

ACHILLES' VIEWS ON DEATH: SUCCESSION AND THE *ODYSSEY*

For I have not yet come anywhere near Achaia nor my own land, but always I am in trouble. Not like you, Achilles: no man is more blessed than you, never before nor ever after. For when you were alive we Argives gave you honor equal to the gods; and even now you rule greatly over the dead, here in this place; so do not be unhappy in your death, Achilles."

So I spoke, and at once he said to me in response: "Do not give me consolation about death, glorious Odysseus. I would rather be above earth and work as a laborer to another, a man with no land of his own and little livelihood, than be king over all the lifeless dead. (*Od.* 11.481–491)¹

Readings of this passage, from the encounter between Odysseus and the ghost of Achilles, have followed a range of strategies. It is the aim of this paper to characterize what I see as the five main trends. These alternative approaches are to some extent in competition with one another, but they are not all mutually incompatible. Each offers a distinct payoff in terms of how it fits the passage into a broader reading of the *Odyssey*.

For example, one common reading, which offers a very limited payoff because it is so evidently a misreading, is to take the passage as a straightforward expression of typical Greek views on death.² This is in spite of the fact that it is anything but typical. Aside from the fact that using a single citation as a convenient sound-bite inevitably leads to over-simplification,³ thanatologists consistently treat the passage as diametrically opposed to more usual mythical conceptions of death. They make sense of it either by regarding it as an exception, or by reversing the customary reading: the episode is about the values of the living, not the experiences of the dead.⁴

In outlining the five main reading strategies, I aim particularly to stress the importance of taking the lines in context, and to advocate the fifth strategy, which I label as the "succession" reading. Context suggests that the episode as a whole is not pessimistic, even if the lines cited above

¹ I wish to thank the anonymous readers at *Classical Bulletin*, Liesl Nunn, and Sheryn Simpson for comments on earlier versions of this paper, and Edmund Cueva for his encouragement. All translations are my own. Greek texts follow those in Oxford editions (*Iliad* and *Odyssey* = Monro and Allen 1920; Hesiod fragments = Merkelbach and West 1990).

² E.g. Powell 2009:294: "Achilles' famous reply nicely sums up Greek pessimism about the afterlife." The website accompanying the book recapitulates the same view, asking in a multiple choice quiz which hero it was that "so encapsulated one of the Greek views of the afterlife" (Pearson Education 2009).

³ Clarke 1999:190–205 provides a more nuanced overview of the nature of personal identity in Hades. For more general surveys of Greek attitudes to death see especially Vermeule 1979, Sourvinou-Inwood 1995.

⁴ See e.g. Vernant 1981:*passim*, especially 288–290; Sourvinou-Inwood 1981:24, 1995:80; Johnston 1999:149.

are. Instead, the scene as a whole is characteristic of the *Odyssey's* tactic of framing families chronologically, as a way of depicting different stages in the genealogical succession from one generation to the next; and it suggests that Achilles' family plays a paradigmatic role for Odysseus' family in the *Odyssey*, comparable to that of the family of Agamemnon and Orestes.

Another example of a reading that takes the passage as an exemplar of an especially pessimistic worldview is that of Stanford.

Note in this passage the typical early Greeks' attitude to existence after death. Its shadowy impotence appalled them, for they loved vigour, action, personality, and the sunshine. Contrast Milton's Satan—"Better to reign in hell than serve in heaven". The recurrent melancholy of all Greek literature is mainly due to this abhorrence of losing one's vital physical powers after death. The Mystery Religions and some philosophies tried to dispel it. But it met no decisive challenge till St. Paul on the Areopagus proclaimed the Resurrection of the Body.⁵

For Stanford the pessimism is not confined to Achilles' mood, but to the whole of pre-Christian Greek civilization. It is difficult now to accept this juxtaposition of a Homeric depiction of death with an anachronistic ideology; but, as indicated above, some more recent interpreters continue to read the passage in much the same way, even if they do adopt a greater anthropological distance.

Fagles offers a suitable counterweight to Stanford.

I love that marvelous meeting between Odysseus and Achilles. It brings back all the latent hostility between the two of them that you see in the *Iliad*, especially in the ninth book. Achilles, the great hero of the *Iliad*, is a ghost who yearns for life, and Odysseus is able to give him a form of life that's very precious—the depiction of the heroic life of Achilles' son Neoptolemus. As long as the son is leading that life, the father can leap triumphant across those fields of asphodel. Two things are being stressed: the extreme fragility of life and how terrible its loss, on the one hand, and how very precious the extension of life is into the next generation.⁶

In effect Achilles has two views on death, not one. The opening exchange between Odysseus and Achilles constitutes only one sixth of their whole conversation. The whole episode presents "before" and "after" situations: at the start of the conversation, Achilles' ghost is in despair.

⁵ Stanford 1959:398 on 11.488–491.

⁶ Fagles, cited in Princeton University Communications and Publications 1996.

Once Odysseus has related news of the achievements of Achilles' son Neoptolemos, the ghost's situation is transfigured; and he departs, "taking long strides across the asphodel meadow, joyful because I told him of his outstanding son" (*Od.* 11.538–540).

In the following discussion I refer to this reading strategy as the "succession" reading, as it takes the scene as being not so much about Achilles himself as about his family and about the actualization of patrilineal succession. "Before," Achilles' family seems moribund: Achilles himself is among the dead, he imagines his father in old age and suffering indignities, and he knows nothing of his son. "After," both he and the *Odyssey's* readers have received knowledge that his son not only survives, but is a warrior and city-sacker so successful as to compete with Achilles himself. Achilles himself remains among the dead, but there is no better outcome that his family could hope for. A hero is survived by an equally heroic son; succession to the next generation has been achieved, and the future existence of the genealogical line seems, for now, to be assured.

