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Homer

*Irene de Jong**

Introduction

If the topic of characterization in literature is in general a complex one, this is all the more true for the Homeric epics. There are a number of reasons which seem to preclude the Homeric narrator from paying much attention to characterization, or his narratees from detecting it in his epics. First, different theories about the genesis of the epics agree in the denial of consistent or refined characterization. For analysts, separate authorship of the different parts of the poems could only lead to inconsistent characterization, while for oralists the ubiquity of the formulaic system prevented the narrator-singer from giving his heroes an individual shape.¹ Second, for a literary critic like Auerbach it is Homer's narrative style, as contrasted to that of the Old Testament, which led to characters without any depth. Since the 'subjectivistic-perspectivistic procedure, creating a foreground and a background, resulting in the present lying open to the depths of the past, is entirely foreign to the Homeric style', Homeric characters are said to experience a mere succession and alternation of emotion but no simultaneous conflict of feelings. Likewise, 'Achilles and Odysseus are splendidly described in many well-ordered words, epithets cling to them, their emotions are constantly displayed in their words and deeds—but they have no development, and their life-histories are clearly set forth once and for all ... Even Odysseus, in whose case the long lapse of time and the many events which occurred offer so much opportunity for biographical development, shows almost nothing of it. Odysseus, on his return, is exactly the same as he was when he left Ithaca two decades earlier.'² Finally, Snell argues that the concept of the 'I', of an individual and autonomous identity, was only 'discovered' after Homer, hence Homeric heroes are not real characters yet: 'there is no denying that the great heroes of the Homeric poems are drawn in firm outline; and yet the reactions of an Achilles, however grand and

* I wish to thank Michael Lloyd, Evert van Emde Boas, Koen De Temmerman for their suggestions, and Nina King for her polishing of my English.

1 See e.g. Kirk 1962: 265.

2 Auerbach [1946] 1968: 3–23, quotations from p. 7.

signified, are not explicitly presented in their volitional or intellectual form as a character'.³ All in all, it would seem that Homeric characters in all senses of the word are 'flat': they have no individuality, lack inner lives, cannot express themselves in an individual style, and do not develop.

All these negative qualifications have in recent decades come to be considerably modified, the chapter of Griffin in his *Homer on Life and Death* from 1980 being a milestone.⁴ In this chapter I will revisit most of these issues, using narratological lenses and methods, and I hope to draw a nuanced balance.⁵ I will start with the techniques of characterization and end with their effects: what kind of characters did Homer draw?

Types of Characters and Explicit Characterization

It may be useful to start with a brief parade of the different types of characters that people the Homeric epics, since the way in which characters are presented is different for different groups. In the first place there are the main characters, who are only rarely characterized in the form of a block of explicit characterization of some length, and certainly not at their first appearance. The first reference to the two protagonists of the *Iliad*, Agamemnon and Achilles, merely mentions their names (*Il.* 1.7), while the main character of the *Odyssey* is introduced only via a circumlocution (*antonomasia*), 'the man who ...' (*Od.* 1.1–9), his proper name following ten lines later. These casual introductions may be due to the fact that the Homeric epics tell traditional tales, the main storylines and characters of which the narratees were supposed to know. But the changeability of traditional characters in later Greek literature, as demonstrated seminally e.g. for the figure of Odysseus by Stanford,⁶ perhaps was at play in the early stages too. In that case we would have to conclude that the Homeric narrator intentionally opts for the gradual characterization of (his versions of) traditional characters. The gods, likewise, do not receive elaborate characterizations. Again, it could be argued that their nature in a sense was 'given', i.e. related to their cultic roles, and hence did not need extensive introduction. But their anthropomorphic outward forms (dark-browed Zeus,

3 Snell [1946] 1953: 1–29.

4 Griffin 1980: 50–80.

5 I leave aside the ('Snellian') question of the autonomy of Homeric persons, which would need a chapter of its own. Important studies on this topic include Latacz 1984; Halliwell 1990; Williams 1993: 21–49; and Gill 1996: 29–93.

6 Stanford 1963.

limping Hephaestus, storm-footed Iris) and characters (nagging Hera, favourite daughter Athena, stern Apollo, and whimpering Aphrodite) seem to be largely the Homeric narrator's invention, as Herodotus (*Histories* 2.53) suggested.⁷

In the second place, there are the minor characters, most of which are never characterized at all but are merely listed in one of the many catalogues.⁸ Some are given an explicit introduction, and here we can be sure that this is due to their being the narrator's invention. Such introductions may be 'advertised' as introductions, when they take the form of the 'there was a man X' motif (*ēn/eske de tis*).⁹ In the *Iliad* minor characters mainly serve as cannon-fodder and their brief biographical vignettes actually are necrologies, e.g. 13.171–176:

(Teucer kills Imbrius), son of Mentor rich in horses. He lived in Pedaeum before the sons of the Achaeans came, and he was married to a bastard daughter of Priam, Medesicate; but when the curved ships of the Danaans came, he went back to Troy, and was a leading man among the Trojans, and lived with Priam, who honoured him like his own children.¹⁰

The minor characters of the *Odyssey* are, typically, servants. They are explicitly characterized by the narrator, e.g. Euryclea (1.429–433), or by themselves, e.g. Eumaeus (15.403–484), whose biography of a prince becoming a swineherd of course has thematic parallels with Odysseus acting the role of beggar.¹¹

A third type of character is that of the anonymous collective of soldiers (in the *Iliad*) or suitors (in the *Odyssey*), which from time to time is allowed to present its view of events, e.g. at *Il.* 4.81–85:¹²

(Athena has descended down to earth like a star) the horse-taming Trojans and the well-greaved Greeks looked on in amazement; and one would glance at his neighbour and say: 'There will surely be grim war again and the horror of battle, or Zeus is setting friendship between the two parties, Zeus who is the referee of men's wars.'

