itself) parallel to the Athenian myth;<sup>9</sup> the following king was Tros whose name clearly points to the name of the Trojan land, *Troiē*, whereas his son's name Ilos points to the city of *Ilion*; after Ilos came Laomedon, Priam's father - and Aeneas' great-grandfather (see below for the use of this genealogy in argument). The walls of Ilion (we tend, inaccurately, to call the city 'Troy') play an important role in the narration, even if the war is not shown as a siege: if the enemy enter the city, it is thereby lost, as is shown by Andromache when she learns that Hector is dead, and throws her veil down (*Iliad* 22.467-72). The building of these walls of Troy by the two gods Apollo and Poseidon employed as *thetes* (serfs) by king Laomedon is told by Poseidon (*Iliad* 21.441-60), once more with an argumentative aim (see below). Another allusion to their building of the walls of Troy for Laomedon is found earlier in the *Iliad* (7.452-3), again in a speech by Poseidon, where the fame of these walls is threatened by a new construction by the Greeks - which Zeus encourages Poseidon to overwhelm by sea and sand after the Greeks return home (459-63).

Homer mentions the abduction of the beautiful youth Ganymede, who became the wine-bearer in Olympus, and the horses given as compensation (*Iliad* 20.232-5). Compared to later poetry and literature (symposium-poetry, Socratic dialogues, Hellenistic epigram and pastoral), Homer seems as discrete about homosexual love as he is about magic.

The topography of Troy shows, among other landmarks, the Skaian gates and the fountains where Trojan women used to wash the linen in peacetime - and Hector prophecies that Achilles will be killed there (*Iliad* 22.360). We also see the tomb of Ilos, the king who gave the city its name, and it is used in the narrative as a landmark. Thus we meet formulae (standard units of Homeric verse) such as:<sup>10</sup>

- *para sēmati Ilou* ('by the tomb of Ilos', *Iliad* 10.415)
- *par' Ilou sēma palaiou Dardanidāo* ('by the tomb of Ilos the ancient son of Dardanos', *Iliad* 11.166)
- *epi tumbōi | Ilou Dardanidāo* ('on the tomb | of Ilos son of Dardanos', *Iliad* 11.372)

The story of Paris, son of Priam and Hekabe, which we know from later authorities (especially Apollodorus 3.147-9), is not mentioned explicitly by Homer. In this story his mother Hekabe dreams she gives birth to a flaming torch (sch.A to *Il.* 3.325; Hyg. Fab. 91),

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<sup>9</sup> See Alaux-Létoublon 2005: Mythes grecs de la terre, in *Les représentations de la terre dans la littérature et l'art européens, imaginaire et idéologie. Nouveaux cahiers polonais* 4, 2005, 217-31 .

<sup>10</sup> Compare *par' Ilou Mermeridāo* ('from Ilos son of Mermeros', *Odyssey* 1.259). Another, this time anonymous, grave is also used as a landmark at *Iliad* 23.331.

and the seer Aisakos then interprets this as foretelling the downfall of Troy, declaring that the child will be the ruin of his homeland. But, instead of killing him, his parents decide to abandon the child and a herdsman exposes him on Mount Ida, hoping he will die there. He is, however, suckled by a she-bear. Though Homer does not mention this story, frequent allusions \*\* (schol. A to *Il.* 3.325 tells Hekabe's dream before giving birth to him;<sup>11</sup> Helen's or Hektor's formulas like 3.428 *eith' opheles autoth' olesthai* : see also 7.390, 24.764, see also the vocative *Dyspari* used by Hector addressing his brother in *Il.* 3.39 and 13.769) name some! or at least give some!<sup>12</sup> in the *Iliad* show that a curse is acting against Troy: Paris should have perished before having abducted Helen.

Moving now to Greece, we can start with Phthia (a district of the later Thessaly). Since the gods know that a boy born of the goddess Thetis would be stronger than his father, none of them are willing to marry her.<sup>13</sup> Instead, they choose a mortal husband for her, Peleus. This was a famous wedding, as was the list of wedding-gifts. We know it best from Catullus 64 (mid 1 c BC), but it was known long before that and even the *Iliad* alludes to it, talking of the immortal horses given to Peleus (18.443-55) and the presence of the gods there (mentioned by Hera at 24.62). Some later authors have the beauty-contest between the three goddesses planned at this wedding. We can also see the wedding depicted as early as the 6 c BC on the 'François vase':<sup>14</sup> here Cheiron leads the procession of the gods, holding Peleus' hand, whilst Thetis sits waiting inside the house.

Homer's narrative is very discrete about Achilles' childhood: if we can trust *Iliad* 11.831-2, he was taught by 'Cheiron, the most just (*dikaiotatos*) of the Centaurs', but in *Iliad* 9, Phoenix seems to have been the main teacher. Thetis mentions twice that she nourished him so that he grew up like a young plant (*Iliad* 17.56 = 18.437), but she never talks about

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<sup>11</sup> First allusion in Pindar's *Paian* 8, a fragment recovered through a papyrus, see Gantz 1996: 562-4.

