

The Creation of the Ancient Greek Epic Cycle

Ingrid Holmberg

In a certain sense, all texts can be considered as parts of a single text which has been in writing since the beginning of time. Without being unaware of the difference between relations established *in presentia* (intratextual relations), and those established *in absentia* (intertextual relations), we must also not underestimate the presence of other texts within the text.

(Todorov 1977:244)

Todorov's description of textual interdependence represents a fictional construct or web of narrative that certain critics attempt to identify and analyze.¹ In a sense, this type of critic involves herself or himself in a constant pursuit of the lost paradise of a pure and unified text. Ancient Greek literature, however, provides us with access to a narrative tradition that approximates this single text: the oral tradition of which the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are the most prominent remains. We also possess in much more fragmentary form other narratives that belonged to the oral epic tradition; these comprise the epic cycle. In this paper I will examine the fall from narrative grace that the creation of the fixed texts of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* imposed upon the unified and universalizing oral tradition of the epic cycle.

The significance and function of the ancient Greek epic oral tradition has been recognized since the work of Milman Parry and Albert Lord.² Their research and the research of their followers has revealed that the Greek epic oral tradition formed a huge, interconnected, and variegated web of legendary and mythical narratives that comprised the *corpus* of the epic cycle, part of which were the stories of Achilles and Odysseus that eventually became the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Oral traditional narrative in

¹ This article builds upon material that appeared in Holmberg 1998.

² See espec. Parry 1971, Lord 1960, and the overview in Foley 1988.

composition is characterized by its fluidity, its lack of boundaries and closure, and its inherent capacity for spontaneous shortening and lengthening in every compositional production. Its nature defies the notions of beginning and closure, authorial identity and control, and exclusivity of narrative with which modern readers are familiar. The events that became the focus of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, therefore, were always already part of a universalizing mythical/legendary narrative that surrounded them with events occurring both before and after the discrete narratives concerning Achilles and Odysseus (Severyns 1928:261). At some point in time, for reasons that remain shrouded in history, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* emerged from this fluid narrative as narratives both relatively fixed and “charismatic.”³

We can only imagine the effect of the emergence of these two monumental epics upon the living oral tradition, whether that emergence was immediate or arose in an evolutionary manner.⁴ The reality for modern scholars is that the rest of that huge web of interrelated, interdependent narrative assumed a secondary status in comparison with the Homeric epics, and consequently has survived only in the most unsatisfactory fragmentary or epitomized form. Hence, scholarly questions about the oral tradition focus almost exclusively upon the monumental epics, with only a few scholars devoting more than an aside or a footnote to the epic cycle. What I would like to do in this paper is observe the oral tradition from another point of view, from the point of view of the rest of the epic cycle, and consider not the “Homeric” question, but the “cyclic” question. What happened to the epic cycle? What relationship did it have with the charismatic Homeric epics? And not least importantly, what meaning did this relationship have for subsequent literature?⁵

The dearth of material that can be called directly representative of the epic cycle illustrates the disrepute and belatedness into which the cycle had fallen even in antiquity. We have minimal sources for the epic cycle excluding the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*: fragmentary references and quotations in the scholia to ancient manuscripts, most prominently the *Iliad* and the

³ I borrow the term “charismatic” from Terry Castle, who defines a “charismatic text” as encoding “talismanic mythic material” to articulate “underlying cultural fantasies,” as gratifying “pervasive cultural wishes,” and as having “an unusually powerful effect on a large reading public” (1986:133-34). See also Holmberg 1998:22.

⁴ As Nagy has recently maintained (1990:52-81; 1996a)

⁵ Burkert (1987:43-44) hints at a perspective that examines the totality of the Greek oral epic tradition and the subsequent hegemony of the Homeric epics, although he chooses instead to focus on the reception of the Homeric epics.

Odyssey; references and quotations in ancient authors such as Athenaeus, Plutarch, and Pausanias, among others; an incomplete set of epitomes by Proclus attached to two manuscripts of the *Iliad*; and the summary of the cycle by Proclus called the *Chrestomathy* and preserved in Photius' *Bibliotheca* (319A17), itself in turn a summary of literature and genres from the ninth century AD (Lesky 1957:79; Allen 1924:51-53).⁶ Although Proclus' *Chrestomathy* is considered to be the most complete and coherent of the sources, there are interrelated problems concerning the identity and date of Proclus and his access to reliable sources for the cycle.

The Proclus who compiled the *Chrestomathy* was either a grammarian of the Antonine age or a Neoplatonist of the same name who died in 485 AD (Huxley 1969:123-24; Severyns 1928:245). An important statement by Photius in his introduction to the *Chrestomathy* asserts Proclus said that the poems of the epic cycle were preserved and pursued seriously by many, thereby implying that Proclus had access to original texts rather than abridged accounts by mythographers.⁷ Therefore, if one believes Photius, an attribution of Proclus' date depends in part on when Proclus could have had access to original texts of the epics. Severyns cites Philoponus, who says that the epic cycle was not read in the time of Peisander (222-35 AD) and that it had disappeared completely by the time of Philoponus himself in the sixth century (1928:75-76). Proclus, therefore, might be the second-century grammarian. Allen claims that many other equally ancient texts survived until the fifth century (including the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, one presumes). In addition, the Neoplatonic Proclus wrote about Homer, and there is ample evidence of an interest by Neoplatonists in Homerica (Allen 1924:51, 53, 56-60). Therefore, our Proclus might be the Neoplatonist. The question of Proclus' identity and date is perhaps not so important for a literary consideration of the epic cycle as for a determination of whether or not his epitome is an accurate representation of its shape and contents. How closely and accurately do the summaries represent the sequence of events of the narratives? Fortunately, there does seem to be a fairly good general correspondence between the

⁶ See Holmberg 1998:20.