7 A discussion of the Homeric gods as literary characters is a desideratum. Some beginnings in Erbse 1986; Kearns 2004; and Heath 2005: 39–78.

8 For catalogues, see Sammons 2010.

9 See *Il.* 5.9; 10.314; 13.663; 17.575; *Od.* 9.508–510; 10.552–553; 15.417–418; 19.353; 20.287–288.

10 See Griffin 1980: 103–143 and Stoesesandt 2004: 126–159. Xenophon (→) also makes ample use of the obituary as characterizing device.

11 Eumaeus' biographical tale is discussed e.g. by Minchin 1992.

12 See de Jong 1987a and Schneider 1996.

Here we get an interesting alternative take on heroic battle: the common soldiers dislike it and hope for Zeus to put an end to it. This device of the collective voice will be taken over later by Pindar (→) and historiographical narrators.

A fourth type of character is that of the silent character or *kōphon prosōpon*.¹³ An example is Chryseis, the bone of contention of the first book of the *Iliad*, who is sometimes evoked though a deictic pronoun (*tēnde*: 1.127) but never heard speaking herself.

Finally, the Homeric epics feature so-called character doublets, when the narrator uses ‘two persons of a single type where he might conceivably have used one’, whereby one of the two is usually slightly more important: e.g. the pair of good servants Euryclea and Eurynome or bad servants Melanthe and Melantheus.¹⁴ Such doublings are an offshoot of the oral epic’s general tendency to repeat, but they also perform important functions within the story. For instance, the activities of Euryclea as Odysseus’ servant and Eurynome as Penelope’s servant in the final scenes of the *Odyssey* underline and reflect the reunion of husband and wife.

When are Characters Explicitly Characterized?

In the previous section it was remarked that only minor characters receive explicit characterizations. These are inserted either at their one and only moment of action (the ‘little fighters’ acting as cannon-fodder), or at their entrance in the story (Euryclea), or when they perform a crucial action.¹⁵ An example of the last category is the Trojan Polydamas who, after three earlier interventions, is explicitly (and positively) characterized at the moment when he gives Hector the advice to withdraw his troops into the city (*Il.* 18.249–252). In this way the narrator marks his advice as important and prepares for its rejection by Hector, to his own cost and that of many other Trojans. Even major characters may receive such ‘plugs’ when they are about to make an important speech. Thus we hear about Nestor’s age and sweet voice at the very moment when he tries to reconcile Achilles and Agamemnon (*Il.* 1.247–252).

If the primary narrator is chary with explicit characterization of his main characters, characters are more prone to express themselves about others. Thus

13 See de Jong 1987b and cf. the AbT-scholion ad *Il.* 1.332.

14 Discussed by Fenik 1974: 172–207; quotation from p. 172.

15 See discussion in Richardson 1990: 36–50.

Patroclus refers to Achilles as ‘a forbidding man, and quick to anger’ and ‘a terrible man’ who is likely ‘to blame even the blameless’ (*Il.* 11.649, 654). Telemachus is informed about the qualities of his father Odysseus, whom he has never (consciously) seen himself, through the qualifications of others: Nestor tells him that Odysseus surpassed all in cunning (*Od.* 3.120–122), while Helen and Menelaus stress his endurance (4.269–270, 340–342). In his *Apologue* Odysseus starts each adventure with a synoptic introduction of the exotic people and persons he meets on his way home, and in this way biases ‘his narratees against his opponents’, increases ‘their admiration for the way in which he succeeds in overcoming them’, and gains ‘their sympathy when he loses some of his men to them.’¹⁶

Two small-scale forms of explicit characterization are found throughout the story: epithets and speaking names. A Homeric character is regularly accompanied by the same epithet, which is used either for other characters too (in which case it characterizes him as belonging to a certain class of people; e.g. *dios*, ‘noble’) or only for him/herself (e.g. *podarkēs*, ‘swift-footed’ Achilles). The widespread use of epithets is arguably related to the oral background of the Homeric epics (although they are found in written texts like the *Gilgamesh-epic* too) and their interpretation is a matter of much debate from antiquity onwards (are they merely line-fillers or do they have their own significance?). The effect of Penelope being systematically called *periphrōn*, ‘circumspect’, or Hector *koruthaiolos*, ‘with glittering helmet’ cannot be overestimated, however.¹⁷ Indeed, characters can even ‘grow into’ their epithet, as will be set out below for Telemachus.

Names in Homer are often taken as meaningful, by narrator and characters alike.¹⁸ An example is the name of Astyanax, explained by Andromache at *Il.* 6.402–403:

Him Hector called Scamandrius, but the others Astyanax: for Hector alone protected Troy.