Obviously the fate of his family has implications for Achilles' own mood. His opening words are certainly a powerful statement of despair; but I would say that these words are "typical" of little more than the simple fact that people prefer to be alive than dead. To take them as typical of an overwhelming, unmitigated pessimism that pervades all of pre-Classical Greek culture is an extreme over-reading, if not an outright reversal of the truth, as Vernant suggests.⁷ The episode, taken as a whole and viewed from a broader perspective rather than with a narrow focus only on Achilles himself, does not present a particularly pessimistic picture at all. More importantly, this broader perspective actually makes the scene relevant to the rest of the *Odyssey*, and suggests implications for Odysseus' own family.

His revised opinion, however, is rarely cited. Odysseus' words are more than a diverting story. They transform the worst of situations for Achilles personally into the best of possible situations for Achilles' family line.

The main strategies, as I see them, that readings of the scene typically follow are as follows.

1. An "inorganic" reading. The passage in question (11.488–491) is the only explicit statement we see about the nature of the afterlife, and is the most important part of the scene. If the rest of the scene is relevant at all, its message is at best only implicit, and therefore carries less weight than the earlier, explicit, statement. "Achilles is no longer interested in honor....[He] can rejoice at his son's outstanding prowess..., but...he sees the futility of the death and glory such heroic greatness entails."⁸

⁷ Vernant 1981, especially 288–290; e.g. 291 "The episode of the *Nekuia* does not contradict the ideal of the heroic death, the fine death. It strengthens and completes it."

⁸ Schein 1996:12.

2. A “distraction” reading. Achilles’ mood improves only because Odysseus has temporarily taken his mind off his woes. Odysseus’ story mitigates the pessimistic tone of the episode, but it does not change the situation at any deep level. “Evidently the best to hope for in the land of the dead is news of a brave son.”⁹
3. A “contrast” reading. The passage is more about Odysseus than about Achilles. Achilles’ opening words are designed to draw a very sharp contrast between Achilles’ unhappy situation and Odysseus’ hopes for a successful *nostos*. “Achilles would trade his **kléos** for a **nóstos**.”¹⁰
4. An “intertextual” reading. The passage is more about Achilles’ character than about death as such. Either (a) his words here show a consistency and continuity with the Iliadic Achilles (“This is the Achilles we know from the *Iliad*”),¹¹ or (b) his words represent a rejection of the Iliadic heroic ethos, by preferring life on any terms over a glorious death (“Achilles regrets his former choice”).¹²
5. The “succession” reading, which, as already stated, I favor. The scene presents a model of a family which has successfully achieved genealogical continuity from one generation to the next. This provides a paradigm for succession in Odysseus’ own family. “To Odysseus... the encounter is not wholly forbidding; it foreshadows the continuity of a son and the longer continuity of poetry.”¹³

These readings are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and there is even some overlap. Fagles, above, concisely synthesizes aspects of at least the “distraction” and “intertextual” readings, as well as the “succession” reading. Nothing will ever stop readers preferring one way of reading over another. This is not problematic, and means only that the *Odyssey* is what Eco calls an open text.¹⁴ Reading is not a passive gaze on the text; there is a kind of reciprocity. The mix-and-match combinations of these tactics that appear in published readings attest to the rich variety of responses the passage can evoke. Achilles’ opening words are widely cited because, clearly, the lines resonate powerfully with readers in many ways.

Nonetheless, the interpretive payoff for adopting the above strategies is also variable. Each strategy leads to a different vision of how the scene fits into the *Odyssey*; and some *Odysseys* are just plain better than others. It will become evident that the “inorganic” approach in particular leads to a greatly impoverished reading of the scene.

The “inorganic” reading is not a positive interpretation of the scene so much as a focus on lines 488–491 to the exclusion of the rest of the scene. A truly “inorganic” approach simply cites Achilles’ opening words

⁹ Morrison 2003:108.

¹⁰ Nagy 1979:35.

¹¹ Schmiel 1987:37.

¹² Clay 1983:109.

¹³ Finley 1978:124.

¹⁴ Eco 1979.

out of context.¹⁵ Also inorganic, though to a lesser extent, is a reading that discusses the passage in the context of surrounding scenes, but does not deal with the way the passage is qualified by the rest of the episode.¹⁶

This is not arbitrary laziness. Even relatively sophisticated readings sometimes have difficulty treating the opening lines as anything other than a sound-bite. Many "intertextual" readings are "inorganic," in the sense that they cite the lines as though they exist in a vacuum; as we shall see below, there are reasons for this.

The "inorganic" reading offers no positive interpretive payoff, except inasmuch as it obviates the need to look at the rest of the scene. It foregrounds the ten lines cited at the start of this paper, and regards the other 64 lines of the episode (467–481, 492–540) as irrelevant or mere filler material. This does not automatically make such readings illegitimate, but can perhaps make them less effective than they otherwise might be.

The "distraction" reading is the response I have met most frequently when advocating the "succession" reading *viva voce*, though it is relatively uncommon in print. It represents a gut reaction against the notion that the scene as a whole is in any way optimistic. In the "distraction" reading, lines 488–491 set the tone for the whole scene. If the ensuing lines change the topic of conversation, and if Achilles is noticeably more cheerful when he leaves, it is merely a change of mood; there has been no deeper change at any existential level, or no change that truly matters. The mood at the end of the scene is somewhat lightened, perhaps, but the reasoning behind Achilles' lament at the start remains valid: there is still "no consolation for death,"¹⁷ and death is still "eine unwirkliche Existenz."¹⁸

In the "distraction" reading the transformation at the end of the scene is a transformation only of Achilles' personal mood, rather than of anything more substantial. It is primarily about the pain of an individual

¹⁵ For example: Beye 1966:190f.; Fränkel 1969:93; Merkelbach 1969:236; Stewart 1976:60–62; Nagy 1979:35f.; Vernant 1981:288–291; Arieti 1986:14. By contrast, some readings that look at the larger scene to contextualize Achilles' opening words include Clarke 1967:62f.; Finley 1978:123f.; Wender 1978:41–43; Edwards 1985a, 1985b:*passim*; Schmiel 1987:*passim*; Dimock 1989:157f.; Hölscher 1989:305; Ahl and Roisman 1996:142–145; Morrison 2003:108. Thornton 1970 adopts an "inorganic" approach at 8f. but discusses the scene as a whole at 119. Commentaries by their nature tend to avoid an "inorganic" reading, though Stanford 1959 sees no relation between the different parts of the scene.

