



The Proem: Formal and Narratorial Complexity in Iliad

“Wrath, goddess, sing, the wrath of Peleus’ son Achilles
and its devastation, which put a vast quantity of pain upon the Achaians,
hurled in their multitudes to the house of Hades strong souls
of heroes, but gave their bodies to be the delicate feasting
of dogs, of all the birds, and the will of Zeus was accomplished
since that time when first there stood in division of conflict
Atreus’ son, the lord of men, and brilliant Achilles.”

The *Iliad* begins with these seven lines, referred to as the *Proem*; they encapsulate the story in brief. Readers are, at a glance, made aware of what is to follow. The Heroic Hexameter evokes the rhythm that arouse “appropriate narratorial response”. This was a device appropriated by the Greeks to balance the excessive pressure of the significance of a narrative beginning in medias res. The Proem successfully lends a deep insight into the epic narrative and all its intricacies, providing a preview to the beautifully coherent mammoth narrative that is *Iliad*. When, in his *Poetics*, Aristotle talked about the *Unities*, he discussed the *Iliad* as a case study. This epic encapsulates what later Aristotle defined as the Unities of Time, Place and Action: characteristics that distinguished literary narrative from history.

Unlike history whose focal point is a Period, the literary narrative has as its focus a single comprehensive Action (Incident). But then, an Epic is a whole, single narrative, which weave the stories of multiple characters. Thus arise the demand of arranging not only multiple



elements, but also handling multiple characters keeping intact the social status of the characters involved. The *Iliad* has secured its throne in the world of literary narratives through Homer's singular expertise in balancing between focussing up on a single character, and simultaneously exuding the experience of war through multiple characters whose intentions are as varied as their natures.

Iliad is at once the story of Achilles, and is also the story of Hector, Patroklos, Diomedes, and all such other memorable characters / heroes. The fabric of the poem intricately weaves the story of the one where many share the canvas, where Achilles stands tall without dwarfing any other war hero fighting with or against him. The *Iliad* is about One and Many in a single whole. A narrative is shaped by the 'attention or neglect' imparted to characters; it is this 'dynamic flux' that fix the positions of the multiple characters, variously intentioned, within the narrative frame, giving it the final shape and meaning. *Iliad* is characterised by the presence of multiple characters of similar stature, who are because of their relationship to events circulating around the protagonist, whose dominating presence often dwarf the others, the secondary characters. The narrative presence of Achilles alone remain incomplete in organizing the completeness of the narrative.

The relationship between the central figure and the other characters become defined in the very opening phrase of the Epic. The first word of the Proem, "wrath" defines Achilles, and successfully plants him as the central figure around whose experience and development the story revolves, thus setting the narrative thread in motion. Achilles binds the narrative. The story follows the wrath of Achilles to its devastating consequence; a consequence that so intrigues its creator that the narrative does not remain limited to the suffering of individuals symbolically related to Achilles, but rises to become a story of human



suffering. This cosmic rise finds reflection in the syntactic arrangement that naturally leads to the grand —“the will of Zeus was accomplished”. Divinity takes over the mortals and order is ensured; the gods step in to handle the complications of the plot and the Proem. It is this mention of Zeus that brings resumes focus on Achilles back from ‘multitudes’ and ‘all nature’. However, this is the Achilles we see in his social aspect, where he is cast against ‘Atreus’ son, lord of men’. The Proem is unique in its formulation with a tension between the dominant and subordinate clause, which not only dramatize the Proem but the whole of the Epic. *Iliad* is a story torn between being a representation of Achilles’ singular experience and development, and a representation of the experience of a multitude of characters who travel between the centre and the margins. This grand narrative, according to Robert J Rabel is, “a double plotted work with the wrath of Achilles furnishing the major plot, and with the Trojan War unfolding in tandem within a subplot”.

Zeus promises Thetis that Achilles honour will be through his destroying many beside the “ships of the Achaians”. Action of such stature often has the effect of resulting in shift of narrative away from the protagonist; the poet may be omniscient but is never anchored. The intrigue of the Epic lies embedded in the tension between placing Achilles within a meta-h is narrative and the assimilating of the multitudes of secondary characters into the central situation. The clash is not only between soldiers battling on the field, but also in positioning equals on a grand board of chess.



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