<sup>12</sup> Sophocles and Euripides both wrote tragedies called *Alexandros*, referring to Hekabe's dream and to the baby abandoned in the Mt Ida and nourished by a beast.

<sup>13</sup> See Slatkin's argumentation with the evidence from Pindar's *Isthm.* 8.29-38 and *Prometheus* 755-758: L. Slatkin, *The Power of Thetis. Allusion and Interpretation in the Iliad*, Berkeley 1991: 70-78. Bibliographic reference

<sup>14</sup> This vase, Florence 4209, is copiously illustrated on the web, eg at

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/artifact?name=Florence+4209&object=Vase>

how she tried to make him immortal, quite unlike for instance Apollodoros.<sup>15</sup> On the paternal side, we learn of Achilles' descent from Peleus, then back to Aiakos and eventually Zeus (*Iliad* 21.188-91). Patroklos' denial of Achilles' ancestry, when he considers his disregard for the sufferings of their companions, serves further to confirm that ancestry (*Iliad* 16.33-35):

Cruel! Your father was not the horseman Peleus,  
Nor Thetis your mother - the grey sea bore you  
And the towering rocks, so sheer is your mind!

Patroklos has a history too. As Achilles sleeps, Patroklos' shade reminds Achilles of the time when he came to Peleus' court with his father Menoitios, after he had killed another boy he was playing knucklebones with - alluding then to their common childlessness, games and learning (*Iliad* 23.83-90).

The origins of the war are well known, in particular the Judgment by Paris between the three goddesses, Athene, Hera and Aphrodite. Because Paris gave the apple to the most beautiful, Aphrodite takes the part of the Trojans, though she was of course in any case the mother of Aeneas by her lover Anchises. And Athene and Hera in consequence support the Greeks. The *Iliad* knows this episode well enough, as can be seen from the fleeting allusion in the last book of the *Iliad*, where most of the gods may pity Hektor

But not Hera, Poseidon or the girl with blazing eyes.  
They clung to their deathless hate of sacred Troy,  
Priam and Priam's people, just as they had at first  
When Paris in all his madness launched at the war.  
He offended Athena and Hera - both goddesses.  
When they came to his shepherd's fold he favored Love  
Who dangled before his eyes the lust that loosed disaster.

*Iliad* 24.26-30 (transl. Fagles).

Athene is the city-goddess of Troy (something the epics do not explain), as can be seen in the prayer Hector has his mother make in Book 6, and in the legend of the Palladion, the talismanic statue of Pallas Athene kept in Troy: as long as the statue remains in the sanctuary, the city will be safe. Nethertheless, Athene is constantly against Troy, whereas Apollo is the sole god constantly defending the 'Holy city'.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Apollod., *Library* 3.13.6; on Achilles' diet as a baby, see A. E. Hanson 2003, '187-8 (Your mother nursed you with bile': anger in babies and small children, in *Ancient Anger. Perspectives from Homer to Galen*, S. Braund and G.W. Most eds, Cambridge, 2003, 2005<sup>3</sup>, 185-207).

<sup>16</sup> S. Scully 1990: 16-40.



The story goes that Aphrodite rewarded Paris for his choice by promising him the most beautiful woman in the world, Helen. And so it is that Paris, the guest of Menelaus in Sparta, seduces Helen, carries her away on his ships and sleeps with her for the first time in the little island of Kranaë, then takes her to Troy: this was told in the *Kypria*, and is well known in Homer (*Iliad* 3.46-51; 443-5 by Paris; 24.765-7 by Helen).<sup>17</sup>

Agamemnon and Menelaus call their allies and gather the ships at Aulis,<sup>18</sup> but the winds and sea prevent them setting out. The seer Kalchas reveals Agamemnon must sacrifice his daughter (Iphigeneia), but Homer only refers either to the gathering at Aulis, a prodigy and a prediction by Kalchas that the siege would take ten years (*Iliad* 2.301-32); he also has to Agamemnon offer Achilles his daughter 'Iphianassa' as a wife (*Iliad* 9.145=287), where the name looks as though it may be influenced by 'Iphigeneia'. However, all mention of the sacrifice is omitted or avoided in Homer, though we may see an allusion in Agamemnon's denunciation of the seer Kalchas for 'never saying anything good' (*Iliad* 1.106-108), a thought which had also occurred to ancient commentators.<sup>19</sup>

At about this time in the legend Thetis has hidden Achilles on the island of Skyros, at the court of its king, Lykomedes. No mention of this occurs in Homer, but his son Neoptolemos, who is notably living on Skyros, is important in Achilles' mind.<sup>20</sup>

Presently, during the journey from Aulis to Troy, the hero Philoktetes is bitten by a snake; his infected wound produces an unbearable smell, and his companions abandon him on the desert island of Lemnos with his bow. Though we know this mainly from Sophocles' play *Philoktetes*, this story is already known to Homer, who takes the trouble to account for his absence in the *Catalogue of Ships* (*Iliad* 2.721-5).