¹⁶ Readings that discuss the Achilles episode only as far as line 491, but examine it in the context of surrounding episodes, include: Reinhardt 1960:109 (= 1996:118f.); Rüter 1969:252f.; Griffin 1980:100f.; Clay 1983:108f.

¹⁷ Griffin 1980:101.

¹⁸ Fränkel 1969:93.

hero's experience of death.¹⁹ Odysseus has distracted Achilles with his stories, but presumably later on Achilles will remember where he is and resume his depression.

The interpretive payoff for the "distraction" reading is for those readers who wish to see the scene as being more about Achilles than about Odysseus. If Achilles' opening words stand as the most important lines in the scene, then our attention is focused on him and on the pathos of his situation; the scene is then about personal loathing and fear of death, rather than about the continuity of the *oikos*. The centrality of Achilles and his feelings are central to some variants of the "intertextual" reading, as we shall see below, that are preoccupied with whether or not Achilles' character in *Odyssey* 11 is consistent with his character in the *Iliad*. To focus on Odysseus or on Achilles' family, rather than Achilles himself, would be to focus on the *Odyssey* instead of the *Iliad*.

There is nothing intrinsically wrong with this way of reading the scene, and lines 488–491 are never going to lose their immediacy. Many readers, perhaps, will inevitably reject the latter part of the scene for its effect in softening the visceral impact of the opening. But a reading is more powerful if it creates a strong scene, rather than a scene that undermines itself as it progresses. Strategies that do build a convincing scene will emerge below; one reason for favoring the "succession" reading is that it is an approach that takes into account the value that Greek culture, and especially the *Odyssey*, places on the continuity of the *oikos*. To focus on Achilles' personal feelings about his own lot would be to regard the story of Neoptolemos as an afterthought. Certainly Achilles has strong feelings about death; but as we see when he departs joyfully, he also has strong feelings about the broader topic at hand. At the start of the scene Odysseus' opening words stress how glorious Achilles was in life, and Achilles dismisses that as irrelevant now that he is dead. But the story of Neoptolemos is not a diverting change of subject. Instead, it expands on the theme of "honor equal to the gods" that Odysseus speaks of at the start of the scene. Odysseus' story shows that though Achilles himself is dead, that glory has not died with him.

The "contrast" reading is one that is compatible with all the other approaches to the scene that I outline. In 481–487 Odysseus contrasts his own state of misery, though he is alive, with Achilles' state of personal glory, though he is dead. Achilles then quickly reverses the contrast, declaring that life is preferable. On this reading lines 488–491 do not stand on their own, but make sense primarily as a response to Odysseus' state of mind. Different readers have read the passage both as a respectful mutual "salute" between equals, and as an attempt (whether by Odysseus or by the epic poet) to assert Odysseus' superiority; one reader even takes it

¹⁹ Some published readings that seem to cast the end of the scene as indicating primarily a change in Achilles' mood include Dimock 1989:157f. (Odysseus "is able to make him happy"); Heubeck 1989:109 on 11.538–540 (Achilles' "earlier passion [is] driven out by joy over his son's achievements"); de Jong 2001:292 on 538–540 ("The report of his son's heroic splendour seems to restore the father's own self-esteem"); Morrison 2003:108, quoted earlier for the "distraction" reading.

as an assertion of Achilles' superiority.²⁰ For Stewart, Odysseus' opening speech is "preposterous and unfeeling," and leaves Achilles to wallow in his bitterness. For Clarke, the two heroes are respectful but at cross-purposes:

Here in the land of the dead the opposition still obtains, as each attempts to compliment the other and can compliment only himself. Achilles' honor, which Odysseus respectfully salutes, has brought him only death, while Odysseus' survival has been purchased at the price of glory.²¹

Only Schmiel actively opposes the usual "contrast" reading. He sees Odysseus as "inept" and argues forcefully that it is Achilles who comes off best in the exchange. He focuses on the notion of Achilles "ruling over the dead" and sees its rejection as affirming the heroism of his choice to stay at Troy and die there: for if Achilles could have some special status in Hades, it would belittle his choice. As it is, the choice has a "fearful cost, and therefore [a] terrible splendor."²²

I do not go so far as to side with Schmiel altogether, but it is true that after Odysseus' opening speech lays out one contrast, Achilles' first words ("Do not give me consolation about death") re-states exactly the same contrast, but ironically. Odysseus' self-pity in his opening speech makes it clear that he thinks that if anyone needs consolation it is himself; Achilles rejects his premises. In effect it is Odysseus, not Achilles, who should take comfort from the opening exchange.²³

For Edwards the contrast continues through the whole episode. Every element of Odysseus' story, he argues, is designed to drive home Odysseus' superiority and rub Achilles' nose in his misery. Achilles wanted Phoinix to take Neoptolemos home to Phthia, so Odysseus stresses that he himself brought him to Troy; when Odysseus describes Neoptolemos' quality as an orator, it is to remind Achilles of his own deficiency in this area; Neoptolemos participates in sacking Troy by a λόχος, as part of a group effort, instead of following the Achillean ethos of the πρόμος ἀνήρ. Edwards' interpretation becomes seriously strained, however, when he argues that even in Achilles' departure the phrase φοῖτα μακρὰ βιβᾶσα shows "Achilles' tragic dissatisfaction with the melancholy boredom of death."²⁴ His reading makes sense only if we resolutely ignore what we are told very

²⁰ Mutual respect as equals: Clarke 1967:62f.; Thornton 1970:9; Scodel 2002:153. Odysseus as superior: Stewart 1976:60; Wender 1978:41–43; Edwards 1985a:227, 1985b:48–68; Dimock 1989:157f.; Ahl and Roisman 1996:142–145; Schein 1996:11–13. Achilles as superior: Schmiel 1987. Rüter 1969:252f. sees the contrast as a swapping of values: Odysseus previously chose life but now prefers death, Achilles *vice versa*.