The Trojans give Scamandrius ‘Astyanax’ as a nickname because his father Hector is the king and protector (*anax*) of the city (*astu*). Throughout the *Odyssey* the name of Odysseus is associated with *odussomai*, ‘be angry at’, and

16 De Jong 2001: 225–226.

17 For the use of epithets as a form of characterization, see e.g. Whallon 1969.

18 This section is based on Louden 1995, who also discusses the abundant older literature. See also Higbie 1995.

with words containing the sounds *dus-*, ‘ill’, and *odu-*, ‘weep’. Athena’s evocation of him towards Zeus is a prime example (1.48–62):

But my heart is torn in me for skilled Odysseus, ill-fated [*dusmorōi*], ... (Calypso) detains the wretched man who is weeping [*dustēnon oduro-menon*] ... Did not Odysseus repeatedly do you a favour by bringing sacrifices to you beside the Achaeans’ ships in the spacious country of Troy? Why did you conceive such anger against him [*ōdusao*], Zeus?

The associations delineate Odysseus’ nature and circumstances: he is a man who has incurred the anger of one of the gods (not so much Zeus, as the god himself will correct Athena, but Poseidon) and who therefore suffers and weeps.¹⁹ The device of the ‘speaking name’ will know a long history in Greek narrative, especially in Hesiod (→), Callimachus (→), Theocritus (→), Aeschylus, (→), Sophocles (→), Euripides (→), Aristophanes (→), Achilles Tatius (→), and Longus (→).

Although the main Homeric characters are only rarely described at length at their first occurrence in the story, the principle of primacy (Introduction, →), information about a character that is given early on strongly determining the narratees’ conception of that character, does play a role. Race has argued that ‘first appearances’ in the *Odyssey* may have a characterizing force: the narrator uses ‘a variety of means—arrivals, dramatic encounters, descriptions of actions and settings, background information, words, actions, emotions—to reveal essential characteristics the very first time we encounter a person, thus providing a sample of the character’s ethos that will be extended and deepened in the course of the epic.’²⁰ A clear example is the minor character Pisistratus, one of Nestor’s sons. When Telemachus and ‘Mentor’/Athena arrive in Pylos, they are greeted first not by Nestor, as one would expect seeing that the youth had been sent out specifically to visit the old man, but by Pisistratus (3.36–37). When suggesting to the guests to bring a libation to the gods Pisistratus thoughtfully gives the cup first to ‘Mentor’/Athena. His prominence in the arrival scene and tactfulness with elders single him out as the one who will accompany Telemachus on his trip to Sparta and it gives a glimpse of his subsequent role as facilitator between Telemachus and people much older than himself. Likewise, the first two books of the *Iliad* acquaint the narratees with

19 Odysseus’ name is explicitly etymologized at 19.407–409. See Dimock 1989. There may also be another association with Odysseus’ name, namely as a man who is angry at and inflicts sorrows upon others (the Trojans and the suitors).

20 Race 1993, quotation from p. 79.

the main cast, Achilles, Agamemnon, Odysseus, and Nestor (as Homer wants to present them).

The device of the 'first appearance' largely works with *implicit* forms of characterization, and these deserve closer scrutiny, since they are in fact the ones most often used by the Homeric narrator.

Metonymical Characterization

Action and Speech

Homeric characters famously are 'speakers of words and doers of deeds' (*Il.* 9.443). Accordingly, the Homeric narrator, rather than explicitly characterizing his main characters himself, lets them show their mettle through their actions and speeches.²¹ Achilles has been called 'swift-footed' throughout the *Iliad*, and this characteristic of his is employed in the spectacular race of life and death with Hector in book 22. Nestor's conciliatory and sensible speeches characterize him as the typical wise old man and advisor. Odysseus fully confirms his characteristics of being *polutlas* and *polumētis* in the *Odyssey*, where we see him not only inventing one clever device after another but also enduring storms sent by his arch-enemy Poseidon and the humiliations of his own countrymen. Not only the 'what' but also the 'how' of their speeches characterize Homeric characters.

If individual characterization in Homer has seemed impossible for critics for so long, the claim of characterization *through speech* has been even more of an anathema. The one who stated this most clearly was Adam Parry in a short but influential paper called 'The Language of Achilles'.²² The formulaic nature of the Homeric epics means that 'everything in the world is regularly presented as all men (all men within the poem, that is) commonly perceive it' and that narrators and characters alike can only say 'the same things about the same things'. When a hero like Achilles wants to question the heroic code, he can only do so by misusing the formulaic language, a misuse which, moreover, the narratees themselves must read into his words. Thus when he says, after killing Hector, 'we have won great glory' (22.393), this is what the formulaic language of the epics dictates he should say, while his heart would have liked him to say that he killed Hector to avenge his friend and that he is not interested in winning glory at all.

