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# The Mythological Background of Homer: The Eternal Return of Killing Dragons

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The Mythological Background of Homer:  
The Eternal Return of Killing Dragons

Myth, according to a well known formulation by Walter Burkert, “*is a traditional tale with secondary, partial reference to something of collective importance*” (1979: 23). Andrew von Hendy, who declares Burkert’s definition the “gold standard” in classical studies, offers a Marxist reformulation, so that myth “is traditional narrative with a high degree of ideological saturation” (2002: 269, 277). This definition accords with the fact that *muthos*, the Greek word that most closely approximates myth, also designates “story” generally, and, as we might expect in an oral culture, “speech” (its meaning of “fiction” is post-Homeric). It also allows us to sidestep the issue of distinguishing between “myth,” “legend,” and “fairytale” that is an enduring legacy of the Brothers Grimm among folklorists, but has no basis in ancient taxonomy (Detienne 1986; Calame 1991; Edmunds 1997; van Hendy 2002).

Lowell Edmunds offers a compatible definition that reflects the status of the epics as oral poetry: drawing on Richard Martin’s analysis of Homeric speech acts (1989), he argues “that for Homer and his audience, our ‘myth’ is the oral performance of a story with intent to sway an audience” (1997: 420, where note that ‘sway’ instrumentalizes ‘collective importance’). “In other words,” he remarks, “myth can be understood in terms of a practice, not a subject-matter, and it is unnecessary to look for some ancient concept and/or term meaning ‘story about gods or heroes’” (1997: 416). I agree that myth should be understood in terms of practice, but propose a more minimalist definition: *myth is the oral performance of a traditional tale*. Implicitly, a tale is traditional precisely because it concerns something of collective importance.

Gregory Nagy (2007) reaches a similar conclusion. Martin serves as Nagy's point of departure as well, though his focus is not on the objectives of the internal characters but on the metapoetic effect of creating myth through epic performance: his thesis is that such performance activates myth, which thus belongs to ritual. Of central importance for the present discussion is that, following Burkert and Nagy's definitions, the epics do not simply include mythic material, but can be legitimately treated as myths in their own right, a point on which Nagy is explicit (also 1996: 136-7). In what follows, I hope to affirm and build on these approaches by demonstrating the symbiotic relationship between epic and fertility myth and cult, particularly Demeter's cult at Eleusis and the Homeric *Hymn* to the goddess.

Still, Edmunds rightly notes that the majority of stories we would naturally identify as myths in Homer are related by the internal characters. These stories are used in a limited number of ways. First, since the Homeric heroes have personal and family histories, extending for the most part two or three generations, they may use them to assert their own standing: for example, Glaucus narrates the achievements of his great grandfather, Bellerophon, to impress Diomedes; while Sthenelus refers to the sack of Thebes by the Epigoni, the sons of the Seven Against Thebes, to justify his claim that they are greater than their fathers. Homer, in turn, may introduce characters and objects with their histories to index their significance, or to provide a defining anecdote about a victim so as to situate his death in the context of his tradition (Bakker 1997: 118). Troy and the Trojan War also have extensive traditions that may provide context for an event: those belonging to the so-called cyclic epics are discussed by X in ch. X of the present volume (see also Létoublon 2014).

A common use to which such stories are put is that characters will relate them to each other as paradigms that indicate the proper course of behavior: for example, Achilles declares that Niobe, having lost all of her children, ate despite her grief, in order to encourage Priam to do likewise. This raises a question that continues to be debated: does the poet ever consciously, and even pointedly, innovate in retelling myths? For scholars such as Malcolm Willcock (1964, 1977), the answer is yes: poets routinely adapt myths to increase their applicability to a given situation. Nagy (1992), on the other hand, argues that oral poets always select from variant traditions. Edmunds (1997: 428) seeks to reconcile these positions by suggesting that we should see the internal characters as innovating. Nagy, however, raises two extremely important points: first, traditional poetry *never* presents itself as innovative because it claims to narrate historical events; second, the narrative traditions of archaic Greece are far richer and more varied than those that have survived in written form. Whatever degree of plausibility one assigns to any particular case, it is always possible that a variant tradition lies behind Homer's apparent departures from the accounts preserved in other ancient authors; finally, the very concept of a 'canonical' version of a myth is questionable in an oral context. An important exception is a myth with an anchor in cult such as the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter*.

Among the mythological elements found in Homer, we may distinguish broadly among: 1) those belonging to Indo-European tradition; 2) those that have a Near Eastern origin, and; 3) indigenous Greek myths, including the Trojan War tradition. These distinctions, however, require a number of significant clarifications and qualifications. What we commonly refer to as Near Eastern mythology includes material belonging to Indo-European and non Indo-European cultures that interacted with each other for centuries before Homer: it is often impossible or simply meaningless to distinguish

between them as separate traditions. Moreover, the myths found in archaic literature have often been so thoroughly Hellenized that their ultimate source is of limited interpretive value; and it can even mislead as any given story may have a nearer source in Greek myth. Conversely, even 'indigenous' myths such as the Trojan War may belong to ancient trans-cultural traditions, for example of war and heroic combat that, following Burkert (1996), can be traced back to Paleolithic hunting practices. Finally, it is implausible that a war remotely resembling the one Homer describes ever took place between Troy and a Greek coalition mounting an amphibious assault of sixty thousand troops; nevertheless it doubtless does reflect the historical reality of life during the Greek Bronze Age in which siege warfare and difficult homecomings were assuredly common (Edmunds 1997: 435).

Still, useful connections and distinctions can be made: if, for example, the *Epic of Gilgamesh* accounts for important features of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, then by definition we are dealing with the influence of a specific Near Eastern text on Homer, whether that influence is direct or mediated (Cook 1992; West 1997: 336-47, 377-8, 402-17). While conceding that the context of the *Iliad* and *Gilgamesh* are very different, M. L. West notes the following parallels, which he sees as compelling evidence of such influence: both heroes are exceptionally emotional; their mothers are goddesses, highly attentive to their sons' needs; the heroes have side-kicks about whom they care greatly; they are consequently shattered by the sidekick's death; and, mad with grief, begin a new venture as a consequence; but in the end recover their senses. Most important, perhaps, the protagonists of both epics confront the fact of mortality, with which fact they struggle before finding acceptance. West (1997: 338) observes that it is precisely this "humanism" that distinguishes *Gilgamesh* from other Akkadian poetry.

The affinity between the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and the *Iliad* thus centers on the character and personal tragedy of Gilgamesh and Achilles. Gilgamesh and Odysseus, on the other hand, do not resemble one another in terms of character so much as in their adventures, the very point on which Gilgamesh and Achilles most differ (West 1997: 402-12). Indeed, the two epics begin in a strikingly similar manner, by introducing their heroes as having traveled extensively and as having seen and learned many things; and in both cases the hero's identification is noticeably delayed. West lays particular emphasis on the parallels between the alewife Siduri from the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and Circe and Calypso from the *Odyssey*, each of whom send the hero to an otherworldly realm. Whereas Gilgamesh goes to Dilmun to consult the wise and immortal Utnapishtim, Circe sends Odysseus to Hades to consult the prophet Tiresias, who alone among the dead retains his intelligence. Following Calypso's directions, Odysseus eventually reaches Scheria. His objective is not further consultation, but the Phaeacians do possess magical ships, thus providing a striking parallel to the boatman Urshanabi, who alone is able to cross the waters of death separating Utnapishtim from the human realm. In fact, the Phaeacians can be seen as otherworldly ferrymen providing conveyance between this world and the next (Cook 1992). Equally striking is that not only does the *Phaeacis* have a series of close parallels in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, but the palace of the king Alcinous also seems to be based on Assyrian royal architecture (West 1997: 251, 419-20, 423-4; Cook 2004): a copy of the epic was housed in the library of Ashurbanipal, and anyone who had seen the palace first hand could have known the story from numerous sources.

Burkert finds compelling evidence for other Near Eastern influence on the *Iliad*. An especially striking example is the scene from *Iliad* Book 5 in which Aphrodite complains to her mother Dione after being wounded by Diomedes. Whereas Dione

comforts her, Zeus offers a gentle reproof, advising her to attend to matters of love, not war. Burkert notes the parallel from *Gilgamesh*: when Ishtar propositions Gilgamesh, he launches into a catalogue of her past lovers; Ishtar then retires to heaven and complains to her father, Anu, in the presence of her mother, Antum, only to receive a gentle reproof from Anu. What makes the parallel compelling is the identity of the actors: as the love-goddess, Ishtar corresponds to Aphrodite, and as the sky-god her father, Anu, corresponds to Zeus. Of decisive importance is that the name of Ishtar's mother, Antum, is the feminine counterpart to Anu: this explains why Dione, or "Mrs. Zeus," is Aphrodite's mother and Zeus' wife here but nowhere else in archaic Greek poetry (Burkert 1992: 96-9; West 1997: 361-2).