²¹ Clarke 1967:63.

²² Schmiel 1987:37.

²³ This is one of the interpretations proposed by the scholia *ad loc.* (cited below in the main text).

²⁴ Edwards 1985b:60–68.

explicitly about Achilles' reaction to Odysseus' story: that he is "joyful, because I told him of his famous son" (11.540). I see Edwards' interpretation as a distortion. But a well motivated one: he tries to construct a coherent reading of the whole episode, in an effort to make sense of the passage as a whole, rather than tolerating an abrupt break after 491 as "inorganic" readings do. However, I cannot see that this specific tactic works.

The "contrast" reading does, however, tie neatly with the "intertextual" reading, casting Odysseus and Achilles as rivals in the same way that the *Odyssey* and *Iliad* are rivals. For Beye and others the contrast is not between Odysseus and Achilles themselves, but between the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.²⁵ For Nagy it is additionally an opposition between *nostos* and *kleos* ("If Achilles has no **nóstos** in the *Iliad*, does it follow that Odysseus has no **kléos** in the *Odyssey*?").²⁶

The "intertextual" reading is by far the most popular strategy in readings of *Od.* 11.472–491.²⁷ A scholion on 489 shows that it had a certain vogue in antiquity too:

How is it that the poet shows Achilles as a lover of life like this, when he previously chose to live a short time with glory? Either Achilles says these things to console Odysseus for his misfortune; or because, seeing the idleness of the dead, he is disgusted at their mode of existence.²⁸

Numerous modern readers have sympathized with the wish to look for consistency between the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, and have usually picked up on the same moment that the scholiast is thinking of, *Il.* 9.410–416, where Achilles recalls that he is faced with a choice between a short life with immortal glory, or a long but inglorious life. Some readers have noted that, inconveniently, at no point in the *Iliad* does Achilles ever actually make this choice, and in fact he states very clearly that there is

²⁵ Beye 1966:190f.: "Here as elsewhere the two poems and their philosophies do not correspond."

²⁶ Nagy 1979:36; similarly Edwards 1985b:52.

²⁷ Readings that adopt an "intertextual" interpretation include Reinhardt 1960:109 (= 1996:118f.); Beye 1966:190f.; Clarke 1967:62f.; Merkelbach 1969:236; Reinhardt 1969:252f.; Thornton 1970:8f.; Stewart 1976:60–62; Finley 1978:123f.; Wender 1978:41–43; Nagy 1979:35f.; Vernant 1981:288–291 (= 1996:58–60); Clay 1983:108f.; Edwards 1985a:227, 1985b:48–68; Arieti 1986:14; Schmiel 1987; Jones 1988a:109 on 11.489; Hölscher 1989:305; Ahl and Roisman 1996:142–145; de Jong 2001:290f. on 11.482–91; Scodel 2002:153; Morrison 2003:108. Sourvinou-Inwood, by contrast, argues *against* an "intertextual" reading (1995:80).

²⁸ Edwards 1985b:50f. has cited the first sentence of this scholion to support the "intertextual" reading. Of the scholiast's own explanations, the first is consistent with the "contrast" reading, above; but the second is alien to modern tastes. Selectively ignoring scholia for reasons of taste is an unsound methodology (Lynn-George 1982:239f.), so perhaps the scholiast's second explanation should be admitted as a sixth reading strategy.

no justification for losing one's life.²⁹ But the impetus of the "intertextual" reading is such that the objection has had all the effect of a cardboard box in front of a steamroller.

Another passage that is temptingly relevant to *Od.* 11—though, strangely, rarely commented on—is *Il.* 9.312–313, where Achilles declares, "For that man is an enemy to me, like Hades' gates, whoever hides one thing in his thoughts but says another." For a reader who knows both epics, these lines—spoken in reply to Odysseus, who is associated with deceit more than any other Iliadic hero—must surely come to mind when reading *Od.* 11; indeed Edwards suggests that "Achilles perhaps expresses annoyance that he is still not free of this rival who has now pursued him beyond the grave."³⁰ Conversely, when reading *Iliad* 9 it is difficult to avoid thinking of how Achilles seems to repeat his loathing for the gates of Hades in *Od.* 11. As with all the alternative reading strategies discussed here, these echoes are to do with the choices of the reader.

Readings that adopt the "intertextual" strategy sometimes become preoccupied with whether or not the portrayal of Achilles in *Od.* 11 is consistent with the *Iliad*. For Stewart, "Achilles, the quintessential hero of the *Iliad*, of the whole epic tradition, is changed in the *Odyssey* into a remorseful, bitter ghost"; while for Finley, Achilles "is as he was," just like Agamemnon in the previous scene.³¹ On this point there is no consensus and probably never will be. But there is little to be gained from deciding a question that the narrative leaves vague: to focus on it too closely would be to make the scene primarily about the character of Achilles.

Other "intertextual" readings take the constructive approach of drawing parallels or oppositions between characters or themes of the *Odyssey* and *Iliad*. As we have seen earlier, the "contrast" approach is frequently adopted, polarizing Odysseus and Achilles, polarizing heroic ideologies, polarizing the *Odyssey* and *Iliad*, polarizing *nostos* and *kleos*, or some combination of these.

Some instead see parallels; in particular, some seize on the choice of Achilles described in *Il.* 9.410–416 and consider whether Odysseus faces the same choice. Odysseus, goes the reasoning, is faced with a very similar choice: the option of immortality offered by Kalypso.³² Kalypso and Odysseus share a meal at *Od.* 5.195–220, where, though Odysseus sits in the chair the god Hermes has recently left, he eats mortal food while Kalypso eats ambrosia. In the following conversation Kalypso despairs of Odysseus accepting her offer of immortality, lamenting that he wants only to return home. Odysseus acknowledges that Penelope is no match for Kalypso in looks, but still he wants only to go home and see the day

²⁹ Edwards 1985b:51; Schmiel 1987:36. Jones 1988a:109, on *Od.* 11.489, avoids the objection by instead citing *Il.* 18.79–100, Achilles' choice to avenge Patroklos instead of returning home.