21 Cf. Fränkel [1951] 1969: 41.

22 Parry 1956, quotations from pp. 3 and 4.

This thesis has been challenged in various ways. First, since formulas are a way of communication they must be open to different meanings in different contexts.²³ Second, it is a matter of much debate whether, as Parry claims, Achilles wants to question the heroic code; to request that we read misuse into his words is a questionable method.²⁴ Third, scholars have detected individual linguistic registers for individual characters, notably that same Achilles.²⁵ He has his own rhetoric (a predilection for similes, richness of descriptive detail, cumulative images, and hypothetical images), syntax (a predilection for asyndeton, subjunctives, emotive particles, and vocatives), and lexicon (101 words are used exclusively by him). The existence of individual styles is confirmed by Homeric characters themselves, e.g. when the Trojan Antenor distinguishes Menelaus' way of speaking from that of Odysseus (*Il.* 3.212–224). Recalling the dictum that heroes should be 'speakers of words', Martin rightly suggests that individual styles are only to be expected in such a competitive society as a means to win individual distinction and status.²⁶

Further Metonymical Techniques

Apart from their words and deeds, the narrator has other means of metonymical characterization. The first is setting, including objects.²⁷ When Hector finds Paris 'in his bedroom' sitting amongst the women and fussing over his armour (*Il.* 6.321–324), this is just as revealing of this hero as his 'wearing a leopard skin' when challenging the Greeks on the battlefield (3.17). The Phaeacians' isolated location (*Od.* 6.8) and the golden watch-dogs and paradisiacal gardens of their ruler (7.91–94, 112–132) characterize them as slightly unworldly. And Ajax' massive shield 'like a tower' (7.219–225) symbolizes his status as a warrior on whom the others can rely and who will fight to the utmost to protect his men and ships, as he does when the Greeks are oppressed by Hector (15.727–746).

23 This is the line of Claus 1975.

24 This is the line of Reeve 1973 and see note 52 below.

25 See Friedrich and Redfield 1978; Griffin 1986; and Martin 1989: 89–230. The findings of Friedrich and Redfield were questioned by Messing 1981, who (too) much reverts to the blockades of earlier scholarship: cf. 891: 'It is a commonplace in all the histories of Greek literature that authors dealt in types rather than in individuals' and 894: 'Minutely accurate, finicky choice of words and turns, as required according to F&R's dictum, is simply not to be reconciled with the known stress of oral composition; and it would make overly great demands on the audience.'

26 Martin 1989: 96.

27 See Griffin 1980: 1–49. For the characterizing function of setting in Homer, see *SAGN* 3: 35–36 (de Jong).

A second device is outward appearance as a signal of moral (inward) quality.²⁸ Since the Homeric narrator pays only little attention to the actual looks of his heroes and heroines (was Helen, the most famous beauty of antiquity blond?), we cannot say that the doctrine of physiognomy—assessing a person's qualities from appearance—started here. But the description of Homeric characters, however brief, usually makes a match between beautiful appearance and good inner qualities: thus a stock qualification of heroes in the *Iliad* is 'brave and huge' (e.g. 2.653 and *passim*), and when Priam, in the Teichoskopia, sees a 'brave and huge man', who is 'the most beautiful and dignified man he has ever seen', he can only conclude that this is a king (3.167–170). Conversely, the exceptionally long and explicit introduction of Thersites at *Il.* 2.212–223 stresses his ugliness and hence characterizes him at least as non-heroic but probably, much more negatively, as someone despised not only by the heroes but by the common soldiers and narrator too.²⁹ The ideal association between beauty and nobility is also confirmed *e contrario* when heroes do *not* live up to this ideal. Thus when Paris first steps forward to fight but quickly shrinks back at the sight of his opponent Menelaus, he is chided by his brother Hector (3.43–45):

'Surely the long-haired Greeks are cackling at this, saying that you are our champion because of your beauty but are lacking in strength and courage.'

In the *Odyssey* the ideal world of the *Iliad* seems to be replaced by a more realistic one in that characters show an awareness that beauty is not a sure sign of nobility while, conversely, a man who is not good-looking can be an excellent speaker (8.167–177; 17.454). Scholars tend to interpret such differences in terms of the *Odyssey* being the later text with a new world-view, but it seems safer to connect them with differences in plot: the *Iliad* deals with an open conflict between two men, the *Odyssey* with the secret return of a hero.³⁰

28 What follows is largely based on Bernsdorff 1992.

29 Most scholars adhere to the second option, e.g. Ebert 1969; Rankin 1972; Bernsdorff 1992: 38–40; and Scodel 2002: 204–209; the first position is defended by Postlethwaite 1988 (Thersites' speech 'reflects the attitude of the ordinary non-heroic Achaians to the quarrel in condemning Agamemnon's treatment of Achilleus'). Thalmann 1988 argues that there is not one perspective on Thersites fixed in the text; the scene is meant to elicit different responses and hence illustrates 'the indeterminacies of lived experience' (28).

30 In the *Iliad* too, we already come across the idea that an unimpressive looking man may yet be a good speaker (3.216–224).

Metaphorical Characterization

Another type of implicit or indirect characterization is metaphorical characterization. In Homer this often takes the form of persons from the past being held up as models.³¹ Diomedes is, no less than three times, compared with or compares himself with his father Tydeus (*Il.* 4.372–398; 5.802–808; 10.285–290), old Nestor repeatedly holds up his own younger self as an example to his fellow Greeks (*Il.* 1.259–273; 7.132–156; 11.605–803; 23.629–645), and Telemachus is given another youth, Orestes, as his model (*Od.* 1.288–302). Penelope compares herself to one of the daughters of Pandareus, who inadvertently killed her own son and was transformed into a nightingale who perpetually mourns her child (*Od.* 19.518–529); both women share the grief over a (in the case of Penelope, supposedly) lost beloved one.