A second Iliadic episode which, Burkert argues (1992: 88-96), attracted a range of Near Eastern material, is Hera's deception of Zeus in Book 14. Hera's reference to the quarrel between Oceanus and Tethys as the original divine couple mirrors the Babylonian pair Apsu and Tiamat from the *Enuma Elish*. Tethys' name may in fact derive from Tiamat, which, if correct, would make the parallel certain (Burkert 1992: 91-3; West 1997: 383). In addition, the love strap that Aphrodite lends Hera for her seduction is not typically Greek, but has good Mesopotamian parallels (Burkert 1992: 93; West 1997: 383-4). Zeus' catalogue of his female loves is comparable to Gilgamesh's catalogue of Ishtar's lovers in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*: the possibility that the echo is genuine is much enhanced by the more striking parallel between Ishtar's subsequent complaint to Anu and Aphrodite's to Zeus in the *Iliad* (Burkert 1992: 93; West 1997: 384). Poseidon's protest that he, Zeus, and Hades cast lots for rule of their respective realms contradicts Hesiod's account of Zeus' rise to power, but parallels the *Atrahasis* (Burkert 1992: 88-93; West,

1997: 109-10, 385). Burkert exclaims: “There is hardly another passage in Homer which comes so close to being a translation of an Akkadian epic.”

The story of Bellerophon in Book 6 of the *Iliad* illustrates some of the methodological and interpretive issues involved in the source criticism of Homeric myth. The story contains a number of distinctly Near Eastern features, including a “Potiphar’s wife” intrigue, a winged horse, Pegasus, a composite monster, the Chimera, whom Bellerophon in fact kills in Lycia, and the only reference to writing in Homer (West 1997: 365-7). Yet, as Calvert Watkins observes (1995: 357-60; 385 n. 4; cf. Katz 1998), Homer preserves the marked verb, *pephne*, that belongs to an Indo-European formula for a hero killing a dragon (see below). In fact, the closest analogies to the Chimera in Near Eastern iconography are Hittite, an Indo-European culture (Burkert 1983: 52; West 1997: 366). It seems plausible that a precursor of the Bellerophon myth acquired a Near Eastern patina in Anatolia before reaching Greece. On the other hand, as early as Pindar the story of taming Pegasus has been Hellenized, so that it celebrates the use of *m tis* (mind and technology) to make nature’s *bi* (violent might) available for human use: specifically, it celebrates the introduction of the so-called ‘Corinthian’ bridle from Assyria in the seventh century. This suggests that the story may have entered Greece together with the Near Eastern technology that made effective equitation possible (Cook 1995: 186-94).

The story of Achilles’ battle with Scamander is still more complex (Cook 2012a: xxviii, li-v). It is paralleled in a number of Near Eastern myths in which the sky or storm-god battles a storm-demon or unruly terrestrial waters; in these accounts the god employs storm-weapons, including lightning and wind (West 1997: 86, 97, 300-4). In a Near Eastern context, the myth celebrates the triumph of order and culture over chaos, a meaning not unwelcome in the *Iliad*. Yet the nearer source of inspiration for having



Achilles battle a river comes from cosmogonic traditions surrounding Zeus himself, specifically the god's battle with Typhoeus, alluded to in the *Iliad* and told in more detail in Hesiod (*Il.* 2.781-3; *Hes. Th.* 304-7; 820-68). Indeed the point of the battle with Scamander is to dramatize how Achilles paradoxically most closely approximates divinity, and specifically the identity of Zeus, after he has embraced his fate to die young and achieve immortal fame.

Although West (1997: 301) argues that “Mesopotamian and Canaanite parallels are at least as important as the Hurro-Hittite,” as Watkins observes (1995: 448), “It is now generally assumed” that the myth of Typhoeus “was diffused into Greece from Anatolian Hittite, where it is attested as the myth of *Illuyankas* the serpent-adversary slain by the Storm God” Teshub. An important further parallel comes from Vedic Sanskrit, in which Indra defeats a snaky water demon named Vr̥tra: although the Hittite myth may have been infiltrated by other Near Eastern accounts, it has a clear Indo-European pedigree (Watkins 1995: chs. 30, 35, 45-6). The Hittite parallel also shows that the initial defeat of the storm god is likewise Indo-European, and it is paralleled by Achilles' almost being drowned before Hephaestus comes to his aid (Watkins 1995: 450).

West has written a pair of in depth studies of the Greek inheritance of Near Eastern and Indo-European myth; and it is telling that although he devotes a very long chapter to Near Eastern echoes in the *Iliad* and a somewhat shorter one to the *Odyssey*, comparable chapters are lacking in his book on Indo-European myth. Jaan Puhvel (1987: 138), goes so far as to say that “the Greek pantheon affords rather slim pickings for comparative Indo-European mythology.” One should remember that half a millennium separates the high point of Mycenaean culture from the arrival of the first Greeks in Greece, and nearly a millennium separates the Greek Bronze Age from Homer. Arguably,

Indo-European tradition has become emulsified in Greek mythology by the time the epics achieved canonical form. (Conversely, one could argue that the majority of the Near Eastern imports arrive in the so-called “Orientalizing Period,” leaving their roots relatively more exposed.) Against this should be set arguments by West (1988, 1992) and others that poetry in a meter cognate with Homeric epic and featuring a divine apparatus that included Hera and Zeus, and heroes such as Ajax, Idomeneus and Odysseus, were sung in the courts of Mycenaean kings. Add to this Nagy’s demonstration that the Homeric formula, “unwithering fame,” descends from Indo-European song tradition, and one can infer that Mycenaean epic also celebrated heroic combat (Nagy 1974: 231-55; 1981; 1990:122-26; 2003: 45-8; see also Edmunds 1997: 438-9; Graf 1991: 358-9; Schmitt 1967, 1968; Risch 1985). Two bodies of material strengthen that inference.

An important exception to the general lack of Indo-European parallels to Greek myth is the archery contest for the hand of Penelope in Book 21 of the *Odyssey*. Scholars such as Joseph Russo (2004) have noted that the archery contest is well attested in Indo-European, and especially Indic tradition. For example, the Buddha proves he is worthy to marry the daughter of Dandapani with a miraculous bowshot that displays a combination of skill and strength. Parallels from the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* are closer, as they involve actual archery contests. In the *Ramayana*, a bow, originally belonging to Shiva, has been handed down through the generations to King Janaka, who proposes an archery contest in which whoever can bend it will marry his daughter. After numerous kings, princes, gods, and serpents fail to bend it, the hero Rama lifts the bow with one hand, and then not only bends but breaks it in two. Points of contact with the *Odyssey* include not only the illustrious descent of the bow, but the contest in which only the hero can string it. The closest parallel comes from the *Mahabharata*, in which Arjuna wins an archery

contest for marriage to Draupadi with another miraculous bowshot. As in the *Ramayana* and *Odyssey* the bow is described as nearly impossible to string. Draupada, the girl's father, issues the challenge that whoever can string it and shoot an arrow through a "contraption" to strike a golden target will win Draupadi's hand. All the other kings who tried to string the bow failed, but Arjuna does so easily and then shoots and knocks the target down. As Russo observes (2004: 99): "It is noteworthy that the narrative places similar emphasis, first, upon the repeated difficulty the rivals have with the bow, and then upon the ease with which the hero strings it."

Our image of Indo-European diffusion changes when we shift from myth to the themes of such myths, which are well attested in archaic Greek poetry (e.g. Nagy 1990). From the pathfinding work of Nagy (1990, 1999) we know that the interplay of praise and blame and the defining themes of the traditional hero extend back to Proto-Indo-European. In addition to the heroic quest for 'unwithering fame,' the hero is characterized by a combination of extraordinary might (*bi*) and intelligence (*m tis*), qualities that can also be opposed, for example as strategies for conquering Troy, or in the competition between heroes such as Achilles and Odysseus for the status of "best of the Achaeans," or even the rivalry between the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Indeed, the *Odyssey* draws a series of such analogies, between itself and the *Iliad*, Athena and Poseidon, and Odysseus and Achilles, Polyphemus, his companions, and the suitors. In addition, the hero has a divine patron and antagonist, with the latter of whom he also has a special affinity and may even be identified in cult: for example, Hera is the antagonist of Heracles, Apollo of Achilles, and Poseidon of Odysseus. Finally, the traditional hero is a man of pain and hatred, and in both an active and passive sense (Cook 2009): this is closely related to the theme of his divine antagonist and his own status as a dragon slayer.

Of crucial importance in the present context is a formula that qualifies as a myth in its own right. Drawing on linguistic evidence ranging from Vedic Sanskrit and Hittite to Old Irish, Calvert Watkins (1995) has reconstructed an Indo-European formula, “Hero Slay Serpent,” which serves to define the traditional hero: Indra is thus “he who slew Vr̥tra.” The formula may include a marginal element in an instrumental relationship, so that the hero slays the serpent with a weapon or a helper (Watkins 1995: 301-2). For example: “Zeus slew Typhoeus with lightning,” or “Heracles slew the Hydra with Iolaus.” More broadly, the combat myth represents the triumph of order over chaos, and equally of life over death; as such it is naturally associated with the cycles of nature, so that winter is aligned with chaos, and the new year with rebirth and the return of life and order (Watkins 1995: 299-300; ch. 47). The Hittite story of *Illuyankas* was thus performed at the New Year festival to promote fertility and prosperity (Watkins 1995: 444-6). The chaos that the dragon represents “was fundamentally social in character”:

the evil or chaos that must be overcome by the narration of the myth . . . is all that is ‘anti-social’, anti-traditional, anti-hierarchical, and that is in violation of the fundamental institutionalized gift-exchange relations and consecrated customs which are alliance and blood kinship, symbolized by hospitality (Watkins 1995: 446).