³⁰ Edwards 1985b:50.

³¹ Stewart 1976:60; Finley 1978:123. Schmiel 1987 provides a thorough survey of the question. Schmiel's own view is, "This is the Achilleus we know from the *Iliad*" (37).

³² Wender 1978:42; Ahl and Roisman 1996:144.

of his *nostos* (220 οἴκαδέ τ' ἐλθέμεναι καὶ νόστιμον ἦμαρ ιδέσθαι). In book 11, by contrast, he seems to prefer death: a death-wish that crops up several times in the *Odyssey*, as Rüter has noted.³³ On that reading Odysseus and Achilles swap their positions. Odysseus now feels that *kleos* and a short life would be preferable to his current situation, while Achilles renounces his Iliadic choice.³⁴ Stewart sees Achilles' Iliadic choice as a negative model: where Achilles chose *kleos* over *nostos*, Odysseus will choose *nostos*. "Either to long for immortality or to court death (with honor) are both attempts to dishonor life and denature it."³⁵

I suggest yet another way of casting Odysseus' choice, not as a choice between *kleos* and *nostos*, but in a way that makes the two heroes' choices parallel. Where Achilles had the choice between long life or *kleos*, Kalypso offers a choice between immortality or *nostos*. Each hero ends up making the choice that ostensibly offers a lesser lifespan, but allows the hero to remain a hero.

The "intertextual" reading has one extremely weak area, which is that it has virtually nothing to say about the rest of the episode. It is difficult for an "intertextual" reading not also to be "inorganic," as I mentioned earlier: it almost requires us to stop reading at line 491, or pretend that the rest of the conversation is unconnected.

A few solutions to this difficulty have been suggested, and some are partially persuasive. Clarke sees Achilles' enquiry about his family, and the story of Neoptolemos, as a movement from Iliadic material to a more family-oriented, Odyssean ethos.³⁶ Edwards sees the conversation as an attempt by Odysseus to belittle Achilles, as discussed earlier; Ahl and Roisman also see it as asserting the superiority of the heroic ethos of the *Odyssey* over that of the *Iliad*.³⁷ But these still give the feeling that the Neoptolemos story is just an expansion on the opening lines—the smoke from the fire of the initial exchange.

One possibility that retains the intertextual flavor and still allows the episode to grow, rather than diminish, is to see the Neoptolemos story as a movement from Iliadic material—life as the price of *kleos*—towards Cyclic material. If 488–491 echo the Iliadic Achilles, then 492ff. echo the

³³ Rüter 1969:252f. He discusses (84–88) Odysseus' apparent death-wishes in several passages, of which the most important are 5.306–312, 10.49–58, and 11.481–486.

³⁴ Edwards 1985b:51 disagrees, but does not take account of the option of immortality offered by Kalypso.

³⁵ Stewart 1976:62.

³⁶ Clarke 1967:63: "Achilles' words are more in keeping with the subject of the *Odyssey* when he worriedly asks about his son and father."

³⁷ Edwards 1985b:52–68; Ahl and Roisman 1996:143f.

stories of Neoptolemos in the *Little Iliad* and *Iliou persis*.³⁸ Existing intertextual readings of the scene do not lend themselves easily to this shift in focus, as they are built on the idea of a binary opposition between the two Homeric epics. The Cyclic stories do not fit well into the set of polarizations between *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, *kleos* and *nostos*, death and life. The Neoptolemos story undoes the tension of these oppositions. Perhaps the events of the Cyclic epics, different in tone from the doom-laden choice facing Achilles in the *Iliad*, can be seen as motivating the difference in tone that we see in Achilles' joyful departure. This is possible, but speculative: an intertextual reading where the other text no longer exists is a weak one. We have a clear portrait of Achilles as painted by the *Iliad*, but nothing corresponding for Neoptolemos.

The "intertextual" approach also sometimes has difficulty keeping this scene as a scene about Odysseus; many readings make it a scene about Achilles instead. That does not illegitimize the reading, but there are good reasons to keep Odysseus at the center of attention. In *Od.* 11 Odysseus has encounters with the ghosts of three Iliadic heroes: Agamemnon, Achilles, and Aias. Each meeting picks up on Cyclic themes, but always with a view to telling us something new about Odysseus' situation. The scene with Agamemnon recapitulates the *Oresteia* narrative briefly; but Agamemnon's own words make it perfectly clear that the *raison d'être* of the conversation is to offer Odysseus advice and to set the scene for the second half of the *Odyssey*. When Agamemnon tells Odysseus to beware of his wife Penelope, and in the next breath assures him that she would never betray him (11.441–456), this lays the foundation for the profound ambiguities in Penelope's character that we see later on.³⁹ The scene is primarily about Odysseus, not about Agamemnon. Again, in the third scene, with Aias, only Odysseus speaks: Aias stalks off in silence. We hear nothing about Aias' suicide, or the story surrounding Aias' hostility to Odysseus, from the *Little Iliad*. In this third meeting Odysseus seems to be leaving behind his Trojan past, again as part of the preparation for his return home. He is the active party in the scene: again, the scene is primarily about him, not about Aias. Finally, in the case of the scene with Achilles, one way for an "intertextual" reading to keep Odysseus in focus is to interpret the scene as an assertion of Odysseus' superiority over Achilles, or of *nostos* over *kleos*, or of an Odyssean heroic ethos over that of the *Iliad*. This is the tactic that Edwards and Ahl and Roisman adopt. I feel the "succession" reading keeps Odysseus at the center equally well, but does so with less of an antagonistic undertone, and without depending on a polar opposition between two—and *only* two—epics.