The war is already in its tenth year when the *Iliad* begins. We have no traditional narrative of the previous years, only allusions to a few prominent events. Protesilaos ('first of the

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<sup>17</sup> The Judgment of Paris: Gantz 1996: 567-571; the Abduction of Helen; 571-6.

<sup>18</sup> Homer mentions only one mobilization at Aulis, whereas later texts (*Kypria* and *Ehoia*) seem to imply that Iphigeneia's sacrifice occurred during a second stay there, see Gantz 1996: 582-8.

<sup>19</sup> Scholiast on 1.108.

<sup>20</sup> *Iliad* 19.326-7; see also *Odyssey* 11.506-9. Apollodorus resumes the anecdote in *Bibl.* 3.13.6. The tradition of the feminine disguise and Odysseus' guile for a dramatic discovering might be recent. It won a wonderful success with painters.

army') was the first man in the Greek army to die; we do not know how, but his ship is mentioned as a landmark in the fighting (*Iliad* 15.705-6; 16.286). The Achaeans sack several towns in the vicinity, kill numerous warriors, share out spoils, and take women and children away as slaves. Chryse is where Agamemnon took Chryseis (the maiden 'of Chryse'); and Thebes Hypoplakie ('beneath Mt Plakos') is where Andromache's father, king Eëtion, was killed by Achilles together with her seven brothers (*Iliad* 6.414-8). Lesbos and Syros are the scene for the capture of Diomedes and Iphigeneia, who are given to Achilles and Patroklos respectively (*Iliad* 9.664-8). And it is at Lyrnessos that Achilles takes Briseis (the maiden originally 'of Brise', on Lesbos) captive (*Iliad* 19.60).<sup>21</sup>

At Troy, Antilochos is killed defending his father Nestor who recalls this fight when talking to Telemachus (*Odyssey* 3.103-12); the killer turns out to have been Memnon, son of Eos (Dawn).<sup>22</sup> The *Aithiopsis* told this episode and also told Memnon's death at the hands of Achilles, and Eos' mourning. Antilochos is still living in the period told by the *Iliad*, and indeed he is seen participating in the chariot-race in the games for Patroklos in Book 23, following the instructions Nestor gives him.

Achilles will be killed by an arrow fired by Paris - at the mortal part of his foot according to later tradition.<sup>23</sup> This death at Paris' hands is of course not part of the *Iliad*'s narrative, but it is prophesied by Hector at *Iliad* 21.359-60, and Hector even locates the scene precisely - at the Skaian gate. The quarrel over Achilles' arms and the madness of Ajax, known through a number of Greek and Latin texts since Sophocles, is alluded to in the Nekyia (*Odyssey* 11.543-67), and Achilles may be found addressing Ajax in the Underworld in the 'second Nekyia' (*Odyssey* 24.20).

There are several prophecies of which Trojans and Achaeans are aware concerning the fall of Troy. First it needs Philoktetes to be there with his bow; secondly it needs the Palladion, the statue of Athene which had once fallen from the sky, or rather had be

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<sup>21</sup> J.W. Zarker, King Eëtion and Thebes as Symbols in the *Iliad*, *CJ* 61, 1965, 110-14; O. Taplin, Homer's Use of Achilles' Earlier Campaign in the *Iliad*, in *Chios*, J. Boardman and J. Vaphopoulou-Richardson eds, Oxford 1986, 15-19, and P.V. Jones, Poetic Invention: The Fighting around Troy in the First Nine Years of the Trojan War, in *Homer's World*, Ø. Andersen and M.W. Dickie eds, Bergen 1995, 101-11.

<sup>22</sup> *Odyssey* 4.187-8.

<sup>23</sup> The first allusions to Achilles' tendon seem to occur in Hyginus' *Fab.* 107 and Statius' *Achilleid* I.133-134, Apollodorus mentioned less precisely his foot (*Bibl. Epitome* 5.3): Gantz 1996; 625-8.

thrown by Zeus,<sup>24</sup> to be removed from the sanctuary it was kept in, away from mortal sight. We know from later texts that Odysseus and Diomedes went together inside Troy and stole it, with some details which are not to Odysseus' credit. Neither the *Iliad* nor the *Odyssey* mention this, but in the *Odyssey*, Helen tells of an expedition by Odysseus disguised as a beggar, in which she alone recognized him and talked with him about the future (4.244-258).<sup>25</sup> The incident also seems to be reflected by the spying mission of Odysseus and Diomedes in *Iliad* 10, the *Doloneia*.