We shall see that the *Mnesterophonia*, or slaughter of the suitors, in the *Odyssey* is a reflex of the combat myth, but Watkins’ account accurately summarizes the major themes of the entire epic. Watkins finds another modality of chaos in the Germanic world that can be applied to the *Odyssey*: “the dragon keeps wealth from circulating: the ultimate

evil in society in which gift-exchange and the lavish bestowal of riches institutionalized precisely that circulation” (1995: 300). Finally, the dragon may undergo various transformations, into another monster, wild beast, hero, or anti-hero; and the hero and his opponent may switch roles, so that the hero may be portrayed as a monster himself.

The formula is highly conservative: the PIE verb for “he slew,” \**gʰen-* persists in its Greek incarnation as *pephne* into the Hellenistic period. In the *Iliad*, it is attested in the stories of Zeus and Typhoeus, Bellerophon and Chimaera, and Achilles and Scamander; and in the *Odyssey* in the stories of Heracles and Iphitus, Odysseus and the Cyclops, and Odysseus and the suitors. On account of its associations with (anti-)social behavior and violations of gift-exchange, the formula finds its Odyssean instantiation in a pair of reciprocal expressions extended by localizing the event in a domestic setting: “Anti-hero Slay Guest (in own House),” that is, the *Cyclopeia*, and “Hero Slay Anti-Guest (in own House),” that is, the *Mnesterophonia* (Watkins 1995: 404).

The *Cyclopeia* most directly represents the formula, although the marked verb does not occur since Odysseus only blinds the ogre: Polyphemus is not only monstrous, but keeps his cattle locked away in a cave; and not only does he not provide food and treasure, but he even eats his guests. His cattle correspond to the cows secreted in the body of Vrātra, and can be seen as representing life itself. It is, then, Odysseus’ task to release them. Odysseus even uses fire to blind the monster, which can be compared to the fire Hephaestus deploys against Scamander, as a metaphor for the lightning bolts of Zeus and Indra. Most important, however, is that Polyphemus’ crimes are social in nature: in particular, he violates the laws of guest-friendship, or *xenia*, including gift-exchange, which Watkins has shown to define the serpent’s behavior. This same violation is also central to the other two instantiations of the formula in the *Odyssey*.

The first occurs in a story used to introduce the *Mnesterophonia*. When Iphitus arrives at the home of Heracles to recover some stolen mares, Heracles kills him and keeps the mares: the marked verb *pephne* is twice used to describe the murder in a marked ring-composition that brackets the story. Before Iphitus dies, however, he gives Odysseus his bow. It is with the guest-gift of a guest wrongly slain by his host that Odysseus slays the suitors “in his own house” for repeated wrongs to their host and his family. The story of Iphitus is thus a “photographic negative” of the *Mnesterophonia*: the “correspondence is rigorous, mathematical” (Watkins 1995: 402). The suitors correspond to the serpent, chaos, and winter. The *Mnesterophonia* thus takes place during a solar eclipse at the new moon of the New Year (Cook 1995: ch. 5). Conversely, the formula links the return of Odysseus to the return of prosperity to his kingdom, and the restoration of social order.

\* \* \*

If the Homeric poems are myths, then it is important to ask, What kind of myth? The narrative of both epics is based on the same story pattern, but there is more than one way the pattern can be classified, each of which has its uses and limitations. I find two classifications especially illuminating. The first is as a rite of passage, one of the more common patterns of Greek myth. Arnold van Gennep published his pioneering study, *Rites of Passage*, in 1909; although it found early champions in Jane Harrison (1927) and Henri Jeanmaire (1939), followed a generation later by Angelo Brelich (e.g. 1961) and Walter Burkert (1966), it was out of step with contemporary trends in anthropology. In the Anglophone world it remained little read until it was translated into English in 1960 and found a champion in Victor Turner (1964, 1969). From there, its popularity grew into something of a preoccupation among students of ancient culture in the 1970s and 1980s.

Although an important collection of essays on initiatory elements in tragedy, Dionysiac cult, and the novel was published near the turn of the century (Padilla ed. 1999), and another on women's initiation earlier in the same decade (Lincoln 1991), the very popularity of initiation in cultural and literary studies inevitably led to excesses (e.g. Moreau ed. 1992), and to studies questioning its hermeneutic value (Dodd and Faraone eds. 2003). Contributing to the latter was a wider loss of interest in deep structures and structuralisms following the collapse of communism. One of my objectives here is to rehabilitate the approach by demonstrating its value in understanding Homeric epic.

The core of van Gennep's discovery is that individuals undergo a series of transitions in life from one age and occupation to another; and just as these transitions all result in ontological change, the underlying processes observe a similar structure (van Gennep 1960: 2-3). Crucially, to transition from one identity to another, the individual must pass through an intermediate step, resulting in three different rites: a rite of separation from the former identity, a liminal rite or rite of transition, and a rite of reincorporation, in which one reenters the community with new status. The different rites may be more fully developed in some cases than in others, and even acquire the status of a full standing three-part rite of their own (van Gennep 1960: 10-11; Calame 1999: 282). Transitions managed by these rites include: "birth, childhood, social puberty, betrothal, marriage, pregnancy, fatherhood, initiation into religious societies, and funerals" (van Gennep 1960: 3). Similar rites attach to "celestial changes" such as the passage from one year to the next (*id.* 1960: 3-4; 178-9). As we have seen, the transition from winter to spring is also central to Watkins' reconstruction of the Indo-European combat myth.

In the case of passage from layman to priest, van Gennep argues that the liminal phase is made necessary by the incompatibility of the worlds between which the initiand passes (1960: 1). Presumably, this is true to varying degrees of all ontological change. Liminality often has a spatial dimension, in which the initiand is physically separated from the community, spends a period in a marginal space, and returns to the community with new status. A defining feature of liminality is death and its analogues: loss of memory or consciousness through sleep, drugs and various privations, underworld journeys, and encounters with deadly adversaries. In ritual, the initiate routinely undergoes a symbolic death experience which may be literal in initiation myths. The initiand's death marks the loss of the old identity during the transition to a new one; passage to adulthood in myth may then be symbolized by various post mortem transformations, for example, to a constellation, bird, or plant.

In adolescent rites, liminality is often marked by precocious and prodigious sexual experiences, and equally by gender inversion. It is marked by other inversions as well, including social roles (Vidal-Naquet 113-4, 137-52): for example, the adolescent initiate is often characterized by trickery, which can be opposed by the norms of behavior expected of him as an adult. In initiatory myth, liminality may also invert normalcy in environmental terms, being imagined variously as a Golden Age paradise, or a place of extreme danger, such as Hades or a cave. Liminality may also involve the paranormal, including, in addition to monsters, encounters with divine beings and powers.

Van Gennep shows that rites of passage are transcultural and ubiquitous, and he traces them back as far as ancient Greece and Babylon. How much further back they go can be assessed by Burkert's theory of the origins of sacrifice in Paleolithic hunting



practices (1983: ch. 1). Burkert imagines a scenario in which boys spend their first dozen years or so raised by women in a domestic environment while the men go off hunting. On coming of age, they venture from home with the men and participate in the hunt: their first adult experience thus involves physical separation from home, and from a female to a male environment, and an encounter with death that may itself be life threatening for the young hunter. Burkert finds this same basic pattern reflected in sacrificial ritual: sacrifice is thus a ritualized hunt. It is debatable whether the pattern accounts for the origins of sacrifice (Faraone 2003: 60-1; Graf 2012), but for our purposes what matters is that it is transparently a rite of passage (van Gennep 1960: 184; Burkert 1983: 56). This is important for several reasons. First, as Burkert notes, the pattern describes a typical male maturation scenario for up to ninety-nine percent of human history. It is only to be expected that it entered human discourse in the form of adventure stories at an early stage. This offers a solution to a problem that has long vexed scholars: why is it that Greek myth is rich in accounts of adolescent initiation, while there are relatively few Greek initiation rituals? This has led some to speculate that at an earlier stage in their history, the Greeks had numerous rites, but they gradually died out, while the accompanying myths survived (e.g. Dowden 2014). If Burkert's historical model is valid, and if it accounts for the adolescent adventure tale (cf. Burkert 1996: ch. 3), then there is simply no need for such explanations (cf. Graf 2003: 18; Dowden 2014: 499), though it would be natural to suppose that some initiation rituals developed out of early hunting practices and their near extension, warfare.

Another reason this is important is that Burkert is able to show that the same ternary pattern informs the cycle of civic festivals in Athens, in which the old order is

ritually dissolved in a series of yearend rituals, and then reconstituted in the New Year with the Panathenaia. The polis itself thus undergoes a rite of passage, linked to seasonal change that, as van Gennep observes, can itself be celebrated with such rites. As I have argued elsewhere (Cook 1995: ch. 5), the civic ritual pattern can also be observed in the *Odyssey*, where Odysseus returns at New Year to reestablish the socio-political order after an extended period of cultural inversion. I also noted specific parallels to Athenian cult that led me to locate the final textualization of the poem in Athens, for only in the *Odyssey* and the cults of the Erechtheum do we have the constellation of: a Bronze Age king; whose ritual antagonist is Poseidon; and patroness Athena; and in whose home Athena's support is manifested by a sacred lamp; and also in which Athena's tree, the olive, embodies the fate of the royal household or entire community.