³⁸ Proklos' summaries of these epics are available in West 2003:120–125 and 142–147. In the reading of Ahl and Roisman 1996:143f. the *Odyssey* suppresses the standard Cyclic story of Odysseus handing over Achilles' arms to Neoptolemos (known from the *Little Iliad* and several later sources; Ahl and Roisman attribute it to only one source). Edwards 1985a suggests that *Od.* 11 is overriding the *Aithiopsis'* account of Achilles' translation to the isle of Leuke, but this is primarily in connection with the start of the scene; the Neoptolemos story still seems redundant.

³⁹ For discussion of Penelope's ambiguities see especially Katz 1991, Felson 1994; more recently also Clayton 2004, Heitman 2005.

In the “succession” reading the episode is an organic whole: Achilles’ joy at 540 is not something unrelated to his despair earlier. The “succession” reading has the additional virtue of not only explaining Homer from Homer, but explaining the *Odyssey* from the *Odyssey*. It interprets the meeting with Achilles as an intrinsically Odyssean scene, not as a postscript to the *Iliad*.

At the start of the scene Odysseus laments his own situation (whether “ineptly” or not). Here, as at 5.306–310, he regards those who died at Troy as the lucky ones. Odysseus nicely sets out the criteria for happiness: glory and the respect of one’s community. “For when you were alive we Argives gave you honor equal to the gods; and even now you rule greatly over the dead ...” Of course Achilles, dead, is in no position to enjoy *his own* glory. So, after briefly lamenting this fact, Achilles immediately changes the subject at line 492 to enquire after the things that *can* still matter to him: his father and his son. In particular, he asks whether his son became an exceptional champion at Troy such as he was himself.⁴⁰ Odysseus has no word of Achilles’ father, but he readily complies with respect to the son. He offers a series of anecdotes illustrating the competence of Neoptolemos, the forceful presence of his character, and the glory he has won for himself independently of his father’s reputation. The son actually outdoes the father in some ways, partaking also of a number of Odysseus’ qualities. As we have seen, Edwards has pointed this out, though he interprets Neoptolemos’ Odyssean qualities as an attack on Achilles. These stories demonstrate that Neoptolemos has lived up to Achilles’ wildest dreams. Not only has Neoptolemos survived to adulthood, completing the narrative of succession, but he is glorious in his own right. Though Achilles’ personal glory may have in some sense died with him, the immortality of his family seems—for the time being, at least—to be assured. Accordingly he is delighted and strides joyfully into the afterlife.

On this reading, the pronouncement about death powers a more important pronouncement about the importance of the *oikos*. The scene as a whole is one of many in the *Odyssey* that lay stress on the importance of succession and the continuity of the family line.

As I noted at the beginning of this paper, scholars approaching the scene from the perspective of death studies have tended to suggest that lines 488–491 represent the value that the poet invests in life, rather than taking it as a statement about death. That interpretation neatly meshes with the “intertextual” reading of these lines. Beye has written, “The poet sings of life and the winning of it (the reason why the ancients saw this epic as comic rather than tragic), whereas the *Iliad* is the story of death.”⁴¹ Vernant acknowledges that Achilles’ lament is haunting for a society convinced that there is no personal fate better than his; but, he goes on, to leave it there would limit the scene to the perspective of the dead.

⁴⁰ See Edwards 1985b: 59–63 on Achilles’ use of the word πρόμος and its connotations.

⁴¹ Beye 1966:191.

The episode of the *Nekuia* does not contradict the ideal of the heroic death, the fine death. It strengthens and completes it....The only values that exist are the values of life, the only reality that of the living.⁴²

Vernant does not draw attention to the latter part of the conversation, which continues for some forty lines after the few lines he is discussing; if he did, I suspect he would have much less difficulty fitting the start of the scene into this picture of "the heroic death."

Achilles' yearning for life on any terms is a longing for life purely at a personal level. As his change of mood at the end of the scene shows, still more important to him are the life and continuity of the *oikos*. In the *Odyssey* the *oikos* is no abstract socio-economic concept but the basis for any kind of existence. The worst thing imaginable for a character in the *Odyssey* is to be deprived of family. This, more than anything else, makes beggars such as Iros and the beggar-Odysseus so wretched. Eumaios, though he is a slave, and though he was once a nobleman but was stolen away from his original family (*Od.* 15.402–484), finds his life tolerable because he regards himself now as part of a new family, that of Odysseus (14.138–144).⁴³

For I shall no longer find another king so kind, wherever I go, not even if I come again to the *oikos* of my father and mother, where first I was born and they raised me. Nor now do I any longer mourn for it, though I long to see it and be in my homeland; instead yearning for Odysseus who is gone takes hold of me.

When Odysseus is at his furthest from home, encountering the monstrous Cyclops, he articulates a distance both from home and from his heroic identity as the sacker of Troy in terms of family. "Nobody is my name; Nobody is what *my mother and father* and all my other comrades are used to calling me" (9.366f., my emphasis). Indeed when Thornton tries to describe the centrality of family in the *Odyssey*, the passage she turns to is none other than the conversation with Achilles:

[Family life in the *Odyssey*] is rich in warmth and humanity. But as important and more specific is the relationship between father, son and son's son, the representatives of a noble line. Just as Odysseus in the Underworld asks his mother about his father and his son, so Achilles seeks Odysseus about [P]eleus, his father, and his son Neoptolemus, and is delighted to hear of his son's excellence.⁴⁴

⁴² Vernant 1981:291 (= 1996:60f.).

⁴³ On Eumaios see further Thalmann 1998:84–100, especially 89 on the passage quoted.

⁴⁴ Thornton 1970:119.

Finley's view (cited earlier) is the clearest statement of the "succession" reading in print: "the encounter is not wholly forbidding; it foreshadows the continuity of a son and the longer continuity of poetry."⁴⁵

Achilles' family offers a paradigm for Odysseus' family, as do several other families in the *Odyssey*. The fullest and best-known example of this is of course Agamemnon's family. Agamemnon provides the central paradigm of a bad *nostos*, exactly the kind of homecoming that Odysseus wants to avoid. It is not just the returning hero who is compared: characters in the *Odyssey* routinely cite Orestes' act of vengeance on his father's enemies as a paradigm for Telemachos to follow; and there is a consistent anxiety throughout the epic that Penelope might follow Klytaimnestra's example, if not by actually killing her husband, then at least by taking an adulterous lover. This use of Agamemnon's family as a paradigm to avoid has been thoroughly explored in recent readings of the *Odyssey*.⁴⁶ It is so central to the Odyssean conception of *nostos* that it is almost the first thing to be mentioned in the main narrative (*Od.* 1.28–43); and it is Agamemnon himself that makes a final comparison between his own wife and Odysseus' in the second *Nekyia* (24.191–202).