⁷ See Allen 1912:97: "He [Proclus] says that the poems of the epic cycle are saved and zealously pursued by many not so much on account of their excellence as on account of the sequence of the events in them." Lesky, however, claims that Proclus did not have the poems but got the plots from mythographers (1957:81).

summaries in the *Chrestomathy* and the fragments available in other sources.⁸

Since antiquity, references to the epic cycle have subordinated it to the Homeric epics in several ways. The first is authorship. Although the cyclic narratives are sometimes attributed to Homer, the *Chrestomathy* and the majority of sources establish a tradition of assigning to the narratives several different authors who are often affiliated with Homer as his disciples or as continuers of his tradition.⁹ The authors of the cyclic poems were also assumed to have been younger than Homer, and therefore the texts are generally dated post-700 BCE, if not post-536 BCE (the alleged Peisistratean Recension).¹⁰ An important consideration in evaluating these types of statements is that while the whole epic cycle including the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* drew on very ancient traditional material—and therefore attempting a chronology must prove fruitless—the epic cycle was probably fixed and written down later than the two large poems were fixed and/or written down.¹¹ The chronological posteriority of the establishment of fixed narratives of the cycles yields the assumption that these narratives were in fact *created* as dependent upon the Homeric epics.

Second, these narratives were considered aesthetically inferior to the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. This aesthetic judgment was in place by the time of Aristotle, who states that the *Kypria* and the *Little Iliad* are much more episodic than the unified *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and therefore inferior to them (*Poetics* 1459b).¹² A scholion to *Odyssey* 7.115 complains that epithets in

⁸ See Burgess 1996:81 for Proclus' general validity on the internal contents of the narratives, if not on the divisions into books.

⁹ See Davies 1986:100 for a discussion of the attribution of authors to the minor epics. Pindar fr. 265 (Sn.) states that Homer gave Stasinos the *Kypria* as a dowry (Loeb fr. 2 = Allen testimonia 117). Unless otherwise indicated, all Loeb references are from Evelyn-White 1914 and all Allen references are from Allen 1912. Nagy (1990:19, n. 9) points out that attribution to a specific author becomes more "exclusive" as time progresses.

¹⁰ The Alexandrian scholars repeatedly refer to the cyclic sources as "neoteroi" or "younger," although this is not an unproblematic connection. See Davies 1986:109.

¹¹ See Huxley 1969:123-24, 141; Allen 1924:64-65. See also Davies 1989a:3-5 for a discussion of the dates of the written versions of the cycle and for his preference for relatively later dates (i.e., late sixth century) for many of them.

¹² Huxley 1969:124; Lesky 1957:83. Even modern scholars fall prey to this literary aesthetic prejudice. E.g., Davies 1989a:iv: "Why, for instance, publish literal translations of those tiny portions of confessedly second-rate epics that happen to have survived?"

the epic cycle do not match the excellence of those in Homer, and merely function to fill out a verse conveniently.¹³ Hellenistic Alexandrian scholars, unaware of the oral tradition of archaic Greek poetry, read the texts of the epic cycle as later than the *Iliad*, which as written texts they probably were, without taking into account the larger, co-extensive oral epic tradition of which the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were part. These influential scholars began the practice of interpreting the cyclic narratives as later compositions that provided further story lines for unexplained or allusive references in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and that could not have influenced the Homeric poet. The Alexandrians explained Homer by means of Homer and, as Severyns notes, were largely responsible for discrediting the epic cycle.¹⁴ Proclus himself, the summarizer of the epic cycle, apparently said that the poems of the cycle were preserved and studied not so much for their artistic nature as for the sequence of events.¹⁵

In addition and perhaps as a result of the first two considerations, the epic cycle has been understood as narratives providing introductions and sequels to the primary, original texts of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Proclus' summaries, preserved by Photius, frequently begin the minor epics with verbal indications that these mini-narratives are intended to follow or add on to the prior mini-narrative.¹⁶ A scholion to Clement of Alexandria's *Protrepticus*. 2.30 describes the narratives of the *Chrestomathy* as the antecedents and "sequel" of the *Iliad* (Lesky 1957:79). In the early twentieth century, an important Homeric critic defined the epic cycle as merely prequels and sequels to the Homeric poems: "the effect of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* was still so strong that sequels or introductions met with a public" (Allen 1924:69). Returning to Castle's notion of charismatic texts, which the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* certainly are, we can observe that from a modern perspective these epics would indeed provide fertile ground for the

¹³ Cf. Severyns 1928:156: "The epithets are not thrown in casually in the manner of the epic cycle, but the individuality of each tree is observed through each epithet."

¹⁴ See Severyns 1928:159, 247—although it should be noted that the most influential Homeric scholar, Aristarchus, despite his derogatory attitude toward the cycle, always included in his scholia and commentary the tradition he denied, thereby preserving it for posterity. His predecessor Zenodotus was not so fastidious, and whatever he rejected was in general excised completely from his commentary. Both Severyns and Davies (1986:93; 1989a:2) note that beginning with the Alexandrians the term "cyclic" became identified with the inferior status of cyclic poetry.

¹⁵ See Holmberg 1998:20-21.

¹⁶ E.g., *Kypria* Loeb fr. 1 = Allen 102.9.

creation of narrative sequels. From the perspective of the Greek oral epic tradition, however, the narratives of the epic cycle were not created *after* the Homeric epics, but had existed in time concurrently *with* those two narratives. The epic cycle achieved its form as prequels and sequels to the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* only after those epics became fixed texts.

The concentration of attention upon the Homeric epics and the opinion of the epic cycle as degraded in comparison with these epics unfortunately created our lack of direct contact with much of the epic cycle. But the obscurity of the epic cycle may in fact have preserved, albeit in the distanced form of Proclus' summaries, aspects of the oral tradition obviated by the fixation of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.¹⁷ The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* have been transmitted to us as unified and exclusive narratives; the epic cycle, even in Proclus, is disunified, repetitive, variable, and inclusive.¹⁸ These later qualities have been thought of as characterizing a group of poems deemed inferior to the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Yet these very qualities are representative of the model of the oral tradition from which the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* emerged.¹⁹ Ironically, what many consider to be *exempla* of the Greek oral tradition may have blinded us to closer representatives of that tradition, and ultimately may have established a set of aesthetic judgments that disparages these representatives. A discrete summary of the extant remains of the Trojan cycle, focusing especially upon apparent "problems" or "inconsistencies" in that narrative tradition, reveals that these problems and inconsistencies derive from the oral tradition and should be understood as such rather than as aesthetic weaknesses.