Better known is the stratagem for taking Troy, the Wooden Horse. It is an idea of Odysseus, executed by the craftsman Epeios. Two different passages in the *Odyssey* evoke this episode: in one Menelaos tells the story of how the Achaeans inside the horse hear Helen imitating their wives' voices, but Odysseus prevents them from going out (4.274-89); in the other Demodokos sings the episode (8.492-98). What follows is the Sack of Troy, told not in Homer of course, but in the lost *Iliou Persis* ('Sack of Troy'). But several episodes are foretold in the *Iliad* (references to Astyanax' fate is foreseen in the meeting between Hector and Andromache on the walls of Troy, in Book 6 of the *Iliad* and in Andromache's mourning words, 22.485-500, 24.726-45: this last reference foretells the child being thrown up from the walls of Troy) or recalled in the *Odyssey* (22.484-507, 24.731-736).<sup>26\*\*</sup>

Turning now to the Returns (*Nostoi*) of the Greeks, the *Odyssey* alludes several times to Agamemnon's tragic return and Orestes' vengeance (1.35-41, 298-300; 3.234-8; 4.512-37; 11.397-439 and 459-61; 24.20). Nestor's return is told in Book 3; and Menelaus' journey with Helen to Egypt receives extensive treatment in Book 4, where we also learn that Ajax, Oileus' son, died because he was insolent to the gods (*Odyssey* 4.449-510).

## Other myths

Apart from the Trojan War and events following it, we see many allusions to other myths in Homer. From Theban material, the Labdacids, Oedipus and his sons are mentioned briefly. We hear for instance of Oedipus marrying his mother (*Odyssey* 11.271-80) and his funeral

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<sup>24</sup>The statue is qualified as *diipetes* in both Apollodorus and Dionysius of Halicarnassus: the adjective is composed from the dative of Zeus' name and the verbal element meaning "to fall".

<sup>25</sup> See S. West's Com. *Ad loc.*: "she held Odysseus at her mercy, but did not betray him because she had come to see the folly of her desertion and longed for a Greek victory."

<sup>26</sup> On allusions in the *Iliad*, see the synthesis given by Cairns 2001, Introduction to *Oxford Readings in the Iliad*, Oxford, esp. 38-43; particularly on Astyanax's fate, 41 with note 148.

games (*Iliad* 23.679-80).<sup>27</sup> We know about Tydeus at Thebes both before the expedition of the Seven Against Thebes and during their siege (*Iliad* 4.371-87, 399; 10.285-90). At Kalydon in Aitolia, the monstrous boar sent by Artemis, the hunt and the hero Meleager are evoked briefly at *Iliad* 2.640-2, and more extensively by Phoenix in Book 9 (see below).

Herakles is probably the non-Trojan most often quoted hero in Homer, from his birth to his Labours and his other adventures such as his quest for Hades' dog (*Iliad* 8.366-9). At *Iliad* 19.91-129, a rather long tale recalls how Zeus was misled by Hera and Ate, when Alkmene was about to give birth to Herakles. Zeus swore that the baby born would be king and Hera therefore caused Eurystheus' birth to take place before Herakles'. His death, through Zeus' will, is alluded to at *Iliad* 18.116-18. His Labours are alluded to in *Iliad* 8.363 (*Eurusteos aethlôn*) the mention of a man that Eurystheus used as a messenger to him may well allude to them<sup>\*\*</sup>(15.635), as has been thought since ancient times and translations often add the word *labours* (for instance, Fagles). It has been thought that the episode refers to the scene where Eurystheus hides in a jar (GANTZ 1996: 415). Above all, the way his offspring Tlepolemos addresses the Lycian ally of the Trojans, Sarpedon, who was said Zeus' son, shows he was actually a model for Homer's heroes.<sup>28</sup>

'Why, think what they say of mighty Herakles-  
there was a man, my father,  
that dauntless, furious spirit, that lionheart...'

5.638-9 (tr Fagles)

Tlepolemos proceeds to recount Herakles' expedition against Laomedon's Troy (several generations earlier if we follow Aeneas' account of his own noble descent), showing that the War between Achaians and Trojans is a quasi-hereditary one, or that the noble sons are walking in their fathers' footsteps. The same expedition is visible at *Iliad* 20.145 where Homer mentions Herakles' wall. Meanwhile, the *Odyssey* recalls through the history of Eurytos' bow the siege of Oechalia. This is picked up briefly when Odysseus boasts of his prowess at the bow (8.224). But it also appears in detail when the narrator recalls how Eurytos' bow came into Odysseus' hands via his son Iphitos (*Odyssey* 21.22-38). It is true that Herakles is not at his best in this passage, since he is said to have killed the man he had welcomed as a guest in his home, a *xenos*, and to have kept the mares Iphitos came to reclaim; but it does also mention Herakles' 'great deeds' (21.26).

Homer presents many details from the gods' 'biographies'. For instance Lykurgos pursues the young Dionysos and his nurses on Mount Nysa (*Iliad* 6.130-43), only to be blinded, and

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<sup>27</sup> See Edmunds 1985: 7, 20.