Support for Burkert's model and interpreting it as a rite of passage is provided by Roy Baumeister (2010). His point of departure is that men are more expendable than women: whereas women may give birth to at most a dozen or so children, men can potentially father hundreds, or even thousands. Genetics, in fact, shows that we have more female than male ancestors, and Baumeister speculates that the preponderance of women was higher in the past when monogamy had not yet become the norm in much of the civilized world. Civilization exploits this surplus by rewarding males who take and survive great risks: the boy who sets out on an adventure and returns with a mastodon, or the head of Goliath, gets the girls. Those who do not take such risks have a greater chance of surviving, but tend not to enjoy the same degree of reproductive access. Culture, moreover, celebrates the achievements of successful risk takers in story and song so as to motivate young men to bet against very long odds. Baumeister thus offers a fully

pragmatic explanation of a ritual and narrative pattern that is often accounted for with recourse to Jungian psychology.

An adolescent rite of passage from Crete is relevant in the present context (Strabo 10.4.20-1; cf. Calame 2001: 245-9). In the Cretan rite, young boys are first separated from their home environment and socialized in an all male society by dining in public messes, where they receive military training. They are initially made to wear shabby clothes and serve food to their older mess mates. Once they reach a certain age, one of the boys is chosen from his cohort by an adult male, who then pursues and ‘captures’ him. The boy then follows his pursuer into the wilderness for two months, together with the witnesses. During this period, the adult presumably instructs the boys in the art of hunting: an older member of the same gender often assumes a pedagogical role in puberty rites. After they return from the wilderness, he then rewards the initiate with various symbols of adult status: an ox, a wine-cup, and a warrior’s robes. The youth then sacrifices the ox and provides a public feast, thus obligating the community to him through commensality and propitiation of the gods. The robes not only represent his preparedness for military service in defense of his community, but he is also allowed to wear them at mess as a sign of honor. The pattern of the Cretan rite of passage can be represented schematically as follows:

Home A	Mess	Wilderness	Mess	Home B
Dominated (Female)	Dominated (Male)	Dominated (Male)	Dominant (Male)	Dominant (Female)
Non-Sexual	Non-Sexual	Sexual	(Non-)Sexual	Sexual
Consumes Food	Serves Food	Procures Food	Provides Food	Provides Food
	Shabby Clothes		Fine Clothes	

The Cretan rite emphasizes a defining aspect of Greek maturation: for boys, the process involves a transference of allegiance from the home to the political community. This process is coded for gender and power hierarchy as a transition from a female to a male environment, and from passive to active roles. It also reflects the constitution of the political community as the fighting force of adult males. The individual household, and the women within it, are thus conceived of in a polar relationship to the political community.

Turning to Homeric epic, it is widely recognized that the *Telemachy* depicts Telemachus' rite of passage into adulthood (e.g. Eckert 1963; Moreau 1992), and the foregoing allows us to add somewhat to that picture. When Athena arrives on Ithaca, she finds Telemachus passive, withdrawn, and daydreaming about his father returning to scatter the suitors. Athena herself is an infectious agent whose stated goal is to place *menos* in Telemachus, which in context means approximately 'adult manhood.' She thus assumes the identity of Mentos, or "Mr. Agent of *Menos*," and encourages the youth to overcome his passivity, denounce the suitors, take a journey in search of his father, and consider how to kill the suitors himself. Athena thus performs the pedagogical role of the older male in a maturation rite.

We see the effect of the *menos* at once as Telemachus reenters the company of the suitors "equivalent to a god" (1.324). There follows a humorous demonstration of his separation from the female sphere when Penelope asks Phemios to sing some other song than the *Nostoi*, and Telemachus tells her to return to her weaving. In an assembly next morning, Telemachus demands that the suitors depart and requests a ship to search for his

father, but is rebuffed on both points. Athena, however, impersonates Telemachus and secures a ship and crew. She then appears to Telemachus disguised as Mentor, another “Agent of *Menos*,” and again assumes the role of guide and instructor. And so, Telemachus’ separation, which began as sullen, psychological withdrawal, now becomes physical as he sails from home as captain of a ship.

His first destination is Pylus, which is not a liminal zone, but corresponds to the Mess into which Cretan boys are assimilated before they venture into liminality. That is, it reproduces the male environment of commensality in which the boys are incorporated into the politico-military community. Nevertheless, his nocturnal voyage with divine escort and dawn arrival suggest that he has done more than merely change locales: as we shall see, Pylus represents for Telemachus his entrée into the heroic world and specifically the world of Troy.

As Telemachus makes landfall, Nestor is officiating over the sacrifice of eighty-one bulls in honor of Poseidon. The participants number 4,500, distributed into nine messes of 500 representing the nine cities of his kingdom. As the ancient commentators recognized, however, the scene also reproduces Nestor’s camp at Troy, comprising ninety ships of fifty men. Moreover, the Pylians are engaged in the ritual slaughter on a scale unparalleled in Homer except in the battles at Troy itself: if one assumes that ancient cattle were somewhat smaller than modern (Naiden 2012), then the bulls sacrificed would have yielded perhaps four pounds of meat per participant, not counting the internal organs, and the altars would have been bathed in roughly one hundred gallons of blood (Hansard et al. 1953).

Telemachus is initially so overwhelmed by the spectacle that he questions whether he will be able to speak to Nestor. This scene in fact turns out to be “the test” that the hero must surmount. After Mentor reassures him, Telemachus “follows in the footsteps of the goddess” to greet him (3.30), a phrase that well captures the pedagogical role of the older male in maturation rites. They are welcomed at once by Pisistratus, Nestor’s youngest son, who seats them by Nestor and Thrasymedes, who is also a Trojan War veteran. He is thus integrated into Homeric military society through commensality, as in the Cretan rite. In this setting, Telemachus learns about his father, the famous counselor, and Nestor praises Telemachus, declaring that he speaks like Odysseus. In this sense, Telemachus does find his father, the Trojan War hero, and the father he finds he also becomes. But Nestor’s knowledge, and thus the Odysseus Telemachus finds, is literally circumscribed by the heroic world: to find the Odysseus of the wanderings, Telemachus must journey to consult Menelaus, himself newly returned from distant lands.

Next morning, Telemachus is bathed by Nestor’s youngest daughter, Polycaste; he emerges from the bath “the same as the immortals” (3.469). This scene belongs to thematic a network in which bathing results in transformed appearance by Telemachus, Odysseus (6.224-43, 23.365-74), and Laertes (24.365-74): purifications, including bathing feature in rites of passage, where they may represent separation or, as here, incorporation (cf. 18.187-96). Telemachus then ventures off to Sparta by chariot with Pisistratus as his charioteer. His immortal guide has thus been replaced by a mortal companion, and his chariot ride, implicitly the first of his life, emblemizes his incorporation into the heroic world (cf. 4.601-8). He is thus called *hērōs* as he arrives at the palace of Menelaus (4.21, 303, 312; 15.62), an epithet he receives first in Sparta and

only there. Sparta, moreover, possesses otherworldly features that make it a liminal experience for Telemachus and allow him to share in his father's experiences during his wanderings.

As they are led into the house, Telemachus and Pisistratus marvel at its wealth, "for its gleam was as of the sun and moon" (4.45). After they are seated at banquet, Telemachus whispers to his companion about "the flash of bronze, gold, electrum, silver and ivory throughout the echoing halls! Doubtless," he concludes, "such is the court of Olympian Zeus inside, such unspeakably great abundance is here; awe holds me as I look upon it" (4.72-5). Hades was also thought of as fantastically wealthy, indeed as the source of wealth; and though it is obvious why Telemachus would not compare Menelaus' palace to the underworld, it resembles Hades and its happier counterpart, Elysium, more closely than Olympus. But however we interpret the imagery, the point remains that Telemachus claims the palace shines with an otherworldly opulence.

Unlike Olympus, to which humans are denied access, everyone eventually goes to Hades or Elysium. The afterlife is thus characterized by the theme of excessive hospitality: nothing could be easier to enter, but like a metaphysical roach hotel it is nearly impossible to leave. Even Persephone is held in Hades against her will until Hermes informs the god that she must return to Olympus; Odysseus is likewise held against his will on Ogygia until Hermes informs Calypso that he must be allowed to return to Ithaca. Sparta is similar, for both Telemachus and Pisistratus. Menelaus welcomes the youths into his home even though wedding festivities are underway. After offering entertainment, Menelaus invites Telemachus to remain with him "until the eleventh or twelfth day arrives" (4.588). He will then send Telemachus on his way with

guest gifts, consisting of a chariot and horse team, and a golden goblet. His gifts can be directly compared to those provided in the Cretan initiation ritual, and point to his adult roles as an elite warrior who presides over sacrifices to the gods. Telemachus replies: “do not detain me here for a long time . . . already my companions in sacred Pylus grow weary while you detain me” (594-9). Nevertheless, despite his professed urgency to leave, we find him in Sparta one month later, when Athena urges him to return. Telemachus then asks Menelaus to be sent home “at once.” Menelaus concurs, and even insists on the impropriety of holding a guest against his will, but then proposes further delays including a tour of Greece to collect gifts! (15.64-85). On this occasion, however, because of Athena’s intervention, like the interventions of Hermes on behalf of Persephone and Odysseus, Telemachus departs. Like his father, Telemachus has a delayed homecoming, and, it would seem, for much the same reasons.