Another form of metaphorical characterization is the simile. The martial spirit of heroes is suggested by their being compared to lions, while the repeated comparison of the Trojans with deer subtly suggests that they are less courageous than their Greek opponents.³² The series of ‘parents-children’ similes connected to Achilles and Patroclus in *Iliad* 16.7; 17.4, 133, 755; 18.56–57, 318, 23.222 evokes the more gentle and caring sides of Achilles’ character.³³ The technique of characterization via similes will be taken up by Hesiod (→), Aeschylus (→), Apollonius of Rhodes (→), and Callimachus (→).

Reading between the Lines?

A perennial problem in discussing literary characterization is how far we may go in reading psychology into a story, that is, in approaching literary characters as real people and speculating about their motives and feelings when these are not expressed in the text. Kakridis in a study significantly called ‘Dichterische Gestalten und wirkliche Menschen bei Homer’ (‘Poetic Figures and Real People’) strongly condemns all forms of ‘anthropomorphism’, as he calls it (the ‘mimetic’ approach of the Introduction, →): ‘outside the poetical space, poetical characters do not exist at all’ (my translation).³⁴ One of the examples where

31 On paradigmatic tales in Homer, see e.g. d’Arms and Hulley 1946; Gaisser 1969; Andersen 1987; Olson 1995: 24–42; and Alden 2000.

32 See Stoevesandt 2004: 253–266.

33 See Moulton 1977: 99–106; the discussion forms part of a whole chapter devoted to ‘similes and characterization’ (88–116).

34 Kakridis 1970 (‘ausserhalb des poetische Raums existieren die poetischen Gestalten über-

he thinks that scholars have gone too far in their ‘reading between the lines’ is Penelope’s alleged recognition of Odysseus in Book 19: although she, shrewdly, nowhere says so, her acts and words would suggest that during her nightly conversation with ‘the beggar’ she has already recognized Odysseus, well before her reunion with him in book 23. Set out for the first time in 1950 by Harsh, this thesis has become something of a *cause célèbre* in Homeric scholarship.³⁵ To discuss arguments pro and contra far exceeds the limits of this chapter, and this is one of those cases where every narratee has to make his or her own decision. In my view, we do the narrator most justice when we see the reunion of Odysseus and Penelope as the longest and most intricate instance of the ‘delayed recognition’ story pattern,³⁶ and hence do *not* assume Penelope has recognized Odysseus and thereafter harboured this secret in her mind for four books. But my position in this particular case does not mean that, with Kakridis, I think we should necessarily forbid *all* filling up of gaps in the text by narratees.

Firstly, there is the phenomenon of characters in their speeches glossing over certain points, which may give us an indication of their mood or feelings. Occasionally, the Homeric narrator himself explicitly notes that a character does not say aloud what he or she really thinks, e.g. when Nausicaa asks her father for a wagon to wash the clothes of her brothers with an eye on their wanting to dance, while the real—but unexpressed—reason for her sudden inclination to do the laundry is her hope for a speedy wedding, an idea fostered by the dream/Athena, who had visited her just before. The narrator caps her speech at *Od.* 6.66–67 with an explicit reference to her reticence: ‘for she was too shy to mention her joyful marriage to her dear father’.

From a case like this and other similar ones³⁷ it seems a small and acceptable step also to read significance into silences that are *not* flagged by the narrator.³⁸ Besslich (1966), for example, spots many instances of ‘speaking’ silences. An

haupt nicht’), quotation from p. 60. Cf. also Redfield [1975] 1994: 20: ‘Homeric man, being objective, has no innerness ... he has no hidden depths or secret motives; he says and does what he is’ and Auerbach, quoted in the introduction to this chapter.

35 See the special issue of *College Literature* 38.2 (2011), with extensive bibliography.

36 See de Jong 2001: 458–459.

37 See e.g. the many instances of ‘hidden thoughts’ in the *Odyssey*, when the narrator reveals only to the narratees the emotions and thoughts that a character does not express in spoken words (e.g. 14.109–110; 17.235–238, 463–465; 18.90–94, 281–283; 20.10–16, 300–302; 23.85–95; 24.235–240), discussed in de Jong [1994] 2009.

38 Similarly Griffin 1980: 61–66, esp. 65: ‘This brief survey has shown that the *Odyssey* contains passages in which the poet explicitly tells of the psychology which we are to see underlying the words and acts of characters, and also that other passages, where this is not explicit, come so close to them in nature that we can have no reasonable doubt that

example occurs when the Phaeacian king Alcinous says that ‘the stranger’ (Odysseus) might be a god, thereby actually inquiring after the latter’s identity. In his answer Odysseus bitterly rejects Alcinous’ suggestion but does not reveal his name. His silence has been convincingly read as revealing his wily character and present mood. He knows that it is often safer not to disclose one’s name to strangers. And the experiences of the past ten years and the losses he has incurred (of men, ships, and booty) have undermined his heroic self-confidence. Thus, rather than thumping his chest and proudly revealing his name, he just wants to be left in peace and return home.