<sup>28</sup> See Galinski 1972, 9-22 (on the 'Archaic Hero') for a different view.

for Dionysos to take refuge with Thetis in her sea-cave. Another god received and nursed by Thetis is Hephaestus, whom his mother Hera has thrown from Olympus (*Iliad* 18.394-408); this will entitle Thetis to ask him to forge new arms for her son. The whole action of the *Iliad* is set in motion by the debt Zeus owes to the goddess Thetis since she helped him against the other gods and by Hera's wrath.<sup>29</sup>

In the *Odyssey*, to understand the difficulties faced by Odysseus in his return we need to know about Poseidon's anger, which is justified by Polyphemus' curse on Odysseus at the end *Odyssey* 9. We will see further instances as we analyse the different uses of myth in Homer.

## Uses of Myths in Homer

### 1. Myth as knowledge of the world: the Homeric encyclopaedia

The formulaic style of the Epics was well suited to deliver a kind of encyclopaedic knowledge in various fields.<sup>30</sup> This knowledge seems to depend on techniques of remembering and often occurs in form of Catalogues.

Geography	Spatial knowledge of the Aegean islands and the sea-routes from Greece to Troy in the <i>Iliad</i> ; routes to the Ionian Islands and visits to new worlds in the <i>Odyssey</i> . <sup>31</sup> Mountains ( <i>Iliad</i> 14 225-30; <i>Odyssey</i> 6.102-8: Artemis in the mountains). The Catalogue of the Ships ( <i>Iliad</i> 2) as a sort of statement of the geography and population of Greece in the Geometric period.
Products and	knowledge of the various products, metals, plants: e.g., 'Alybe, where silver originated' ( <i>Iliad</i> 2.857), of Meonian and Carian women skill in colouring

<sup>29</sup> See Slatkin 1991. 53-84 and Clay 1983. \*\*\*I forgot to borrow the book from the Library : precise references still lacking.

<sup>30</sup> See E.A. Havelock. \*\*\**Preface to Plato*, Oxford 1963: 134-144. For techniques of memory, see E. Minchin 2001. \*\*\**Homer and the Resources of Memory. Some Applications of cognitive theory to the Iliad and the Odyssey*, Oxford 2001: 11-31. reference

<sup>31</sup> See Germain 1954, Segal 1994, Malkin 1998, Dougherty 2001. \*\*\*G. Germain, *Genèse de l'Odyssee: le fantastique et le sacré*, Paris 1964; C. Segal, *Singers, Heroes and Gods in the Odyssey*, Ithaca 1994; I. Malkin, *The Returns of Odysseus: Colonization and Ethnicity*, Berkeley 1998; C. Dougherty, *The Raft of Odysseus: The Ethnographic Imagination of Homer's Odyssey*, Oxford 2001. precise references

properties	ivory with purple (simile for blood on skin, <i>Il.</i> 4.141-5) and of the technologies useful in every case (see on building a ship <i>Od.</i> 5.233-61. <sup>32</sup>
Meteorology and climate	Meteorological and practical knowledge for seamen: where one can expect storms (Cape Malea was known as especially dangerous: <i>Odyssey</i> 3.287, 4.514, 9.80, 19.387; <i>Homeric Hymn to Apollo</i> 409). Myths sometimes give explanations on the natural phenomena, day and night, the seasons of year, storms and other extraordinary events <b>***(<i>Od.</i> 3.320-2, 5.269-322, 365-493, 10.48, 86, 12.405-9, 415-6 etc.) examples in Homer.</b>
Ethnography	The <i>Odyssey</i> almost serves as a guide to the world in antiquity, <sup>33</sup> though some strange absences may be noted. There are few mentions of Crete, though Homer mentions numerous towns; its king Idomeneus is not among the greatest heroes in the <i>Iliad</i> ; the labyrinth built by Daedalus in Knossos is mentioned at <i>Iliad</i> 18.590-3. It is most used as a backcloth for Odysseus' lying tales and false identities, especially at <i>Odyssey</i> 19.172-84. <sup>34</sup>
Cosmology	In addition to the cosmological passages mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the Shield of Achilles ( <i>Iliad</i> 18) shows how the Greeks in Homer's time imagined the sun and the stars and constellations in the middle of the cosmos, thought of as a circle limited by the Ocean ( <i>Iliad</i> 18.483-9). <sup>35</sup> But before this, we see Thetis enter Hephaestus' house, which he built himself with a gold-nailed vault: this, then, is a rounded and enterable image of the cosmos, where the shield seems more like a flat map. Homer also alludes to cosmogonies: we saw earlier how Hera invokes the quarrels of Ocean and Tethys as an excuse for her journey; other passages refer to a war between the Gods and the Giants, and a war between the Centaurs and the Lapiths.