One of the more striking features of Sparta is the prominence of Helen. This is sharpened by contrast to Pylus where women are relegated to the background. The situation in Sparta can be paralleled with Hades, where Persephone is the true ruler of the underworld and her husband remains fairly inert; and, of course, Helen, like Persephone, is abducted with disastrous human consequences. But the situation can also be paralleled in Elysium or the islands of the blessed, where heroes dwell for eternity with goddesses in paradise. Odysseus’ relationship both Circe and Calypso is similar: both nymphs live at the ends of the earth, Calypso’s home is described as an island paradise whose name, Ogygia, is an epithet of Styx (Hes. *Th.* 805-6), while Calypso’s own name means “Cover.” In fact, Calypso pronounces herself willing to render Odysseus immortal, and had he accepted the offer, the correlation to an island of the blessed would be exact



(5.135-6). Although Odysseus is described as yearning for home, Homer remarks that he does so “because the nymph was no longer pleasing to him” (153). Implicitly, his yearning is fairly recent; in fact it is awakened at the very last moment there will be a wife and home for him to return to (Cook 1995: 146). Circe is less possessive, and gladly sends Odysseus on his way when he asks, but after a year cohabiting with the nymph his own crew must remind him of his homecoming (10.471-4). Proteus informs Menelaus that he is destined to be transported to Elysium at the end of his life, “because you have Helen to wife and are the son-in-law of Zeus” (4.569). It would seem that Sparta itself has acquired an otherworldly patina on account of Helen.

Helen was worshipped as a goddess at Sparta and elsewhere (Zweig 1999; Calame 2001: 191-202), and although Homer nowhere says so explicitly, he repeatedly alludes to it in the episode at Sparta, beginning with her arrival in the *megaron*. Telemachus’ appearance stirs memories of Odysseus in Menelaus, who promptly launches into an encomium of his old friend that causes Telemachus to burst into tears. Menelaus realizes who his guest is, but as he deliberates how to get Telemachus to identify himself Helen enters the room and names Telemachus on the spot. (When Menelaus deliberates the meaning of a bird omen before Telemachus departs in Book 15, Helen again usurps her husband and identifies it.) She then calls attention to her powers of identification by speaking of how she alone recognized Odysseus when he entered Troy in disguise. Menelaus replies with a story in which her powers of identification are truly supernatural: when the Trojan horse was brought into the city, Helen again recognized who were secreted within. Moreover, she was able to mimic their wives’ voices so perfectly that everyone except Odysseus tried to call out to her. The hero’s

encounter with a goddess is a common element of initiation mythology and is often erotic, as it is in Odysseus' encounters with Circe and Calypso. Helen thus also poses a temptation to which Telemachus can be seen as succumbing, again as does Odysseus.

Like Circe, Helen is in possession of special drugs that make people forget. Circe's drugs make people forget to return, which is the effect of her sexual allure on Odysseus. Helen's drugs erase pain and anger, producing forgetfulness of all evils (221). Circe's drugs are, moreover, emblematic of the world of the adventures, in which sex, food, drugs, and song all produce a forgetfulness of return and identity, resulting in assimilation to that world and symbolic or literal death. The paradigmatic example of food that binds one to the place it is consumed is, of course, Persephone's pomegranate, which also concretely represents her transition to adult sexuality (Lincoln 1991: 85; cf. Burkert, 1996: 73, on Snow White's apple); while the weakened and altered consciousness induced by various types of eating in the world of Odysseus' wanderings can be directly compared to loss of mental powers experienced by the dead in Hades. Helen's effect on Telemachus is identical to Circe's effect on Odysseus, even though the sexual theme remains in the background and her thematically homologous drugs are foregrounded. Nevertheless, a sexual subtext is evoked, not only by Odysseus' parallel experiences with nymphs but equally by those of Menelaus who once entertained another handsome young stranger named Paris. More important is the role of forgetfulness and loss of consciousness in liminality, which is sometimes induced by drugs and is functionally equivalent with death (van Gennep 1960: 75, 81, 184): this is the same pattern of association that we find with Helen's drug at Sparta. Helen is thus for Telemachus what Circe and Calypso are for Odysseus; and Sparta is a virtual Elysium.

On the other hand, the definitive heroic adventure is *Catabasis*, the conquest of death by descending into the underworld and returning. Odysseus not only spends eight of his ten years of his 'wanderings' cohabiting with nymphs in otherworldly paradises, his supreme adventure, around which the other adventures are arranged in a elaborate series of concentric ring-structures, is his *Catabasis* to consult Tiresias, from whom he learns his ultimate destiny (Cook 2012b: 82-3). Telemachus, in turn, journeys to a virtual Elysium where he consults Menelaus, from whom he learns his father's whereabouts. Telemachus thus also finds his father in Sparta, and that father too he also becomes. He has thus achieved the goal of his quest, and as many a hero in such stories is in no hurry to return to mundane reality afterwards, again like his father. He then returns to Ithaca with extraordinary dispatch, and is joined at Pylus by a prophet, Theoclymenus, the same place where Athena, and now Pisistratus, cease their assistance. Theoclymenus can be seen as an ersatz Athena and sign of divine support, such as heroes, including Odysseus himself, receive on their return journeys.

There are, then, good reasons to see the *Telemachy* as a two stage journey into adulthood. Telemachus will return from Sparta an adult, prepared to take part in the *Mnesterophonia*. The *Telemachy* has also greatly simplified the task of interpreting Odysseus' story as a rite of passage. If we start with his own departure from Ithaca twenty years earlier, we see that Troy again corresponds to Pylus and to the Cretan mess. His adventures then correspond to a liminal period, from which he returns, again in two stages, first to Scheria, then to Ithaca. His wanderings are associated with stock liminal motifs, including identity altering drugs, deadly sleep, sexual entrapment, encounters with monsters, underworld journeys, and Hermes as a helper (Johnston 2003). His

transitions from Ogygia to Scheria and from Scheria to Ithaca are clearly marked with imagery suggestive of death and rebirth: he makes his landfall on Scheria by swimming up a river's mouth, crawls naked onto dry land so exhausted he can scarcely move, and sleeps buried deep beneath a pile of leaves until nearly sundown the next day; he voyages at night from Scheria to Ithaca "overcome by sleep" (13.119: *dedmēmenon*), that is "most sweet, one that knows no awakening, and bears the closest resemblance to death" (79-80; cf. 74, 134). His incorporation on both Scheria and Ithaca begins with the offer of guest-friendship (*xenia*), and concludes with the offer of marriage. This two stage return does more than formally echo the stages of departure: instead, he is first reintegrated into a functional human society on Scheria, this being impossible on a degenerate Ithaca, and is then reintegrated into his own household on Ithaca. Nevertheless, on Ithaca his beggar's rags exactly invert the hierarchical status that separates him from the wider community as king, while the clothes that Nausicaa gives him mark his social status *and* symbolize his incorporation into the royal household.

The question remains, however, What does Odysseus return as? He underwent a rite of passage to adult status years before when he journeyed to Parnassus and killed a wild boar, at the invitation of an model initiatory figure, a maternal grandfather named 'Werewolf' (Dowden 2014: 500); and he had already married, had a son, and assumed the kingship of Ithaca before departing for Troy. This is not to deny the possibility that his story can be understood as a maturation rite: we are, after all, dealing with a highly sophisticated poem, not an initiation ritual. I think there are three, overlapping interpretations. We can see the entire narrative from his departure for Troy to his reunion with his family as reflecting an extended rite of passage, despite some features that would

be incompatible in a ritual context. Or, he could be seen as re-initiated after a prolonged absence in which he is presumed dead: that is, he must be reborn, compete with ‘other’ youths in athletic games, win a contest for his wife, remarry, and reclaim the kingdom (the apparent position of van Gennep 1960: 188; cf. Dowden 1999: 225). Finally, he can be seen as undergoing a different change, one involving his heroic identity.