Other families also serve as paradigms. In the Telemachy, the tableau of Nestor surrounded by an entourage of legitimate sons (3.31–39) serves as an example to Telemachos of what a truly happy family looks like, with all the implications of continuity into the next generation, in a scene of harmonious ceremony and serenity. When Telemachos arrives at Menelaos' house, he finds him holding a magnificent feast in honor of the marriage of his daughter Hermione to Neoptolemos (4.3–19): the scene is an especially direct celebration of succession. Again, Telemachos encounters a paradigmatic image of a family that is, at present at least, as a family ought to be: a good *nostos*, wealth to be inherited, marriage and the hope of grandchildren. In spite of future ills awaiting the children—the reader who knows the story of Euripides' *Andromache* may be looking for forebodings of disaster—the tableau presented here is as solid a guarantee as there can ever be of survival of the *oikos* into the next generation.

In a smaller way, the meeting with Achilles' ghost achieves exactly the same thing. The story is one of succession: in this case Neoptolemos has not inherited wealth, but his father's heroic qualities; and he has acquired other qualities besides—victory at Troy, skill in oratory, the ability to work in harmony with the heroic community. We are left in doubt about the family's property and land (Odysseus has heard nothing of how Peleus is managing in Phthia); but Neoptolemos has inherited his

⁴⁵ Finley 1978:124.

⁴⁶ See e.g. Hölscher 1989:94–102, Katz 1991:29–53, Olson 1995:24–42, with further references.

father's *kleos* and has lived up to it.⁴⁷

The paradigm does not extend to *nostos*: Achilles famously does not see the day of his homecoming. Nor is there a paradigm for Penelope within Achilles' family. The paradigmatic role of Achilles' family is relatively limited compared with those of Agamemnon, Nestor, and Menelaos. But it is a paradigm for succession, for the son's worthiness to step into his father's shoes, and his inheritance of his father's qualities. Neoptolemos is a model for Telemachos in many of the same ways that Orestes is. As Dimock writes,

The indications are that [Odysseus] will get home to free his father from oppression and to see his son not only behaving as a hero should, like Neoptolemos, but engaged in the vindication of his father's honor, like Orestes. Odysseus is beginning to look, in prospect at least, like the happiest of men.⁴⁸

For Telemachos, like Neoptolemos, there is great pressure to grow up into a mature hero, someone worthy of taking Odysseus' place as head of the household, if Odysseus should not return. There are differences as well, of course: unlike Achilles, Odysseus will return. But that does not make Telemachos' maturation irrelevant.

Telemachos' maturation is enacted through a number of scenes spread throughout the *Odyssey* that have been well studied.⁴⁹ His maturation is not only a matter of personal growth or literary character development. Like the meeting with Achilles' ghost, it can also be viewed from the perspective of family, as a matter of succession. Throughout the whole epic, from the first book to the last, Telemachos is required to prove in one way or another his worthiness to be Odysseus' son and to

⁴⁷ In one subtle respect he has notably outdone his father, as the wedding in *Od.* 4 shows us in an intertextual link to another early epic tradition. As the *Catalogue of Women* relates, when suitors gathered to court Helen, Menelaos won her only because Achilles was not present (fr. 204.87–92): if he had arrived in time—if he had “achieved his *nostos* from Pelion” (οἴκαδε νοστήσας ἐκ Πηλίου)—Achilles would have won her “even though he was still only a child.” As it is, Menelaos won her and they had Hermione as a daughter (fr. 204.93–95). In the *Odyssey*, Neoptolemos has now compensated for this old injustice by marrying Hermione. On the date of the *Catalogue*, certain historical references suggest a relatively late date for parts of it (West 1985:130–137), but linguistically the surviving fragments belong to the time of the *Theogony* (Janko 1982:85–87). Dating of its mythical content is very uncertain; West assigns dates as early as 776 to some genealogical elements (1985:164f.).

⁴⁸ Dimock 1989: 158.

⁴⁹ There is disagreement as to whether Telemachos' maturation is a gradual process, or a moment of sudden transformation, or whether the *Odyssey* is a snapshot of one moment in his growth, frozen in time but re-enacted repeatedly. It would be a tremendous detour here to explore the debate on this point thoroughly: suffice to say that this aspect of the *Odyssey* is as open to multiple interpretations as the meeting with Achilles' ghost. See instead Heitman 2005:58–62, with bibliography and evaluation.

succeed to Odysseus' position as head of the *oikos*.⁵⁰ In book 1 he does this by playing the part of a flawless host, showing formal hospitality to Athena/Mentes.⁵¹ In book 2 it is by summoning the first assembly on Ithaca since Odysseus' departure (2.1–259); his participation in Ithacan politics continues in two further assemblies later in the epic (17.61–73, 20.144–146). He leads an expedition to the mainland;⁵² he converses with senior and established heroes, Nestor and Menelaos; in the second half of the epic he again hospitably takes care of guests and suppliants as best he can (Theoklymenos, and the beggar-Odysseus); he develops the talent for trickery he has inherited from his father; he takes part in a pitched battle, showing his combat ability.⁵³ The sequence continues up to the very last scene of the epic, where Laertes offers an editorial comment on Telemachos' excellence (24.513–515), expressing his delight that he has lived to see his son and his grandson competing in valor. Laertes is delighted precisely at the assurance of continuity for the *oikos*, and at the family's success in producing a worthy series of successors. All these scenes do the same kind of work, writ large, as Odysseus' news about Neoptolemos does for Achilles: they demonstrate an assurance of continuity for the family line.