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<sup>32</sup> On shipbuilding and songbuilding, see Dougherty 2001: 27-37.

<sup>33</sup> See Dougherty 2001 **\*(former note)\*\*reference**

<sup>34</sup> See Murnaghan 1987; Peradotto 1991. **\*\*\*(*S. Murnaghan, Disguise and Recognition in the Odyssey, Princeton 1987; J. Peradotto, Man in the Middle Voice: Name and Narration in the Odyssey, Princeton 1991.* precise references**

<sup>35</sup> See Létoublon 1999 with the bibliography **\*\*\*(*F. Létoublon, L'indescriptible bouclier, in Euphrosyne. Studies in Ancient Epic and Its Legacy in Honor of Dimitri N. Maronitis, J.N. Kazazis and A. Rengakos eds, Stuttgart 1999, 210-20.* precise reference).**

To this list we may add the whole area of theology and politics on Olympus.<sup>36</sup> Because he is close to the gods through the medium of the Muses, the poet knows much more about gods than humans usually do. He alludes sometimes to words, maybe part of a whole language of gods.<sup>37</sup> Instead of eating and drinking like humans, it is well known that they use *nectar* and *ambrosia*. The passage where Aphrodite is wounded by Diomedes even reveals they have *ichor* in their veins instead of blood (*Iliad* 5.339-40, 416). But the most visible part of theological knowledge touches the powers of the gods.

The Olympian Gods took the power from the Titans, and they once shared out the world as we saw above between Zeus, Poseidon and Hades. Other versions show a number of the gods involved in the distribution.<sup>38</sup> Among the other gods, we sometimes see allusions to their particular power and honours, and to the quarrels that derive from them: Athene, Poseidon, Apollo and Artemis, Hera, take part in the battle at Troy, though Zeus strictly forbids it. The loves of the gods form an important part of mythology, and a few allusions are known in Homer, though he does not seem particularly to appreciate this genre: Zeus himself lists a catalogue of women that he loved (Ixion's wife, Danae, the daughter of Phoinix, Semele, Alcmene, Demeter and Leto) as an argument for his wife Hera to have sex with him, since he never felt such a strong erotic desire (*Iliad* 14.317-27). It is interesting that Leda is not mentioned here, despite Helen's importance in the *Iliad*.

Male gods are known as seducers, sowing the world with their glorious offspring. The goddesses have a less happy fate. Thetis does not seem to have stayed long in Peleus' house in Phthia, since the *Iliad* shows her living with her sisters the Nereids in sea caves. In *Odyssey* 5.118-27 another goddess, Calypso complains about the female lot, when she learns from Hermes she must allow Odysseus to return to Ithaca, and lists various instances of goddesses who slept with a mortal without obtaining lasting happiness: Eos with Orion, Demeter with Iasion, which constitutes an interesting parallel to the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite*, where Aphrodite herself tells Anchises how Zeus' abduction of Ganymede (5.201-5) contrasts with the loves of the goddesses, whose paradigm is provided by the case of Eos and Tithonos (218-238): she obtained immortality for him but not eternal youth.

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<sup>36</sup> See the title of Clay 1997 on the *Hymns* **\*\*\***(J.S. Clay, *The Politics of Olympus. Form and Meaning in the Major Homeric Hymns*, Princeton 1997). please just say what you mean here.

<sup>37</sup> Létoublon 1985. **\*\*\***(F. Létoublon, *Les dieux et les hommes. Le langage et sa référence dans l'antiquité grecque*, in *Language and Reality in Greek Philosophy*, Athens 1985, 92-9. precise reference

<sup>38</sup> // 15.185-93, Cairns 2001: **\*\*\***37.

Apart from love-affairs, the gods also experience some trouble with human beings: at *Iliad* 6.383-415, Aphrodite goes to her mother Dione (another difference from Hesiod's *Theogony*), to complain about her wounding by Diomedes. Her divine mother, as a consolation, then tells a catalogue of other occasions where the gods once suffered wounds at the hands of mortals: Ares from Otos and Ephialtes, Hera from 'Amphitryon's son' (Herakles), Hades also by Herakles, but this time called the son of Zeus.

### ***Myth as paradigm***

Myth is frequently used, mainly in speeches, as a paradigm in the context of an argument, to the effect that since some event turned out in a particular way in a myth, accordingly the addressee should behave in the same/opposite way as a comparable person in this myth.<sup>39</sup>

So, in *Iliad* 9, Phoenix presents Achilles with Meleager as a model for relenting in one's anger; Achilles is not swayed by this and remains wrathful and rejects the conciliation proposed by the embassy.<sup>40</sup> Later, in *Iliad* 24, Priam presents Achilles with Niobe as a model to justify eating despite his sorrow. We saw above how the love-catalogue of goddesses by Calypso helps her to accept her female condition, and how Dione's list of wounded gods seeks to console Aphrodite. There are also several instances of Herakles being used as a model (particularly for Tlepolemos). In the *Odyssey*, Penelope uses Aedon<sup>41</sup> as a model for her nights passed in weeping. Aedon in myth mourns for the son Itylos that she killed through *ate* (error, or possibly madness). Penelope is mourning for her husband, absent for twenty years, but maybe she feels guilty about her own son Telemachus, whom she cannot protect against the suitors as he needs.