The full mythic narrative of Proclus' *Chrestomathy* ranges from the marriage of heaven and earth to the death of Odysseus. It includes the various subnarratives or narrative cycles that form the central core of much ancient Greek literature, such as the war of the Titans, the story of Oedipus, a *Thebaid* (the story of the struggle over the rulership of Thebes by Oedipus's sons) and an *Epigoni* (the renewal of that conflict by the next generation of warriors). The Trojan Cycle is part of this large narrative and

¹⁷ Although Latacz (1996:75) notes that what remains of the epic cycle is a "post-Homeric version of the Troy saga," he also admits that even this version may contain pre-Homeric elements of that tradition (76). See also Burgess (1996:78-79), who argues strongly for the independence of the cycle, as well as Kullmann (1984:321-22) and Huxley (1969: 126) on the epic cycle's proximity to the oral tradition.

¹⁸ Nagy (1990:73) comments upon the process of "Homeric streamlining."

¹⁹ See Holmberg 1998:23.

begins immediately following the *Epigoni* with the *Kypria* in 11 books.²⁰ One source attributes the *Kypria* to Stasinos, although the accompanying comment notes attributions to Homer himself, and even recounts the tale that Homer gave the *Kypria* to Stasinos as a dowry.²¹ The name of the *Kypria* remains a mystery to scholars: the name may refer to Cyprus as its place of composition, although this would be unusual for an epic, or more likely it may refer to the role of Aphrodite, “the Cyprian goddess,” in setting events in motion (Huxley 1969:128-29; Davies 1989a:33). The text of the *Kypria* that Proclus preserves in many instances seems to presuppose the *Iliad*, although I would argue that it is impossible to distinguish because the tradition is shared by both narratives.

The beginnings of both the *Kypria* and the *Iliad* demonstrate the difficulty of determining the interrelationship of these narratives and complicate the notion that the *Kypria* is the “prequel” to the *Iliad*.²² In Proclus’ *Kypria*, the plot is explained by Zeus’ planning (*bouleuetai*) with Themis to bring about the Trojan war.²³ The opening lines of the *Iliad* refer to the plan (*boulê*) of Zeus being fulfilled. These lines are provided with a scholion that quotes lines in verse (Proclus’ epitome is in prose) from the *Kypria* containing the same phrase for the plan of Zeus as the *Iliad* does, and outlining Zeus’ plan to relieve Earth from the burden of mankind’s population by causing the Theban and Trojan wars.²⁴ The severity of Zeus’s punishment stems from the lack of divine reverence among mankind. The evidence of the direct quote from the *Kypria* itself and the connection that the scholion to the *Iliad* makes between the plan of Zeus in the *Iliad* and the plan articulated in the *Kypria* indicate that the plan of Zeus in the *Iliad* at least in part refers to the plan of Zeus for the diminishment of mankind. Nevertheless, the Iliadic passage has since the

²⁰ All the epics or parts of epics surrounding the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are much shorter than the two “monumental” poems.

²¹ Loeb fr. 2 = Allen 117; see Davies 1989a:33.

²² For a detailed analysis of the *Kypria*’s relationship to the *Iliad*, see Burgess 1996.

²³ Loeb fr. 1 = Allen 102 ff. The Alexandrian scholars Aristophanes and Aristarchus substitute Thetis for Themis here, obviously assimilating this planning session with the plans of Zeus and Thetis for Achilles in *Iliad* 1 (Severyns 1928:247). If, as the various commentaries and *Kypria* claim, the purpose of the wars is to punish mankind for its lack of reverence, Themis, the goddess of holy law, would be the likely candidate as Zeus’ assistant.

²⁴ Loeb fr. 3 = Allen fr. 1.

Hellenistic age been interpreted as referring primarily to Zeus' plan for Achilles, in other words as separate from the rest of the Trojan cycle; accordingly, the plan of Zeus in the *Kypria* has been read as dependent upon, and as an imitation of, the beginning of the *Iliad*. Thus begins the construction of the *Kypria* as a prequel to the *Iliad*.

My own emphasis on the independence of the *Kypria* does not preclude other interpretive options or seek to denigrate the artistic quality and unity of the *Iliad*. The reference to the *boulê* of Zeus in the *Iliad* may be an acknowledgment of the common store of myth shared by the *Kypria* and *Iliad* and thus not part of a prequel paradigm in which the *Kypria* expands on the *Iliad*, or it may simply stand on its own within the *Iliad*. Given the self-consciousness of the poet of the *Iliad*, there is also the distinct likelihood that the *boulê* of Zeus at *Iliad* 1.5 refers both to the plan in the *Kypria* and to Zeus' plan for Achilles in the *Iliad*.²⁵ My point is that once the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* achieved a fixed status and became exemplars of the epic genre, other narratives of the epic cycle were forced into a less prominent position, eventually being read as simply extensions of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, when all the narratives including the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* had previously existed on a relatively equal footing. The *Kypria*, along with the other Trojan epics, finds itself literally and figuratively relegated to the ranks of explanation, footnote, and prequel to the text of the Homeric poems.²⁶

Proclus' epitome goes on to relate the quarrel between Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite at the wedding of Peleus and Thetis, the judgment of Paris, Paris' seizure of Helen, the Greek decision to attack Troy, and the Greek preparations. Interestingly, the two Homeric heroes are both depicted as hiding in order to escape conscription, events scrupulously avoided by the Homeric poet. Odysseus pretends to be mad, but his ruse is detected by Palamedes, a revelation later punished by Palamedes' drowning at the hands of Odysseus, according to one variant.²⁷ Achilles' feminine disguise is not referred to by Proclus but is related in a scholion to the *Iliad* dubiously

²⁵ Proclus' *Kypria* ends with Zeus' plan (*Dios boulê*) to relieve the Trojans through Achilles' withdrawal. This *boulê* seems to resonate with the Iliadic *boulê* as a means of connecting the narratives, but see Burgess (1996:82-86), who reads this *boulê* as part of an independent *Kypria* that also included episodes associated with the *Iliad*.