One of the most revealing moments is in the bow contest, when Telemachos tries to string Odysseus' bow: "And now, drawing it the fourth time, he would indeed have strung the bow by his strength, but Odysseus gave a nod and stopped him, eager though he was" (21.128f.). This is perhaps the moment *par excellence* of Telemachos showing that he is capable of stepping into his father's shoes—*without actually doing so*.⁵⁴

This moment goes to the heart of the difference between the families of Achilles and Odysseus. Achilles is dead: his heritage and his *kleos* can live on only in the excellence of his son. He therefore takes joy in the fact that they do live on. Odysseus is alive and well, so Telemachos must not be allowed *actually* to supplant Odysseus; but to show that Odysseus' own heritage is in secure hands, and that the future of his household is assured, we have to be shown that Telemachos is up to the job. So long as Odysseus is alive, Telemachos is in the unfortunate position of being frozen in mid-step, between being a boy and a mature hero: he has to show, over and over again, that he is capable of the deeds of a fully-fledged hero, without ever actually getting any credit for it.

⁵⁰ For one recent reading of Telemachos' maturation scenes from the perspective of character growth, see Murnaghan 2002:143–152.

⁵¹ On hospitality scenes generally see Reece 1993; on Telemachos' role as host see especially Katz 1991:120–128.

⁵² Rose 1967 argues that the journey itself is a source of *kleos* for Telemachos; for a contrasting view see Clarke 1963.

⁵³ On Telemachos' command of *dolos* see Austin 1969, Hoffer 1995. Jones 1988b:105 lists occasions in books 17–21 where Telemachos demonstrates a capacity for "endurance and intelligence."

⁵⁴ Similarly Thalmann 1998:213–218: "Telemachos's attempt to string the bow is the paradigmatic expression of the problem that threatens when the son is reaching a maturity inhibited by the father" (217).

One useful way to articulate this distinction between the two families is by thinking of their family histories as a narrative in its own right, where succession from one generation to the next is the main plot-element.

From this perspective, Achilles' family-narrative is over now. Everything is resolved: succession has passed on to the next generation. Neoptolemos' success as a hero is the happy ending for this story. Hence the before-and-after situation: at the start of the scene, the succession story is incomplete, and so Achilles thinks of his family-narrative as having an unhappy ending. He himself has had no *nostos*, and he has no confidence that his lineage—the continuity of his *oikos*—will survive long if Neoptolemos turns out to be inadequate. Odysseus shows him that Neoptolemos is, for now at least, carrying on the family business. And, so to speak, they lived happily ever after.

Odysseus' family-narrative is at a different stage in its life-cycle. The succession story of Telemachos is being told throughout the *Odyssey*, but at no point is the story ever finished. As noted above, the story of Telemachos' maturation continues even into the very last scene of the epic; and at the end of the *Odyssey* Telemachos' father is not only still alive but has achieved a successful *nostos*. Succession proper will have to wait. The achievement of succession is something that has to keep on being *signified* over and over again without ever being *completed*. To put it another way, Telemachos must not step into his father's shoes until after the *Odyssey* is over and done with—and perhaps not even then.

This kind of reading of Telemachos may go some way towards explaining those readings of Telemachos' character, at the personal level, that regard him as unchanging throughout the *Odyssey*. Hölscher has written,

All the scenes in the Telemachy in which the character of Telemachos is revealed are in fact no more than multiple representations of that single, critical moment of the passage from boyhood to manhood. The entire Telemachy is nothing other than the transformation of the folktale formulation, "when our son has grown a beard," into various epic situations.⁵⁵

It is of course unsatisfactory to think of this unchangingness in Telemachos as a lack of personal growth; but as with Achilles in book 11, we can instead think of it as a matter of the family's genealogical succession. From the perspective of the family-narrative, he truly is frozen in time.

This reading of *Od.* 11 moves the emphasis from the beginning of the scene to the end. It leaves Achilles' ghost sorry to be dead, no doubt,

⁵⁵ Hölscher 1996:139. Olson 1995:65–90 sees no change in Telemachos' character within the Telemachy; Felson 1994:68–89 sees his story in the *Odyssey* as located in a liminal phase of his maturation, rather than as a completed development from childhood into maturity.

but decidedly pleased at how things have turned out in a broader sense. His first view on death—"I would rather be above earth and work as a laborer to another"—is a lament at a strictly personal level. As Vernant, Sourvinou-Inwood, and Johnston have noted, he does not speak for Greek culture.⁵⁶ That personal level, the level at which Odysseus and Achilles are competing for superiority in the "contrast" reading, occupies only one sixth of the episode; and a polar opposition between *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, or between two types of heroic ethos, is in danger of falling apart if we read on past line 491. These readings are certainly salvageable, but a strong reading of the scene needs to find a perspective that works for the episode as a whole. That perspective must also take into account Achilles' second view on death, which is concerned with something wholly different from the personal experience of being a ghost in Hades. Other readings typically emphasize Achilles' opening lament as the "money shot" in the scene, but that almost inevitably makes the Neoptolemos story a weak digression. I would emphasize the Neoptolemos story itself, and Achilles' reaction, as the climax.

The episode as a whole then becomes a profoundly optimistic one: the exact opposite of the overwhelming pessimism that Stanford finds so depressing about pre-Christian Greek culture. Previously Odysseus' meeting with Agamemnon's ghost created anxiety over the trustworthiness of Odysseus' family; later, his meeting with Aias' ghost puts him face-to-face with past mistakes and regrets, the madness and violence of heroic culture. But the meeting with Achilles' ghost shows us a way that one hero has found of achieving a personal reconciliation with his mortality. These days it may no longer be fashionable in all circles to yearn for immortality through our children; and it may be that readers knowledgeable about Greek mythology are uncomfortably aware of future misfortunes awaiting Achilles' son. But Achilles, at least, is joyful for the time being; and Odysseus has been shown that a hero can hope for the well-being of his family, even though his own *nostos* is still in doubt.

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⁵⁶ See note 4.

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