Another well-known—but not unproblematic—area where scholars have read psychology into the Homeric text is the simile. Similes often explicitly illustrate a character’s feelings, e.g. when Agamemnon, at a loss as to how to deal with the Trojans’ sudden superiority, is compared to two different winds whipping up the sea (*Il.* 9.4–8). But there are also similes that seem to invite the narratees to fill in gaps.³⁹ One example is the simile found at the moment when Telemachus enters the hut of Eumaeus, where his father Odysseus finds himself. Upon seeing the youth, Eumaeus kisses his face and hands and starts weeping (16.17–21):

As a father, full of love, greets his son, who returns in the tenth year from a far country, his only son, late-born, about whom he has worried much, so the excellent swineherd then kissed godlike Telemachus, clinging to him, as if he had escaped death.

This simile foremost—and explicitly—illustrates Eumaeus’ feelings: he loves Telemachus as if he was his own son, and he has worried about him, he who had gone away to distant countries for quite some time and had been awaited upon his return by the suitors in an ambush. Thus Eumaeus had feared that he would never see Telemachus again. But to a careful narratee the simile also suggests the emotions which (we can imagine) are raging inside Telemachus’ real father Odysseus but which he has to suppress in order not to reveal his true identity. In particular the detail of ‘his only son’ (*mounon*) specifically points at Odysseus. Shortly afterwards Telemachus will explain that it is a characteristic of his family to have ‘only sons’ (118–120):

there, too, the instinctive response of the audience, to interpret the passages in the light of the psychology of human beings, is sound.’

39 What follows are basically the interpretations I gave in de Jong 2001: *ad locc.*, where further bibliography may also be found.

Arcesius begot Laertes as his only son (*mounon*), his father begot Odysseus as his only son (*mounon*), and Odysseus, having begotten me as his only son (*mounon*), left and did not profit from me.

Eumaeus' fatherly feelings for Telemachus can easily be taken to suggest those of his real father Odysseus.

Things are perhaps more open to discussion in another intriguing simile. Upon hearing Demodocus' song about the Wooden Horse and the fall of Troy, Odysseus starts weeping and is given the following simile (8.523–531):

As when a woman weeps, throwing herself over her dear husband who has fallen in front of his city and men, trying to ward off the pitiless day for his city and children. She sees him gasping for breath and dying and folding herself over him she weeps loudly. But behind her they beat her back and shoulders with their spears, and carry her off into slavery, to have hard work and misery. And her cheeks are wasted through her most pitiable sorrow. So Odysseus shed piteous tears from his eyes.

The point of comparison, as so often in Homer, is 'advertised' through the verbal echo of 'most pitiable' (*eleeinotatōi*) in 'piteous' (*eleeinon*): the weeping of Odysseus/the woman is such as to evoke the pity of those who see them, and indeed Alcinous is moved by the stranger's tears and once again inquires after his 'sorrow'. But many scholars have read more into this simile. It seems to suggest that Odysseus feels more like a victim than a victor. Although notably the victor in the Trojan war (just before evoked by Demodocus' song), the aftermath of that war, his years of wanderings, has brought him only 'hard work and misery'. His long separation from his wife, child and home seems to have engendered some sensitivity for the price paid by families, both those of the victor and of the victim, for warfare, normally one of the undisputed occupations of heroic warriors. In short, his experiences have changed his outlook on life.⁴⁰ This brings us to the question as to whether Homeric characters can change.

40 Not all commentators are equally convinced of this reading between the lines. Thus Hainsworth 1988: *ad* 523–530 writes: 'It is not easy for the modern reader to separate the anonymous woman from the Trojan captives implicit in 516. There would be a bitter irony in the equation of the *ptoliporthos* himself and his victim; *but we should expect the poet to mark a connection which he wished to be significant.*' (my italics).

Dynamic Characters

As we saw in the introduction to this chapter, Auerbach claims that Achilles and Odysseus ‘show no development’.⁴¹ There are at least two Homeric characters which modify this claim, the one a fairly undisputed example (Telemachus), the other at least a plausible one (Odysseus).

That Telemachus would be hailed as ‘the only character in Greek literature who shows any development’⁴² need not come as a surprise since he is young and ancient conceptions of character concur in seeing character as partly given at birth but needing to be realized and fulfilled through nurture and education.⁴³ A number of studies have shown how Telemachus in the course of the *Odyssey* and of course especially as a result of his journey to Pylos and Sparta changes from a shy, inactive, uncertain youth into a young man who takes initiatives, speaks out and assumes responsibility. In the end, he is considered mature enough by Athena and Odysseus to be introduced to their scheme of Odysseus’ incognito return at an early stage (before Eumaeus, Penelope, and Laertes). Homer is too fine a narrator to give Telemachus’ development a linear trajectory: his first performance as a man vis-à-vis his mother and the suitors (1.345–419) is followed by his being ‘tucked in’ by his old nurse Euryclea (1.436–442). Even after he has given his maiden speech in the Ithacan assembly, he admits to being nervous when he is about to face the venerable old man Nestor, since he is ‘not yet experienced in sensible speeches’ (3.23). And when he is incited by Athena to return home from Sparta it is Pisistratus who must check his youthful impatience (15.49–55).