²⁶ See Holmberg 1998:23-24.

²⁷ Proclus only mentions Palamedes' death, while Pausanias cites the *Kypria* as relating his drowning at the hands of Diomedes and Odysseus (Loeb fr. 19 = Allen fr. 21).

assigned to the *Kypria*.²⁸ Peleus hides Achilles in disguise as a girl on Scyros, where he meets Deidamia and sires Neoptolemus. In the *Little Iliad*, however, Proclus does relate Achilles' marriage to Deidamia on Scyros after Achilles has wounded Telephus and the Greeks have been scattered by a storm on their first attempt to sail to Troy.²⁹ Without attempting to unravel the complexities of Achilles' visits to Scyros and the chronologies necessary for Neoptolemus' conception if he is to be old enough to fight at Troy, suffice it to say that both the *Kypria* and the *Little Iliad* seem to have included at least one trip by Achilles to Scyros.³⁰ The reference by the two cyclic epics illustrates an important feature shared among the cyclic epics but not with the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*: these minor epics frequently have overlapping narratives and repeat versions of the same episodes, particularly at their beginnings and endings. Although this feature is often interpreted as a sign of their disorganization and inadequacy, the permeability of boundaries, especially beginnings and endings, is also a trademark of the flexibility of an oral tradition, where the poetic composer can begin and end his narrations wherever he and his audience wish. Citing this fragment and others in an important recent article, Burgess argues that the *Kypria* in fact included events relating to the whole Trojan war, introducing "the possibility that the original *Kypria* covered the whole Trojan war" (1996:91).³¹

Proclus says that the *Iliad* follows the *Kypria* and that the *Iliad* is in turn followed by the *Aethiopsis* of Arctinus of Miletus.³² The *Aethiopsis* is preserved by Proclus and in two fragments, one of which may be spurious. As with the *Kypria*, the *Aethiopsis* was probably written down, although not composed, expressly to complement and expand upon the *Iliad* (Severyns 1928:313-14, 318). The narrative of the *Aethiopsis*, in fact, appears from the type of stories it relates to be one of the most ancient of the cyclic epics:

²⁸ Scholion to *Iliad* 19.326 = Davies 1988: *incertum fragmentum* 4; see Severyns 1928:289-91.

²⁹ Loeb fr. 5 = Allen fr. 4.

³⁰ Severyns (1928:338) suggests that Achilles was hidden on Scyros as a boy, as in the uncertain Kyprian fragment, that he returned to Scyros as a man according to the *Little Iliad*, and that Proclus incorporates both by having Achilles actually marry Deidamia on this second visit, even though Neoptolemus was previously conceived.

³¹ Davies (1989b:98) refers to the *Kypria* as a "hold-all for the complete story of the Trojan war."

³² Loeb fr. 1 = Allen 105.20-22.

its main incidents are the conflicts between Achilles and two Trojan allies, Penthesilea and Memnon. Proclus' summary tells us that the *Aethiopis* begins with the Amazon Penthesilea coming to the aid of the Trojans and eventually being slain by Achilles. A scholion at the end of the *Iliad* introduces the arrival of the Amazon immediately following the burial of Hector, and has been cited as a possible beginning of the *Aethiopis* rather than as a gloss on the ending of the *Iliad*, although there is no internal evidence for the former conjecture.³³ Achilles then kills Thersites (the object of the Greeks' scorn in *Iliad* 2) for accusing him of being in love with the Amazon. It is unclear from Proclus' summary whether there was any basis for Thersites' allegation against Achilles, although in later literary sources and artistic representations Achilles conceives a love for Penthesilea as she dies from the wound he inflicts (Davies 1989a:54). Memnon, son of Eos, kills Antilochus the great friend of Achilles;³⁴ Achilles kills Memnon, who is granted immortality; and Achilles, himself killed by the combination of Paris and Apollo, is also granted immortality.

Achilles' contest with Memnon seems to parallel significantly Achilles' encounter with Hector in the *Iliad*. The two accounts differ, however, in ways that illuminate the agenda of the Iliadic author. The most prominent of these is the immortality available to both Memnon and Achilles from their divine mothers: in the *Aethiopis*, Memnon receives immortality from Eos, and Achilles is transported by his mother Thetis to the White Island. Although I would hesitate to suggest that the Memnon/Achilles scenario is the early paradigm of the Hector/Achilles antagonism, it does seem likely that the Homeric poet may have had the Memnon/Achilles story in mind and sought to distinguish and deepen his own narrative by denying his hero the salvation of immortality. The Homeric poet therefore distinguishes his poem from the cyclic tradition of Achilles' immortality—in addition to the idea of immortality in general as a possibility for mortals that runs through the cycle—by an explicit denial of these variants.³⁵

Proclus' *Aethiopis* ends with the quarrel between Ajax and Odysseus over the arms of Achilles; a scholion to Pindar's *Isth.* 3.53, the only fragment definitely connected with the *Aethiopis*, says that the *Aethiopis* relates Ajax's suicide. Severyns (1928:324-25) gives credence to this

³³ Scholion *Iliad* 24.804; Loeb fr. 2 = Allen fr. 1. See Davies 1989a:61 for a short discussion.

³⁴ See *Iliad* 23 for Memnon as a young clever charioteer.

³⁵ See Holmberg 1998:25.

fragment, asserting that the author of the *Aethiopsis* would not have ended his narrative without including the suicide. The *Little Iliad* begins with this same dispute over the arms and Ajax's suicide; therefore it apparently renews part of the *Aethiopsis*. In the anterior, less well differentiated form of the cycle, it is possible that there were two versions of Ajax's suicide in both the *Aethiopsis* and the *Little Iliad*, but that Proclus eliminated one in the interests of a smoother overall summary.³⁶ This repetition again betrays the flexibility of the narratives of the epic cycle before they achieved their status as prequels and sequels. In addition, Kopff argues (1983:59, 61) that the *Aethiopsis* may also have included Priam's supplication of Achilles, which we have in *Iliad* 24, and that *Iliad* 24 may have conversely included the death of Penthesilea (an *Amazonia*) featured in the *Aethiopsis*. This theory, if valid, would be yet another example of the permeability of the early epic oral tradition before complete fixation. Like the *Kypria*, the *Aethiopsis* may have covered more narrative ground than the summary we currently have and may have included what we now take to be exclusively Iliadic episodes.