In *Odyssey* 21 (295-304), when the suitor Antinoös gives the parallel of the Centaurs and their leader Eurytion, who was misled by wine and killed his host Peirithoös, the argument seems to have a meaning quite contrary to its aim: the suitors are after all eating and drinking Odysseus' wealth (Edmunds 1993: 37-8). This parallel seems to be put ironically in the mouth of Antinoös?<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> The classic study is Willcock \*\*\*1964, 1977. See also Nagy 1992, 2007, 63-66.

<sup>40</sup> On the role of anger in the plot of the *Iliad*, see Muellner 1996: 94-175.

<sup>41</sup> Or *aedon* ('nightingale'), cf. Létoublon 2004, 83\*\* on this ambiguity. (Le rossignol, l'hirondelle et l'araignée, *Europe* 904-5, *Mythe et mythologie dans l'Antiquité gréco-romaine*, 73-102).

<sup>42</sup> For ironic use of features of the tradition in the *Odyssey*, cf. the reversed similes analyzed by Foley 1978 and the discussion by Felson & Slatkin 2004, 91-114. \*\*\*H. Foley, 7-26 precise references



## *Myth as a way of enhancing character*

Homeric poetry seems also to use myth to amplify character: so, Diomedes' glory (*kleos*) is enhanced by the magnificent deeds of his father Tydeus, recalled by himself (*Iliad* 10.285-94) and by other characters who knew him or know about him - such as Agamemnon who did not, he says, actually meet him (4.370-400) or Athene (5.801-13), who did.

Nestor's numerous complaints about the fading of his youth and vigour lead to narratives of his glorious past, and in his own memory he becomes a hero of a former generation (*Iliad* 1.262-70, 4.319-20, 7.134-60, 11.671-803).<sup>43</sup> Heroes usually die young, as some do in the *Iliad* itself - Sarpedon, Zeus' son, at the hands of Patroklos, Patroklos at the hands of Hektor, Hektor at the hands of Achilles. And we all know that Achilles will die soon after he kills Hector, as on various occasions Patroklos, his horse Xanthos, his mother Thetis, and the dying Hector all predict and remind him. Nestor, on the other hand, seems exceptionally to have survived his own time for being a hero; furthermore, he survives his own son Antilochos, as can be seen from his nostalgia in front of Telemachus in *Odyssey* 3 and from the words of his son Peisistratos.

Odysseus will finally narrate his own glorious past, before the Phaeacians in Scheria and before his family in Ithaca, or hear it narrated to him by an *aoidos*. He and Nestor form the exceptions to the rule that the hero does not survive his glorious deeds to narrate them; on the contrary, his death is the condition for those deeds to become the strange thing we were looking for, myth. Thus the narrator shows the 'best of the Achaeans' singing before a silent and meditative Patroklos 'deeds of heroes' (*Iliad* 9.189), i.e. of the past, not his own. And Hector's last wish is that people later will hear about his actions and glorious fighting and death (*Iliad* 22.304-5).<sup>44</sup>

Though the main characters are not given as mythical in the narrative, the density of allusion in the Epics tends to insert them in a general mythical frame: Achilles particularly already shows mythical features in the *Iliad*, for instance when the poet tells us first in Book 16 that Patroklos does not take the ash-spear Cheiron gave once to Peleus, then in Book 19 that Achilles takes it, with a pair of nearly identical lines (Létoublon 2001, \*26\*, and 2007: 223-4). The allusion to Cheiron and Mount Pelion calls to the audience's mind the memory of the mythical education of Achilles in the mountain caves by the Centaur. And the whole mythical biography comes to mind in the *Odyssey* when Odysseus meets in

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<sup>43</sup> Cf. Dickson 1995, \*\*10-20 precise reference on this extraordinary longevity

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Vernant 1991 \*\*\*I could not see this ed. In English. precise reference

the Underworld with Achilles' shadow asking for news of his father Peleus and his son Neoptolemos.

Opposite trends in the study of Homer, Neoanalysis (concerned with predecessors influencing Homer) and the study of Oral Poetry (concerned with constant re-creation of epic as new by the improvising oral performer), may perhaps be fruitfully combined in the case of myth. The characters in Homer may have been built on an older *mythical* frame so that they may be included in a story that did not belong to this traditional frame, and so that they may in some cases have been either totally invented or inflated far from their primitive form. For instance, it has been suggested in the Neoanalytic school that Patroclus and even Hector could be new characters invented for the *Iliad*. Nothing can be proved rigorously, but several details suggest this. If so, Homer could prove a 'deviant' poet compared to the tradition which might have been found in the lost Epic Cycle.