Some characteristics, however, Telemachus does seem to possess from the start. Thus already in book 1 he displays the typical wiliness of his father when he does not tell the suitors about the exact content of his conversation with ‘Mentes’ nor about his inference that his guest had in fact been a god (1.417–419). Likewise, his very first actions in the story show him to be a good host (1.119–120).

Given Telemachus’ development, it may seem odd that he is given the epithet *pepnumenos* right from the start (the first time at 1.213), for this perfect

41 Cf. also Finley [1965] 1975: 16: ‘Historical husbands and wives grow old, but the plain fact is that neither Odysseus nor Penelope has changed one bit; they have neither developed nor deteriorated, nor does anyone else in the epic.’

42 Millar and Carmichael 1954: 58. Cf. also Rose 1967; Austin 1969; Scheid-Tissinier 1993; Roisman 1994; and Heath 2001. *Contra* Olson 1995: 65–90.

43 See Introduction (→) and Halliwell 1990.

participle refers to ‘a wisdom that comes through experience and age’ and is used of mature men like Diomedes, Nestor, Menelaus, Odysseus, Tiresias and Laertes.⁴⁴ Heath convincingly argues, however, that ‘Telemachus’ maturation [...] can be seen as his acceptance of his heritage, and this is revealed at least partially through his development into the *pepnumenos* son of Odysseus his epithet has promised he would become’.⁴⁵

Turning now to Odysseus, a strong case for this hero’s development in the *Odyssey* has been made by Rutherford.⁴⁶ In his early adventures Odysseus is ‘still something of a dashing buccaneer’, but gradually he learns to curb his heroic impulses and his curiosity. His ability to restrain and control his emotions (of which he gave an early demonstration when sitting inside the Wooden Horse: 4.284–288) maximally comes to the fore during his incognito stay in his own palace, when he must restrain both anger (*vis-à-vis* the suitors: e.g. 17.446–492) and pity (*vis-à-vis* Penelope: 19.209–212). Of course, he never forgets the older, craftier side of his character but his lying tales now also convey a serious, moral lesson. The suitors may think that man can misbehave without punishment, but ‘the beggar’, from his own experience, knows better (18.130–140):

‘For as long as the gods grant him [a mortal] prosperity, as long as his limbs are swift, he thinks that he will never suffer misfortune. But when the blessed gods send him sorrow, that too he has to bear, under compulsion, with enduring heart. Such must be the mind of men, as the father of gods makes each day after the other. I too once was destined to be a fortunate man, but I did many reckless deeds, yielding to my strength and power, putting great faith in my father and brothers.’

Odysseus’ ten years of wanderings when he got to know ‘the cities and mentality of many men’, were seen by many ancients as a moral training and testing-ground for virtue, and the story of his development hence as a lesson for Homer’s narratees. Thus, Horace in his *Epistles* 1.2.17–18, writes that ‘of the power of virtue and wisdom, he [Homer] has put before us Ulixes as a useful example’. In that same letter he claims that Homer ‘tells us what is fair, what

44 Heath 2001: 133.

45 Heath 2001: 155.

46 Rutherford 1986. Other studies on the figure of Odysseus in the *Odyssey* include Stanford [1954] 1963: 8–89; Finkelberg 1995 and Seidensticker 2001.

is foul, what is helpful, what not, more plainly and better than Chryseus or Crantor' (3–4), and this brings us to the topic of the moral evaluation of Homeric characters.

The Moral Evaluation of Homeric Characters

An important observation to start with is that the covert Homeric narrator largely refrains from explicitly evaluating his characters. Only exceptionally does he call characters *nēpios/nēpioi*, and this word most of the time has a sympathetic undertone, stressing the tragic 'blindness' of mortals (e.g. Patroclus: 16.46 or Andromache: 22.445–446), sometimes a critical connotation, when mortals do foolish or even depraved things despite being warned not to (e.g. Odysseus' companions: *Od.* 1.8 or the Suitors: 22.32–33). Other evaluations of characters found in the narrative parts should be ascribed to the embedded focalization of another character. Thus it is Menelaus who considers Paris a 'sinner' (*Il.* 3.28), Telemachus the suitors 'overbearing' (*Od.* 1.134).

Does this reticence of the Homeric narrator mean that he does not intend his characters to be morally judged by his narratees? This seems hardly plausible. Rather, as in the case of explicit characterization, the narrator leaves it to his characters to do the job. One example is Agamemnon's judgement on Penelope (*Od.* 24.194–202):

'How loyal (*agathai*, lit. good) was the heart of excellent (*amumoni*) Penelope, daughter of Icarius. How well did she keep the memory of Odysseus, her wedded husband. So the fame of her virtue (*aretēs*) will never die, and the immortal gods will make a song about graceful, steadfast Penelope for the men on earth. Very differently the daughter of Tyndareos devised evil things, killing her lawful husband, and her song will be hateful among men.'