Odysseus arguably undergoes four changes in his heroic identity since leaving for Troy. The Trojan Horse earns Odysseus ‘fame’ (*kleos*) as the ‘city-sacker’ (*ptoliporthos*) and a hero of ‘cunning intelligence’ (*mētis*), whose success in taking Troy reveals the superiority of strategy to ‘violent might’ (*biē*). The *Odyssey* celebrates that success, but it does not belong to its own narrative, while the liminal nature of the wanderings suggests he acquires further status during them. Circe, in fact, declares that their *Catabasis* has fundamentally changed Odysseus and his men, calling them: “Hard men, who have gone down, though living, to the home of Hades, twice dead, when others only die once!” (12.21-2). Nevertheless, all Circe’s words necessarily imply is that Odysseus belongs to the select group of heroes who have successfully returned from the land of the dead. Odysseus’ *Catabasis* significantly enhances, but arguably does not fundamentally change, his heroic identity, nor is that identity unique to him. A more fundamental, and individuating, change does occur in the *Cyclopeia*, whose initiatory features likewise include: *Catabasis*; an encounter with a deadly adversary, who may be understood as a personification of his cavern dwelling; a loss of identity as he becomes “Mr. Nobody”; and a cattle raid, in which the monstrosity of the victim is emphasized in order to celebrate the pluck and prowess of the raider (Johnston 2003). More important, however, when Odysseus identifies himself to Polyphemus, he does so in anger, and as a result

acquires Poseidon as a divine antagonist, whose enduring anger causes Odysseus to suffer repeated hardships and to find troubles at home. In other words, he becomes Odysseus: his generic, heroic identity as a man of pain and hatred is now superseded by his own personal identity as the man hated by Poseidon, and who suffers pain at the hands of his antagonist, even as he hates and punishes those who violate civilized norms. He thus reasserts his identity to Polyphemus as a hero who inflicts pain, calling himself “Odysseus the city-sacker.” Most important of all, however, he *survives* his sufferings and *returns* to Ithaca. In other words he becomes the hero of the *Odyssey* and exemplifies a heroic type that the poem celebrates as superior to *Iliadic* heroism: a hero who wins immortal fame and has a homecoming because of his superior intelligence.

What, then, about Achilles? It has been argued that he undergoes an extended adolescent rite of passage while at Troy (Bremmer 1978; Dowden 1999: 225). One could support this interpretation with appeal to Patroclus as an older mentor, a role that Peleus did in fact urge on him. He is unquestionably one of the younger fighters at Troy, remaining unshorn until the funeral of Patroclus, to whom he dedicates his hair. But once again there is a significant, if perhaps not insurmountable, obstacle to this interpretation, namely that he has a wife and son on Scyros. Moreover, both the Cretan initiation ritual and *Odyssey* suggest that Troy is a rite of political incorporation that precedes liminality proper. Nevertheless, one can understand him as undergoing a true liminal period after the death of Patroclus. When Antilochus arrives with the news of Patroclus’ death, Homer describes Achilles’ response with formulaic language elsewhere applied to fallen warriors. And from that point on to Priam’s ransom of Hector’s corpse, he essentially ceases to have the basic bodily functions of eating, sleeping, and sex. In other words, he

has separated himself from the human community, which his hair sacrifice can be understood to symbolize (van Gennep 1960: 53-4). Nevertheless, we are still left with the nature of his transition. One answer is that Achilles returns as the hero who killed Hector and thereby seals Troy's fate, and crucially seals his own. We thus have two separations and re-incorporations, of which the second is more significant than the first: he withdraws from the Greek community in Book 1 and is reincorporated when he accepts Agamemnon's gifts and increased status in Book 19; but he withdraws from the human community and the world of the living after the death of Patroclus in Book 16, and is restored to them when Priam arrives at his hut in Book 24. Like Odysseus, Achilles is thus reintegrated with a new identity that embodies that poem's brand of heroism: that of the tragic hero who purchases immortal fame with a short life.

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A second, and by no means exclusive, way of interpreting the pattern is as a heroic Withdrawal and Return. As its name implies, Withdrawal and Return observes the three part structure of a rite of passage, but is more elaborate. Although variations of Withdrawal and Return can be found in the Homeric Hymns and a variety of myths (Sowa 1984), the epics have a special affinity for the version found in the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter*. As is common among farming communities, the *Hymn* links agricultural fertility to the fertility of a female undergoing a rite of passage into adulthood (Lincoln 1991: 50, 89-90). In fact, the story of Persephone is an elaboration and conflation of several different rites of passage: she is raped, married, becomes adult, is installed as queen of the underworld, and dies in a single act; and as part of the same process, her return to life results in seasonal change, and the foundation of mystery religion.

Although he views the influence of fertility myth on epic as indirect, Albert Lord explains the affinity between the epics and fertility myth as the result of generic attraction based on structural homology:

The essential pattern of the *Iliad* is the same as that of the *Odyssey*; they are both the story of an absence that causes havoc to the beloved of the absentee and of his return to set matters right . . . The rape of Persephone in all its forms as a fertility myth underlies all epic tales of this sort, and until the historical is completely triumphant over the mythic, all such tales are likely to be drawn into the pattern of the myth (Lord 2000: 186; cf. Clarke 1989: 70-72).

Additional cases of such ‘attraction’ in classical authors have been studied by Helene Foley (1992), Richard Seaford (1984: 33-42), and Charles Segal (1999). Foley’s analysis of Euripides’ *Helen* is of special interest because the play interweaves the plots of the *Odyssey* and the *Hymn to Demeter*: it does so easily and naturally, I suggest, because they are essentially the same plot.

The relationship between this story pattern and the *Iliad* is concentrated on Achilles and his quarrel with Agamemnon, though the quarrel and its aftermath also shape the entirety of the battle narrative. The wrath of Achilles is the first word and principle theme of the *Iliad*; the wrath of Demeter features no less prominently in the Homeric *Hymn*. In fact, variations of the word that describes Achilles’ anger, *mēnis*, are used four times to describe Demeter’s anger in the *Hymn*. Watkins (1977; cf. Muellner 1996) notes, in fact, that *mēnis* typically describes divine anger. I agree that the term



characterizes Achilles' wrath as superhuman; but I also suggest that it may point to a specific kind of wrath, and even a specific god's wrath.

Agamemnon, the leader of the army, seizes Achilles' mistress, Briseis, for sexual purposes. He thus corresponds to Hades, and Briseis to Persephone. Achilles curses Agamemnon and withdraws from battle in anger. Demeter likewise withdraws in anger from the company of the gods when Hades carries off Persephone. As a result of Achilles' withdrawal, the Greeks suffer heavy casualties; Agamemnon sends an embassy to Achilles to offer restitution if he will return, but at first he refuses. Demeter's withdrawal threatens humanity with extinction; Zeus sends a parade of gods to plead with Demeter to return, but at first she also refuses. When Demeter arrives at Eleusis, she disguises herself as an old woman. In the *Iliad*, the theme of disguise is largely displaced from Achilles to his alter ego, Patroclus, who impersonates him in battle and is killed by Hector. However, when Achilles next appears at the trench, he impersonates Zeus in a scene of divine epiphany as Athena clothes him in the aegis and causes light to flash from his head until it reaches the sky. Demeter also emits divine radiance during her partial epiphany as she enters the palace, and in her full epiphany to Metanaira, where she, like Achilles, is enraged. Achilles and Demeter both become angry over the loss of not one but two people they care about, first female, then male: Demeter loses Persephone, then Demophon; Achilles loses Briseis, then Patroclus. Whereas Achilles withdraws from the Greek and then human communities, Demeter quits Olympus and then withdraws her generative powers from earth. Achilles and Agamemnon are formally reconciled and Briseis restored to Achilles, who returns to battle, where he wins fame and honor by saving the army from defeat. Demeter likewise gains new honors when she and Zeus are

reconciled, Persephone is restored to her, both goddesses return to Olympus, and save the human race from extinction. Of the major events in the *Hymn*, only the theme of hospitality, including a lying tale, is missing from the story of Achilles, though the related theme of disguise is well represented. Moreover, the events in the *Iliad* follow the same sequence of themes as those in the *Hymn*.

The parallels between the *Hymn* and the *Odyssey* are still more extensive, and pointedly include the themes of hospitality and *theoxeny* (Cook 2012b). Whereas Demeter and Achilles are notable for their divine anger, Demeter's grief is equally prominent and shared by Odysseus and every member of his family. It is also a highly similar or even the same type of grief: whereas Demeter grieves for her absent daughter, Odysseus grieves because he is separated from his wife, father, and son, Telemachus grieves for his absent father, Laertes for his absent son, and Penelope for her absent husband and son. Although the story of the fertility god's withdrawal and ensuing disaster can be paralleled in both Hittite and Mesopotamian mythology, there is no parallel for splitting the god into a mother-daughter pair. This unique foregrounding of the parent-child relationship has a clear echo in the *Odyssey*: whereas the *Iliad* does develop extensive parallelism between Achilles and Patroclus, so far as I am aware in all of ancient literature only the *Odyssey* is structured by parallel journeys of father and son, and only the Demeter-myth is structured by parallel journeys of mother and daughter.

In the the *Hymn* as in the *Odyssey*, the experience of parent and child are likewise parallel, even though the rites they undergo have different outcomes: Persephone goes to the land of the dead, where she yearns for her mother; Demeter goes to the mortal realm where she yearns for her daughter. In her grief, Demeter initially refuses to bathe or eat.

Ritual mourning is a form of sympathetic death, and in this way Demeter shares in her daughter's experience as well (van Gennepe 1960: 147; Cook 2012b: 92-3): indeed, she very nearly turns the earth into another Hades by withdrawing her reproductive energy from it while Persephone remains below. After a nearly identical period of absence, parent and child experience the joy of reunion, and then return to Olympus together where they enjoy new honors. Similarity of experience is paralleled by physical resemblance: as Burkert (1983: 289) notes, it is often difficult to distinguish between Demeter and Persephone in the pictorial tradition.