Proclus attributes the *Little Iliad* in four books to Lesches of Mitylene; this narrative intervenes between two poems by Arctinus of Miletus, the *Aethiopsis* treated above and the *Iliou Persis* ("Sack of Troy"), which will be discussed below. The *Little Iliad* appears to share many incidents and episodes with both the *Aethiopsis* and the *Iliou Persis*; this coincidence has led a number of scholars to conclude that the *Aethiopsis*, the *Little Iliad*, and the *Iliou Persis* were originally one undifferentiated poem called the *Little Iliad*. This theory would explain why so much of the *Little Iliad* seems to replicate episodes from the other narratives. The argument against this theory, as Davies puts it (1989a:7, 63), is that Proclus does divide up the epics carefully by the number of books assigned to each, and that he would not do so unless they were distinct works).³⁷ On the contrary, the intervention of Lesches' *Little Iliad* between two poems ascribed to Arctinus in combination with these overlappings has led other scholars to speculate that Lesches composed the *Little Iliad* to fill in the narrative gap left by Arctinus between his poems,³⁸ Similarly, the poets of the epic cycle were said to have filled in gaps left by the magisterial Homer and, like the other epic poets and in contrast to Homer, the author of the *Little Iliad* is

³⁶ See Davies 1989a:60.

³⁷ See also Huxley 1969:147.

³⁸ See Severyns (1928:356-57), who argues, however, for unarticulated borders between the works; Allen 1924:74.

often disparaged when compared to Arctinus and Homer.³⁹ Severyns repeatedly explains passages in the *Little Iliad* that differ from the *Aethiopsis* and the *Iliou Persis* as hapless innovations rather than alternative traditions, and he finds Lesches' style "romanesque" (1928:331, 333, 352).⁴⁰

The first incident in Proclus' *Little Iliad* relates the judgment over the arms of Achilles in detail. Odysseus is judged victorious either by his fellow Greeks, by a jury of captured Trojan men, or by the eavesdropped conversation of young Trojan women.⁴¹ As is well known from Sophocles' *Ajax*, that great hero goes mad and kills the Greek herd and himself. Then follows the completion of a series of contingencies that will assure the fall of Troy.⁴² First, Odysseus seizes the Trojan seer Helenus, who prophesies that the Greeks can take Troy only with the aid of the archer Philoctetes, who was left behind by the Greeks on the island of Lemnos.⁴³ Philoctetes then kills Paris, an important step in overcoming the Trojan resistance. Second, Odysseus fetches Achilles' son Neoptolemus from Scyros. Epeius builds the Trojan horse, perhaps under Odysseus' guidance, and Odysseus himself makes at least one undercover entry into Troy before he enters the city as the leader of the men inside the Trojan horse. Odysseus, disguised as a beggar, meets with Helen (a scene narrated by her in *Odyssey* 4), and, either on this same mission or on a separate one, Diomedes and Odysseus steal the Palladium out of the city, the most important condition for the fall of Troy.⁴⁴ The *Iliou Persis* informs us that

³⁹ See Nagy 1990:76 for an alternative interpretation that valorizes Lesches.

⁴⁰ See Holmberg 1998:26.

⁴¹ Loeb fr. 3 = Allen fr. 2 scholion to Aristophanes' *Knights* for Trojan women; *Odyssey* 11.547 for male Trojans, which Severyns believes refers to an older and aesthetically preferable tradition found in the *Aethiopsis* (1928:331). In contrast, Davies 1989a:60 feels that the tradition found in Pindar *Nem.* 8.26 ff. of the Greek men judging the decision might be the oldest because it is the simplest, but that the Trojan prisoners as judges might have been the version in the *Aethiopsis*.

⁴² Severyns (1928:333) feels that this tripartite overdetermination represents Lesches' excessive reliance on ancient legends, when instead he should have chosen one episode as a focus for the purpose of narrative aesthetics: "La *Petite Iliade* montre le genre épique en pleine décadence, épuisé d'avoir déjà fourni une trop longue carrière."

⁴³ See Proclus' *Kypria*.

⁴⁴ Loeb fr. 1 = Allen 106-7 divides Odysseus' entry into Troy into two distinct visits; Apollodorus V. 13 describes it as one visit. Severyns (1928:351) argues that the *Little Iliad* innovates by dividing Odysseus' entry into Troy into two episodes, one derived from Helen's Odyssean rendering, the other from the story of the Palladium from the *Iliou*

in fact the Palladium stolen by Odysseus was a copy, and that Aeneas, a remaining member of the Trojan royal family, had hidden it and subsequently escaped with it.⁴⁵ Proclus' *Chrestomathy* ends at the point at which the Trojans take the fatal horse into their city, yet fragmentary evidence suggests that the epic may have in some versions continued and overlapped with the *Iliou Persis*. Loeb fr. 14 (=Allen 19A) narrates the fall of Troy by marking the degradation and destruction of Hector's family: Neoptolemus seizes Andromache and kills Astyanax.

Proclus attributes the *Iliou Persis* in two books to Arctinus of Miletus, the alleged author of the *Aethiopsis*. Proclus' summary begins with a debate among the Trojans about taking the Trojan horse into the city, an event already related in the *Little Iliad*. Again, like the *Little Iliad*, the *Iliou Persis* addresses the fate of Aeneas: the eventual founder of Rome withdraws with his family to Mt. Ida outside Troy following the portentous death of Laocoon and his sons. The Greeks instigate their final attack from the horse, and Proclus' version becomes simply a litany of who kills whom. We read that Neoptolemus kills Priam on an altar, contrary to the artistic representation of the *Little Iliad* by Polygnotus described by Pausanias in which Priam dies at the threshold of his house;⁴⁶ Menelaus takes Helen; the Greeks sacrifice Polyxena at the tomb of Achilles; Odysseus rather than Neoptolemus kills Astyanax; and Neoptolemus takes Andromache. Ajax Ilian's attempt to tear Cassandra by force away from Athena's image in her temple seems to be the cause for Athena's hostility to the Greeks upon the occasion of their victory, and indeed Proclus' epitome of the *Iliou Persis* ends with Athena's plans to destroy the Greeks.