Myth has thus a typically epic effect since it models human beings into heroes by giving them a kind of traditional aura. Nagy (2007: 62-63) speaks of the poetic function of similes: the amount of mythical allusions in both the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* still enhances this poetic function.

### ***The complexity of Myth***

A final observation is that the origins of the Trojan War can be taken as a model for showing how mythical tales unfold the complexity of the world we live in. At first sight, the war might be due to Menelaus asking Helen's former suitors to form an army against Paris who abducted Helen. But if we trust the story of the Judgment of Paris, the apple thrown by Eris could be the actual cause of the war. Or is it the flame Hekabe saw in her dream before Paris's birth? Or else the egg laid down by Leda giving birth to Helen and **Klytaimestra**? Later texts seem to compete in giving several explanations, and thus seem to recognize that none of them constitute the main cause of the conflict - except perhaps that war is a natural behaviour for mankind.

## Appendix

The War at Troy: the contents of the Epic Cycle and allusions to them  
in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*

Plot of Epic Cycle	Allusions in Homer
<b>KYPRIA:</b>	
The beginnings: Judgment of Paris. Paris abducts Helen.	<i>Iliad</i> 24.26-30
Agamemnon and Menelaus call their allies and gather the task force at Aulis.	
Achilles hidden on Skyros (whence Neoptolemos' birth).	<i>Iliad</i> 19.326-7; <i>Odyssey</i> 11.506
Odysseus does not want to leave his young wife and son; he feigns madness, but is recognised.	
The ships becalmed at Aulis.	<i>Iliad</i> 2.303
The seer Kalchas prophesies that the goddess Artemis wants a sacrifice, and Agamemnon gives his daughter Iphigeneia, whence the revenge of his wife Clytemnestra.	
The journey: The ships leave Aulis. Philoctetes wounded by a snake and abandoned on Lemnos with his bow.	<i>Iliad</i> 2.717, 721-4
The (nine) years of War ( <b>nine before the beginning of the <i>Iliad</i></b> ): Protesilaos, the first to die.	<i>Iliad</i> 2.698, 706, 708;15.705-6; 16.286
<b>AETHIOPIS, &amp; LITTLE ILIAD:</b>	
After Hector's death, therefore after the end of the <i>Iliad</i> , meeting of Achilles and Penthesileia, Achilles and Troilos, Polyxena.	
Antilochos' death, defending his father Nestor; Memnon's death, killed by Achilleus.	<i>Odyssey</i> 4.187-8
Achilles' death by an arrow thrown by Paris in the mortal part of his foot.	<i>Iliad</i> .21.359-60
The quarrel for Achilles' arms, Ajax's madness.	<i>Odyssey</i> 11.0000; 24.20
Odysseus and Diomedes go inside Troia and steal the Palladion.	<i>Odyssey</i> 4.244-58 indirectly
<b>ILIOU PERSIS:</b>	
Odysseus finds out the idea for taking the city. Epeus builds the	<i>Odyssey</i> 4.274-89;

Horse, the warriors hide themselves in the horse, which is left on the beach.	8.492-8
Troy's fall: Priam's death, Astyanax' death, the city is burnt.	<i>Iliad</i> 22.484-507; 24.731-6.
Aeneas leaves the city.	
Trojan women taken as captives by the Achaeans: Andromache, Cassandra, Hecuba.  <i>Astyanax thrown from the walls of Troy</i>	*** <i>Iliad</i> 6.410-32; 22.485-511; 24.725-34; <i>Iliad</i> 24.734-5
<b>NOSTOI, &amp; TELEGONY:</b>	
The returns of the Achaean warriors: Agamemnon <i>killed by Aigisthus and Clytemnestra, Orestes taking revenge.</i>	<i>Odyssey</i> 1.35-40, 298-300; 3.162-83; 262-322; *** 4.512-37; 11.397-439, 459-61; 24.20
Menelaus goes to Egypt with Helen.	<i>Odyssey</i> 3.318-22; 4.83; 228-32; 352-359; 581**
Ajax, Oileus' son dies because he was insolent against the gods.	*4.499-510*
Odysseus killed by his son by Circe: <i>Telegony</i>	

## Further Reading

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On the Epic Cycle: Severyns 1928; Burgess 2001; 2005.

On the Trojan War: Scherer 1963; Anderson 1997.

On Homer's Formulaic style: M. Parry 1928; transl. from French in Parry 1971; Lord 1960 (2000<sup>2</sup>) 1991, 1995; Havelock 1963; Foley 1991, 1997; Rose 1992; Edwards 1997; Russo 1997.

On Near Eastern parallels and influences: Walcott 1966, Burkert 1992 discussed in Haubold 2002, West 1997.

Indo-European parallels: Allen in this volume.