In a previous study I showed that an elaborate narrative pattern involving some forty themes organizes the *Telemachy*, the *Phaeacis*, and the *Revenge* (Cook 2014: 87-91). In other words, Telemachus and Odysseus undergo the same experience, and Odysseus does so twice. More important, however, is that not only are the experiences of parent and child closely parallel, but their shared experiences mirror those of Demeter and Persephone. The similarity of experience is again mirrored by resemblance: whereas Nestor affirms that Telemachus speaks like his famously eloquent father, Helen instantly identifies him as the son of Odysseus based on physical appearance.

When we first encounter him, Telemachus is grieving for his missing father: he thus inverts Demeter's role as mother grieving for her daughter, although a parallel can also be drawn to Persephone yearning for her mother. As noted, he is also psychologically withdrawn from the company of the suitors, and then withdraws physically, first to Pylus, then to Sparta. Demeter's withdrawal also takes place in three stages, first from Olympus, then to Eleusis, and finally to her temple, where, like Achilles and Telemachus, she waits as crisis builds. Telemachus is accompanied Athena, just as

Demeter is accompanied by Hecate, and together they consult the old and wise Nestor, just as Demeter consults the all-knowing Helios. In Pylus, Telemachus undergoes a change of status in a scene of epiphany, a central theme of the *Hymn* and Demeter's cult that features more prominently in the story of Odysseus. In the case of both Telemachus and Odysseus, the transformation is effected by bathing; and ritual purification, including bathing, features prominently in Demeter's cult as well as in rites of passage generally (Cook 2012b: 65). Athena and Hecate then leave off their escort at this point, as the hero journeys to the final destination of Sparta and Eleusis respectively.

In Sparta, Telemachus does not initially identify himself, though he does so inadvertently when Menelaus' encomium of Odysseus causes him to weep. Menelaus then fulfills the role of Helios in the *Hymn*, informing Telemachus of his father's whereabouts. (This is, in fact, the only significant departure between the actual sequences of themes.) In both cases, a family member discovers that a parent or child is beyond reach, but does not return on learning this and only does so later on account of divine intervention. In the *Odyssey*, the journey in search of a missing relative is the principal theme that links Telemachus to Demeter. In that Sparta has otherworldly associations, Telemachus also resembles Persephone in certain respects: in particular, his delayed return corresponds to Persephone's partial return, caused in both cases by eating. Athena eventually arrives to tell Telemachus he must return home to avert a possible crisis, just as Persephone is summoned home by Hermes to avert an actual crisis.

The story of Odysseus in the *Phaeacis* parallels the *Homeric Hymn* even more closely than do the stories of Achilles and Telemachus. The embassy scene in which Hermes informs Calypso that Zeus commands her to send Odysseus home links Odysseus

to Persephone; and, as noted, Ogygia is a happier version of the underworld in which Persephone finds herself. The similarities between Demeter and Odysseus are more direct and detailed. Their stories uniquely combine a “maiden at the well” theme that includes a lying autobiography with a theoxeny theme set in the home of the king: in theoxenies, the god assumes human form and tests mortals for their adherence to the rules of hospitality, or *xenia*, to strangers. Afterwards, the god appears in epiphany to reward or punish his or her host. (Kearns 1982: 6; Parker 1991: 9; Foley 1994: ad *h.Cer.* 145-68; Cook 2012b: 59, 61-2). On Ithaca, as in the *Hymn*, epiphany is associated with divine light, which is a central and defining feature of mystery cult.

The *Phaeacis* begins with “Maiden at the Well,” a central theme in the *Hymn* lacking from the *Telemachy* and *Iliad*. The settings are also strikingly similar: Demeter sits beneath an olive tree by a well at which the citizens of Eleusis draw their water; Odysseus sleeps beneath an olive tree by a washing hole in which the Phaeacians do their laundry. It is also worth noting what an unusual version of the theme is found in the *Hymn*: whatever its frequency in myth, “Maiden at the Well” is usually associated with erotic intrigue, and I know of no other example in Greek literature in which it features an encounter between an adolescent and an adult (or more specifically, an adult in need). Although an erotic theme is present in the *Phaeacis*, it can thus also be seen as engaging with the unique situation described in the *Hymn*. Moreover, Demeter does not eat or bathe for nine days before she arrives at Eleusis, and has pointedly disfigured herself so that she resembles an old and barren mortal. Odysseus, on the other hand has been so disfigured by his twenty day ordeal at sea that he appears to Nausicaa’s maidservants as a wild beast (*Od.* 6.130-8): his actual condition thus corresponds to Demeter’s disguise.

Also emphasized is that Odysseus has gone without eating for over four days, though, strikingly, he does not ask Nausicaa for food (*Od.* 6.250, 8.232-3).

Odysseus does not tell Nausicaa a lying autobiography, as Demeter does in the *Hymn*, but he does relate a tale of woes suffered at sea that corresponds to Demeter's tale of abduction by pirates. More important, Odysseus and Demeter both tell their tales of woe with the same strategic aim of: moving the maiden(s) to pity their plight; and offer assistance; which consists of welcome into their family. Neither Nausicaa nor Callidice asks who the stranger is, though Demeter volunteers a name as part of her lying tale, while Odysseus suppresses his identity for three whole books. But after Odysseus bathes, Athena rejuvenates him, in a scene that echoes Telemachus' bath in Pylus. Nausicaa then directly and indirectly compares him to a god, in a scene of partial epiphany in which she recognizes that the stranger is far more than he initially seemed (6.243, 280). The *Hymn* also includes a partial epiphany when Callidice intuits the divinity in Demeter despite her disguise (159). Whereas the poet of the *Hymn* declares that the daughters of Celeus look like goddesses (108), Odysseus directly compares Nausicaa to the goddess Artemis (*Od.* 6.149-52). Odysseus concludes his tale of woe with a direct appeal for Nausicaa to take pity on him, since he does not know the people who live there, by pointing out the town and giving him rags to wear. He follows with the wish that the gods grant her every desire, namely a husband and home (6.175-81). The mention of rags foreshadows his disguise as a beggar on Ithaca, but even without the intratextual echo, he can be seen as asking for a false identity that is the inverse of his status as ruler of a wealthy kingdom. Demeter's disguise as a barren, old mortal woman likewise inverts her identity as a fertility goddess, as does her requested role of domestic servant. And she too ends her

tale of woe by declaring that she does not know the land or its inhabitants, wishing that the gods grant the girls husbands, and asking that they take pity on her (133-4, 137, 148). Callidice replies that is necessary for mortals to ‘endure’ the gifts of the gods (147-8), while Nausicaa replies that the stranger must ‘endure’ what Zeus has given him. Not only is the sentiment the same, but so too is the irony of having a royal maiden voice it.

The daughters of Celeus arrive at the well bearing pitchers, and escort Demeter to their father’s palace. Nausicaa, in turn, escorts Odysseus as far as the city well, where he is met by Athena, disguised as a maiden bearing a pitcher, who escorts him to the palace of Nausicaa’s father. In the *Hymn* there follows a scene of partial epiphany: as Demeter crosses the threshold she momentarily fills the doorway and emits divine radiance. Odysseus’ entrance into the palace is also a scene of partial epiphany, as he insinuates himself into the palace hidden in a divine mist and then appears miraculously at Arete’s knees. Odysseus initially sits in the ashes of the hearth in an expression of grief, and Alcinous reseats him in a throne appropriate to his social standing; Metaneira attempts to seat Demeter in her own throne, reflecting Demeter’s status as a goddess, but Demeter insists on a fleece covered stool (*diphros*), again expressing her grief. Whereas Metaneira intuitively responds to Demeter as to a goddess, Alcinous hints that Odysseus may be a god, and they intuitively offer the strangers seating appropriate to their true status. (Odysseus also sits on a fleece covered *diphros*, and Penelope on a throne, during their interview in Book 19.) Moreover, in Demeter’s cult, a stool is used during a purification ceremony, and a boy is initiated “from the hearth” (Cook 2012b: 72-3).

Arete does not offend her guest, although we are prepared for her to do so by the repeated warning that Odysseus’ return lies in her hands and that the Phaeacians are

unfriendly to strangers. Nor does Odysseus attempt to expropriate her daughter, or take her in marriage when Alcinous extends the offer. The former can be explained, in part, by Odysseus' status as a mortal, while the latter in fact represents a temptation that Odysseus must resist in order to return home, psychologically as well as physically. The offer of his only daughter to Odysseus in marriage can also be seen as the complement to Metaneira's equally remarkable offer of her only son to Demeter for rearing. Nevertheless, Arete's question "Where did you get those clothes?" indicates suspicion that Odysseus may have had improper dealings with her daughter, while Metaneira openly accuses Demeter of trying to kill her son. In the *Odyssey*, we also have a scene in which the guest is mistreated by a member of the royal household. During athletic games held the next day in the stranger's honor, Alcinous' son, Laodamas, challenges Odysseus to compete, and Odysseus replies that Laodamas is taunting him. The bigger insult, however, falls to Euryalus, who implicitly denies Odysseus' nobility by calling him a merchant who knows nothing of games. Odysseus responds by tossing a discus far beyond any thrown by the Phaeacians, and in his ensuing boast lets drop that he fought at Troy. Alcinous instructs Euryalus to make amends, which he does by offering Odysseus a valuable sword and scabbard, thus acknowledging Odysseus' royal and heroic status.