The *Nostoi* ("Returns") of Agias of Troezen in five books picks up the story from the destruction of Troy and describes the returns of the Greek heroes with the exception of Odysseus, who merits his own monumental epic. The plurality of stories within this narrative creates, even in Proclus' summary, an impression of an extremely episodic and disunified plot. Many of the episodes closely parallel descriptions of events in the *Odyssey*, although this does not definitively prove that one was dependent on the other. The anger of Athena, established in the *Iliou*

Persis.

⁴⁵ *Iliou Persis* Loeb fr. 2 = Davies 1988:65-66 *fragmentum dubium*. Davies (1989a:79) is highly skeptical of this latter story from Dionysius Halicarnassus and suspects it of lateness because of its convenient connection with the Roman and Vergilian myth of Aeneas.

⁴⁶ *Iliou Persis* Loeb fr. 1 = Allen 107-8 and *Little Iliad* Loeb fr. 12 = Allen fr. 16.

Persis, begins to take its toll when the goddess causes a quarrel between Agamemnon and Menelaus; the former decides to remain in Troy in order to appease Athena, while the latter sets out on his journey home. Agamemnon eventually returns home, only to be killed by Aegisthus and Clytemnestra. The death of Agamemnon provides yet another example of the fluidity of the oral epic tradition. The first mention of Agamemnon's murder in the *Odyssey* names only Aegisthus as the killer. The later references in the first Nekuia in Book 11 and in the second Nekuia in Book 24 add Clytemnestra, and the queen's involvement becomes an important dramatic focus in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*. Severyns insists that Clytemnestra's stronger role in *Odyssey* 11 and 24 is the result of the influence of the *Nostoi* upon the rhapsodes who recited the *Odyssey* (1928:402-5).⁴⁷ This may be the case; on the other hand, we may be seeing yet again the result of the breadth and possibility available within a flexible, intertextual, and constantly evolving narrative.

Chronologically, the *Odyssey* follows the *Returns*, and is in turn followed and concluded by the *Telegony* of Eugammon of Cyrene in two books. The *Telegony*, the final book of the epic cycle preserved by Proclus, is a very strange and even less well known part of the epic cycle; it suffers the humiliation of being described by Severyns as a "misérable poème," a harsh judgment but one that to a certain extent encapsulates the attitude toward sequels in general.⁴⁸ A study of the *Telegony's* farfetched plot would certainly have contributed strongly to Aristotle and Aristarchus' opinions that the epic cycle was far inferior to Homer's finely crafted epics.

The *Telegony* begins with the burial of the suitors after their slaughter by Odysseus, repeating the same event from *Odyssey* 24.417 ff. Not surprisingly, Odysseus immediately sails off from Ithaca again on an errand, but returns to complete the sacrifices to Poseidon ordered by Teiresias in *Odyssey* 11.⁴⁹ He then travels to Thesprotis where he marries

⁴⁷ Conversely, Severyns (1928:399) argues that the mention in Pausanias of a Nekuia which was part of the *Nostoi* (Loeb fr. 6 = Allen fr. 3) is a remembrance and nod to the Homeric Nekuia. See Davies 1989a:84 on the likelihood of a Nekuia in the *Nostoi*.

⁴⁸ See Severyns 1928:409: "Eugammon de Cyrène a fait tomber l'épopée plus bas encore que Leschès, dont il exagère les défauts jusqu'à l'invraisemblance. Une oeuvre comme la Télégonie marque la fin du genre épique, annonce un genre nouveau, celui du roman en prose." The somewhat more moderate Lesky calls this the "most surprising part" of the epic cycle, combining old tradition with new invention (1957:83).

⁴⁹ Davies 1989a:91 suggests that the text be emended here to say that Odysseus sails not back to Ithaca, but to Epirus to perform these sacrifices and then on to Thesprotis. This would bring Proclus' summary into accord with Apollodorus' epitome

the queen Callidice, but eventually he returns yet again to Ithaca. On Ithaca, Odysseus is killed by Telegonus, his own son by Circe.⁵⁰ At *Odyssey* 11.134, Teiresias had prophesied that Odysseus would die *ex alos*, which can mean either because of or on the sea, or away from the sea, that is, on land. A scholion to that line often thought to represent events in the *Telegony* attempts to iron out this problem by recalling that Telegonus killed his father with a dart from a fish, therefore Odysseus died because of or from the sea.⁵¹ Following the mistaken patricide, Telegonus accompanied by Penelope and Telemachus takes his father's body back to Circe, where Circe makes them all immortal and they intermarry (Circe to Telemachus; Penelope to Telegonus).⁵² The events depicted in the *Telegony*, however, like events of several of these other minor epics, are also assigned to other narratives: the scholar Eustathius attributes these intermarriages, and presumably the rest of the story too, to a version of the *Nostoi* rather than the *Telegony*.⁵³ More than the other parts of the epic cycle, this continuation of the story of Odysseus seems to represent a desire on the part of the audience (the not yet paying public) to hear more about its favorite characters and for the story not to end.⁵⁴ The narrative of the *Odyssey*, too, is particularly accommodating to continuation by incorporating multiple opportunities for extension, including the prophecy of Teiresias in *Odyssey* 11 and the mystery and ambiguity of Odysseus' future and death. The *Telegony's* fantastic aspects perhaps indicate an effort on the part of the composer(s) to outdo the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*; incapable of rivaling the poetic composition of those two epics, the composer of the *Telegony* chose to emphasize more and more outrageous plot inventions.

Some, if not all, of the perceived inadequacies and inconsistencies of the epic cycle can be attributed to the mode of composition in an oral tradition. Both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* and the rest of the epic cycle were

7.34 and avoid repeated sailings back and forth from Ithaca.

⁵⁰ There is also a tradition in Eustathius that Telegonus is the son of Calypso and Odysseus (Loeb fr. 2 = Allen fr. 1).

⁵¹ See Severyns 1928:413. Davies (1989a:93) cites Apollodorus who says that Telegonus wielded a spear "barbed with the spine of a sting-ray."

⁵² For Davies, "this is a second-rate Greek epic's equivalent of 'they all lived happily ever after'" (1989a:94).

⁵³ *Nostoi* Loeb fr. 4 = Allen fr. 9.

⁵⁴ See Severyns 1928:411 for comments on this aspect of the *Nostoi*.

part of the oral tradition in which narratives were composed or recomposed by an individual bard according to the contingencies of the occasion and of his audience. The *Odyssey* provides us with several examples of this type of narrative composition. We see the bard Demodocus in *Odyssey* 8 respond to requests from his audience. He first sings about a quarrel between Achilles and Odysseus, an episode that may have connections to some episode in the epic cycle; then, upon a request from his host for a happier song, he sings the adulterous liaison between Aphrodite and Ares, who are captured by the huge net of Aphrodite's husband Hephaistos; lastly, at the request of Odysseus, he sings about the Trojan horse and Odysseus' cleverness. Demodocus' short renderings in no way rival the complexity or length of the composition of the Homeric poet in whose work they are embedded. The episodic nature of Demodocus' narratives, which present a small part of the whole mythic construct, highlights the uniqueness of the size of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.⁵⁵ One might even see here the Homeric poet's triumph over the epic cycle embedded in his narrative—rather than a representative of Homer himself, as so many have suggested. The Homeric poet's closest competitor is the hero Odysseus, whose four books of wanderings perhaps approximate the excessive inventiveness of the epic cycle. But Odysseus' later stories may be more informative about the method of a bardic composer, even though he is not actually a bard. When Odysseus arrives on Ithaca, he tells three similar tales to three different audiences: the disguised Athena, the swineherd Eumaios, and Penelope. The tales seem to be broadly analogous to Odysseus' actual travels, but he cunningly adjusts each tale ever so slightly in order for it to be persuasive for the particular audience. In Demodocus, we see an oral tradition that allows a poet to pick up a thread at any point within the broad field of narrative available to him; these episodes are not named nor do they have an author. From Odysseus' later tales we see both conservation and innovation of narrative.

In the oral tradition, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*—as defined texts with beginnings, endings, and an author—did not exist, even if the stories or versions of the stories that they tell were in circulation. It is the fixation of the texts of the Homeric epics that begins the process of definition, and that has significant consequences for the epic cycle and the development of Western literature. From literary references and artistic sources, it is clear that the narratives of the Trojan war, without special emphasis on the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, were recognized from the eighth century onward in

⁵⁵ See Foley 1991:7, 10; Nagy 1996a:79-80 for the “metonymy” of oral tradition.

Greece.⁵⁶ By the end of the sixth century, however, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* seem to have achieved special status, whether fixed by writing or transmission through memorization or by repetitive recomposition by rhapsodes.⁵⁷ Whenever it is that one determines the fixation of the epics to have occurred, the survival of both the two large epics and the epic cycle in the fixed forms that we have them is directly dependent upon preservation in writing at some point, a phenomenon that in itself reflects literary historical judgments about the value and excellence of the narratives. It is tempting to attribute the popularity and survival of the Homeric epics to the aesthetic quality of these narratives in comparison to the rest of the cycle, as is often done, but latter-day aesthetic criteria exclude other possibilities that are not available for modern scholars to explore, such as political and historical exigencies in the archaic Greek world.⁵⁸ It seems that once the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* became charismatic texts, the other loosely connected narratives of the epic cycle were arranged and organized in relation to those narratives as sequels and prequels, with fixed limits and authors.⁵⁹ The

⁵⁶ Scaife (1995:164-65) argues from artistic evidence that the epic cycle was received even more favorably in the period from the eighth century to the sixth century; Burkert too notes from a literary perspective that “it was not necessarily our *Iliad* that was at the center of interest” (1987:45-46). He later concurs with Scaife on the artistic evidence that “it was not the unique text of the *Iliad* as the one great classic that made its impression on seventh-century art, but a more variegated complex of Trojan themes” (46).

⁵⁷ Nagy (1990:70) reasserts his argument that the Homeric epics achieved their prominence through an impetus towards “pan-Hellenism”; Nagy (1995:165) attributes to Alexandrian scholars the written preservation of the Homeric epics, although he posits an earlier fixation of a text without absolute reliance on writing around the time of the alleged Peisistratean Recension. (Nagy 1996a:100-10 reiterates many of these same arguments.) Burkert 1987:48-49 assigns the establishment of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* as a “frozen classic” to the end of the sixth century.

⁵⁸ It is virtually impossible to ascertain why the narratives of Achilles and Odysseus, out of the whole corpus, became focal narratives. Along with others, Latacz is still wedded to the idea that the success of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* is due to their “originality of perspective” (1996:75). See Nagy 1996a:22 for the dubiousness of the aesthetic theory of why the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* came to dominate the scene of early epic.

⁵⁹ Scholars have recently recognized that the shared tradition between the epic cycle and the Homeric epics complicates any attempts to establish a chronology for these narratives. While some may suggest that the narratives of the cyclic epics might precede the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* (Davies 1986:96; Burgess 1996:78-79), most agree that the cyclic epics in written form postdate, and were in some aspects influenced by, the written Homeric epics (Davies 1989a:5; Latacz 1996:61,75-78; Nagy 1990:73). Davies would therefore date the final version of the cyclic epics shortly before 500 BC, an assignment that

episodes and narratives of the epic cycle, loosely affiliated as they had been, now became secondary to the Homeric works. Yet for both the epic cycle and the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, the construction of distinction and exclusion was and is as much a fiction as the purported authors assigned to each.⁶⁰