This is the same sequence of themes as in the *Hymn*: a member of the royal household mistreats the guest; the guest rebukes her host; and reveals her true identity; whereupon attempts are made to make amends with appropriate gifts, in Demeter's case with a temple. Odysseus' epiphany remains partial, but this is soon followed by a complete identification that includes a four book autobiography. In both cases: after an epiphany; the hero quits the palace; followed by divine anger; disaster; and attempted



appeasement. In the *Hymn*, Demeter is angry that her daughter has been carried off to Hades and the gods try to appease her before she wipes out humanity; in the *Odyssey*, Poseidon, angry at the Phaeacians for restoring Odysseus to his home, turns their ship to stone, and they attempt to appease him before he destroys the entire city.

The *Revenge* also reproduces the sequence of themes from the *Hymn* and adds two that are definitive of fertility myth: the absence of Demeter and Odysseus results in a depletion of life from their realms, and their return signals the renewal of life and prosperity (*HHDem.* 486, *Od.* 11.136-7, 19.108-14; cf. Cook 2012b: 56). It also repeats the combination of Maiden at the Well and *theoxeny* found in the *Hymn* and *Phaeacis*, to which it adds another pair of themes from the *Hymn*: disguise and lying autobiography. It thus completely reproduces the thematic sequence from Demeter's stay at Eleusis: Maiden at the Well, including: lying autobiography and disguise; and *theoxeny*, including: arrival at the palace; testing; mistreatment; epiphany; punishment; marital union in bed; departure of child; and reunion of child with parent. In keeping with the narrative's much larger dimensions we also have a multiplication of several of these themes. That is, the *Revenge* emphasizes through repetition the story pattern's most distinctive and significant features, while still following the same narrative sequence. As a result I will only deal with material that casts further light on the *Odyssey*'s relationship to fertility myth.

The narrative begins with another iteration of "Maiden at the Well" in a setting that echoes Demeter's arrival at Eleusis. The Phaeacians deposit the sleeping Odysseus at the head of a harbor near a spring and a 'sacred' olive tree, about whose base they set the many gifts they had given him (13.122, 372). Athena greets Odysseus disguised as a

young shepherd who resembles the son of a king, and will presently disguise him as an aged beggar. She thus reverses her transformation of Odysseus from disfigured to godlike in the “Maiden at the Well” episode on Scheria, and she does so in a manner that closely parallels Demeter’s transformation from goddess to crone in the *Hymn*. When Athena presently identifies the island as Ithaca, Odysseus responds with a lying autobiography in which he hails from Crete. Athena smiles at the attempted deception and reveals herself; after stowing Odysseus’ treasure in a cave they sit beneath the olive tree to plan their revenge on the suitors. Their position echoes that of Demeter, sitting beneath an olive tree as she awaits the daughters of Celeus. In the *Odyssey*, as in the *Hymn*, the encounter of goddess and mortal initiates a *theoxeny* theme.

The Cretan origin of Odysseus and Demeter in their autobiographies is striking, and on the strength of the other similarities I believe it is significant. The stories also have in common that: they are false; meant to elicit the listener’s assistance; and in them the stranger has arrived involuntarily on a foreign ship. Odysseus will go on to relate four other “Cretan Tales,” in which he adjusts his story to his audiences in order to test them. The tale he tells Eumaeus is of particular interest, because it is false, he hails from Crete, attempts to manipulate his listener, *and*: a Phoenician attempts to abduct and sell him into slavery, as do the Thesprotians; from whose ship he escapes while they take their supper on the shore. On every point, his story echoes Demeter’s.

A central function of the interlude in Eumaeus’ hut is to stage the reunion of father and son in Book 16. For our purposes, the most important feature of this remarkable scene is that when Odysseus appears to Telemachus after Athena transforms his appearance, Telemachus is convinced that his father is in fact a god. He thus begs him

to be propitious and promises to offer pleasing sacrifices and golden gifts if he spares him. The poem thus renders the epiphany theme explicit. It does so, moreover, in a scene ending in joyous reunion that is directly paralleled in the *Hymn* when Persephone returns to her mother: in both cases the child is reunited with a grieving parent. The theoxeny theme is again explicit when Athena instructs Odysseus to beg the suitors for food so he can “discover who are just and who lawless” (17.363). When Antinous responds by striking him with a footstool, the other suitors worry that the stranger may be a god in disguise testing them (*Od.* 17.363 and 483-7; cf. Kearns 1982: 7, Cook 2012b: 57-8). This serves to preface the epiphany that launches the *Mnesterophonia* as Odysseus kills Antinous first of the suitors.

The epiphany theme is linked to divine light in a pair of complementary scenes. At the end of his first day in the palace, Odysseus declares that he will tend to the braziers and torches in the *megaron* “and give light” to the suitors (18.317). He then stands by the braziers, “shining as he looked at all of them” (343-4). This is directly paralleled in the light that Demeter emits as she enters the house of Celeus, and in her epiphany to Metaneira. As if to leave no doubt about the scene’s import, Eurymachus then jokes: “not without divine support has this man reached Odysseus’ house—why, there seems to me a blaze of torches from his very being, right from his head, since there’s not a hair on it, not even a little!” (353-5).

This mock epiphany is followed by a scene in which Athena uses divine light to help Odysseus and his son punish the suitors. As they carry the weapons lining the walls of the great hall to a storeroom, Athena guides them with “light of surpassing beauty”

issuing from a golden lamp (19.34). Telemachus responds with awe, and specifically, I suggest, the awe of an initiate experiencing religious mystery:

Father! truly do my eyes witness a great marvel here,  
why, the walls of the *megaron*, and the lovely tie beams,  
and roof beams of fir, and the pillars standing aloft,  
they are shining in my eyes like blazing fire!

Truly, some god is within, of those who rule broad heaven!

19.36-40

Just as striking is Odysseus' response, which could not be more at odds with the easy familiarity he displays towards Athena elsewhere: "Silence! Restrain your thought and do not question! This is the way of the gods who rule Olympus" (42-3). It is thus important to note that not only does Demeter emit brilliant light during her two epiphanies, bear torches as she searches for her daughter, and attempt to purify Demophon, "Mr. Light to his People," with fire, but these scenes also reflect the central and distinctive role played by light in Demeter's cult. The highpoint of her mysteries, in fact, is reached with the emergence of the high priest in a blaze of light to summon Persephone with a gong ([Burkert 1983: 286-88](#)). The scenes from the *Odyssey*, in turn, prepare not only for Odysseus' fictitious name of Aethon, or "Blaze," in his interview with Penelope, and his identification by Eurycleia in the light of his own hearth, but also and more importantly for his epiphany to the suitors.

After the *Mnesterophonia*, Odysseus is reunited with Penelope. In that Odysseus' return brings renewed prosperity to the entire kingdom, their reunion can be seen as a *hieros gamos*, or sacred marriage that promotes fertility; and a sacred marriage may have taken place during the mysteries (Burkert 1983: 284). Persephone's marriage to Hades leads to the barrenness of the earth, but she also represents the seed that must be 'buried' in the earth in order for the crops to grow, so that her marriage likewise ensures fertility: return and renewal are predicated on departure and death, as they are in rites of passage generally. The *Revenge* thus reproduces the narrative pattern of the *Hymn*, whose most important themes it multiplies and thereby emphasizes. As in the *Hymn*, the poem concludes with joyous reunion of child with grieving parent, Odysseus with Laertes, that heralds the return of prosperity to the wider community: symbolizing this, their reunion takes place in an orchard where the vines bear grapes "continuously" (24.342); afterwards, Zeus promises that Odysseus will rule "forever" and his people will enjoy "abundant wealth and peace" (24.483, 486; cf. 11.136-7).

In conclusion, I hope to have established or at least made plausible several basic points. First, that the case for seeing widespread Near Eastern influence on the mythological background of Homer is strong, and the case for the influence of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* is particularly compelling; but the myths have been so thoroughly Hellenized, or better Pan-Hellenized, that knowing this often does not change how we understand them or the epics. On the other hand, the influence of Indo-European mythology is even more diffuse in Homer. Nevertheless, the hero's combat with a dragon in Indo-European myth, as reconstructed by Watkins, is able to cast significant light on Achilles' fight with Scamander in the *Iliad*, and on the *Cyclopeia* and *Mnesterophonia* in the *Odyssey*. In

addition, Achilles, Odysseus, and Telemachus all undergo ontological change that can be usefully interpreted as rites of passage. The *Odyssey*, even more than the *Iliad*, can be seen as the heroic equivalent of fertility myth, in which the hero's absence results in loss to the community that is restored with his return. Most striking, perhaps, is the exploited congruence between heroic combat and fertility myth, both of which are associated with seasonal change, the laws of hospitality, social and agricultural crisis, and renewed fertility: Persephone returning in Spring is Indra killing Vr̥tra said in fertility myth—they are complementary ways of describing the same process of death and renewal.