An equally important aspect of the secondariness assigned to the epic cycle is the aesthetic judgment imposed upon it in contrast with the Homeric epics. The production of the two great epics engendered a lack of appreciation for the multiplicity of narrative and enforced a linear way of looking at the creation of narrative, opening the way for the possibility of both prequels and sequels.⁶¹ As I have suggested, a fruitful approach to the supposed inadequacies of the epic cycle might be to understand them as remnants of the living oral tradition, and to accept the inherent multiplicity, rather than to insist upon determining the one true version. In this sense the unity, perfection, and exclusion of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* created, along with the prequel and sequel, a lack of appreciation for the multiplicity of the oral tradition. Jasper Griffin (1977) argues that Homer excludes so much from the epic cycle because it is fantastic, bizarre, and inappropriate for the modest and discreet Homeric poet.⁶² I speculate that the Homeric poet does not omit events from the epic cycle out of a dislike for bizarreness or some false modesty (one need only look at the episodes in Odysseus' wanderings for bizarreness, or the song by Demodocus about Ares and Aphrodite for sexual frankness), but rather specifically in order to establish his own narratives as unique and individual, as not part of an amorphous tradition, and as supremely exclusive.⁶³

seems reasonable given the increased fixation of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* by the second half of the sixth century.

⁶⁰ Miller discusses the fictionality imposed by the beginnings and endings of novels: "The aporia of ending arises from the fact that it is impossible ever to tell whether a given narrative is complete. If the ending is thought of as tying up in a careful knot, this knot could always be untied again by the narrator or by further events, disentangled or explicated again . . . no novel can be unequivocally finished, or for that matter unequivocally unfinished" (1978-79:5, 7). See also Holmberg 1998:28.

⁶¹ See Nagy 1996b:9 for the multiplicity of oral epic, and Scaife 1995:170-74 for the emergence of an Aristotelian aesthetics that preferred the unity of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* to examples of the epic cycle such as the *Kypria*.

⁶² "In the Cycle both heroism and realism are rejected in favour of an over-heated taste for sadistically coloured scenes; more striking, even more perverse effects are once again what is desired" (Griffin 1977:45; see also 40, 43).

⁶³ See Holmberg 1998:29.

The oral tradition of the epic cycle as I have presented it constitutes what may essentially be read as one large, universalizing text, as described by Todorov in the prologue to this piece. Jonathan Culler also proposes for all texts a unity that the oral tradition of the epic cycle exhibits: “literary works are to be considered not as autonomous entities, ‘organic wholes,’ but as intertextual constructs: sequences which have meaning in relation to other texts which they take up, cite, parody, refute, or generally transform. A text can be read only in relation to other texts, and it is made possible by the codes which animate the discursive space of a culture” (1981:38).⁶⁴ Unlike literature following the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, the stories of the epic cycle did not exist as “autonomous entities” but as intertextual constructs. The establishment of the primary texts of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* began the process of asserting narrative closure (and opening) against a tradition that seems to have been based upon unselfconscious and overt intertextuality. The creation of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* inaugurated the autonomous text, to which other texts then must relate as either prequels or sequels.⁶⁵

The creation of the fixed texts of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* marks, from our perspective, both the height of the oral tradition and the end of that very tradition. The rest of the oral tradition, which I am identifying as the broad spectrum of the epic cycle, declined into obscurity and obsolescence. The unified, interdependent web of narrative associated with the oral tradition would seem to disappear from sight, taking with it forever the dream of such a text. But survival for both the epic cycle and its web of narrative, if in a different form, might be intimated in Burkert’s article “The Making of Homer in the Sixth Century B.C.” (1987). In this piece, he suggests that alongside the epic tradition represented by the Homeric poems there arose a separate, choral tradition in lyric form of which the recently discovered fragments of Stesichorus are examples. The fragments

⁶⁴ “Intertextuality thus becomes less a name for a work’s relations to particular prior texts than a designation of its participation in the discursive space of a culture: the relationship between a text and the various languages or signifying practices of a culture and its relation to those texts which articulate for it the possibilities of culture. The study of intertextuality is thus not the investigation of sources and influences as traditionally conceived; it casts its net wider to include anonymous discursive practices, codes whose origins are lost, that make possible the signifying practices of later texts” (Culler 1981: 103).

⁶⁵ My argument does not intend to deny conscious use of intertextuality by authors, or unconscious intertextuality in all types of texts. The creation of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* changed the face of narrative in that texts either did not reveal or were not aware of intertextuality, or else recognition of intertextuality became a conscious literary device rather than a mode of composition.

of Stesichorus indicate that many if not all of the subjects of these narratives derive from both Homer and the epic cycle. Burkert posits that the Stesichorean tradition, choral in presentation, had to depend upon a fixed text for its survival, and furthermore, that this more stable tradition threatened to supplant the Homeric epics themselves. The protectors of the Homeric epics reacted to the stability of the Stesichorean tradition and the assault on their own hegemony by fixing their own narratives either through writing or simply through less innovation (51-56). The fixation of the Homeric texts was so efficient that the Homeric epics came to dominate the choral narratives of Stesichorus.

What if we take this process back a step? Burgess (1996) and Kopff (1983) have suggested that at least two of the named narratives in the epic cycle, the *Kypria* and the *Aethiopis*, may have originally been more extensive narratives that included Iliadic material, if not the whole narrative of the *Iliad*. We have evidence that Stesichorus wrote long choral pieces with titles such as *Iliou Persis*, the *Nostoi*, *Helen*, *Wooden Horse*, and the *Oresteia*; this is the material we are familiar with from the cycle. One could imagine the beginning of the fixation of the Homeric texts forcing the hitherto variegated and multiform epic cycle to mutate into another type of tradition, the Stesichorean choral tradition, thereby preserving its own narratives. The written Stesichorean tradition, as Burkert suggests, then influences the further stabilization of the Homeric tradition. But the fixation of the Homeric tradition is also its demise: the extreme fixation adopted by the practitioners “froze” the epics into an approximation of the narratives we have inherited. But this is not the end of the process, as Burkert himself intimates (1987:53ff.). The now more flexible Stesichorean tradition, faced with the ever-increasing hegemony of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, mutates further into other forms of lyric and eventually tragedy. Even though we see a change in genre, the narratives of the oral tradition and the epic cycle remain intact, leaving behind another kind of universalizing, unified text—paradise regained.

University of Victoria

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