The narrator's avoidance of explicit moral guidance does result, however, in Homeric characters being open to *widely diverging* (moral) interpretations. Is Penelope a paragon of marital fidelity or is she playing games (and even flirting) with her suitors?⁴⁷ Are Hector and Patroclus mere pawns on the divine chess-board or do they themselves 'earn' their death by overestimating their own strength and not listening to good advice (of Polydamas in Hector's case,

47 For discussions of Penelope, see e.g. Katz 1991 and Felson-Rubin 1994.

of Achilles in that of Patroclus)?⁴⁸ And is Helen really the passive victim of Aphrodite's wiles she claims to be?⁴⁹ The bibliography on most Homeric figures is substantial and can only be listed here.⁵⁰

Surely the most intriguing and controversial Homeric character is Achilles, and it seems fitting to end this chapter with him.⁵¹ Unlike Hector and Patroclus, he is nowhere explicitly said to make a moral error, either by one of the characters or by the narrator. But some of his deeds have been seen as errors *by implication*: his quarrel with Agamemnon in book 1 and resulting prolonged *mēnis*; his rejection of the embassy in book 9; and his extreme revenge on Hector, which includes the killing of countless Trojans and the mutilation of his opponent's body.⁵²

Regarding the quarrel we can be brief: it is Athena herself who identifies Agamemnon's behaviour as *hubris* (1.214) and thereby signals that Achilles' anger is justified. His angry withdrawal from battle is the kind of heroic behaviour known also from other heroes (Meleager: *Il.* 9.524–599; Aeneas: 13.459–461). The crucial question is, of course, how long such anger should last, especially when it leads to so much harm to one's *philoî*.

Here the scene of the embassy in book 9 is crucial. When diplomatic Odysseus presents Agamemnon's offer and appeals to Achilles' desire to win glory (now he could kill Hector), old Phoenix tells an allegory (about Prayers, daughters of Zeus) and adduces a paradigm (Meleager), and Ajax, the sturdy warrior, appeals to Achilles' solidarity towards his fellow warriors, Achilles does not give up his *mēnis*. Many scholars have seen this as a tragic mistake for which he is punished by the death of Patroclus. Just as Meleager only relented and re-entered battle when his wife Cleopatra asked him but did not get the promised reward, Achilles will give in to Patroclus (letting him go to war in his place) but when he himself re-enters battle to avenge his friend he will take no pleasure in Agamemnon's conciliatory gifts. Just as the allegorical Prayers, when not

48 For discussions of Hector, see e.g. Schadewaldt [1956] 1970: 21–38; Metz 1990; and de Romilly 1997.

49 For discussions of Helen, see e.g. Reckford 1964; Austin 1994; and Roisman 2006.

50 For Nestor see e.g. Dickson 1995 and Frame 2009; for Agamemnon van Erp Taalman Kip [1971] 1999 and Taplin 1990.

51 Critical studies on Achilles include Bassett 1934; Redfield [1975] 1994; Effe 1988; Erbse 2001; positive ones: Yamagata 1991; Latacz 1995; and Gill 1996: 94–174. The following discussion is essentially that of de Jong 2012: 16–18.

52 A related debate which for reasons of space I do not take into consideration here is whether Achilles rejects or embraces the heroic values of the society he lives in; see e.g. Zanker 1994, who also discusses other literature.

treated with respect by a man, beg Zeus to visit that man with Folly, 'so that he pays with his own hurt', Achilles' rejection of the prayers of the ambassadors will lead to the death of his best friend and, eventually, his own death. There are strong indications, however, that Agamemnon's gesture of reconciliation simply was not good enough: he should have come himself and publicly admitted his earlier error in taking away Achilles' prize Briseis and hence dishonouring him. That this would have been the right course of action becomes clear from book 19, where we see Agamemnon doing exactly this. As regards the allegory and mythical paradigm, only the narratees, who know from Zeus' announcement at 8.473–477 that Achilles will re-enter battle because of Patroclus' death, can 'read' these later events in Phoenix's stories; the characters cannot.

Lastly, there is Achilles' bloody revenge. His rampage in books 20–22 is naturally criticized by the Trojan river god Scamander (21.213–221), but it is not condemned by the narrator, and the hero is duly saved from drowning in the river's streams by Poseidon and Athena. Many have taken the reference to Achilles' treatment of Hector's body as *aeikea erga* (22.395) as a sign of criticism on the part of the narrator. But it should be realized that this means 'disfiguring deeds' and does not so much imply wrong deeds (for Achilles to commit) as shameful deeds (for Hector to suffer). Moreover, *aeikea erga* is part of Achilles' focalization, who earlier had announced that he intended to let dogs maul his opponent *aikōs* (22.335–336). Finally, the narrator indicates that it is *Zeus* who allows his enemies to disfigure (*aeikissasthai*) Hector (22.403–404).

The case against Achilles, thus, can be countered on all points. And there is also positive evidence about his character. We may think here of his unquestioning loyalty to (some will say love for) Patroclus. When his mother Thetis warns him that avenging his friend will mean death, he accepts this verdict without flinching: 'Then let me die directly, since I was not destined to help my friend when he was killed' (18.198–199). But above all there is his impressive behaviour in the final book of the *Iliad*. It would certainly be misleading to see the humanity and gentleness he displays there as a *development* of his character.⁵³ Rather it is stressed more than once that he always was a temperate warrior, who spared his defeated opponents or treated them with respect (cf., e.g. 6.414–420; 21.76–82). It is only the death of Patroclus that unleashed an exceptional and terrible, but temporary, anger and harshness in him. When he has returned to his normal self again, it is Achilles who is chosen by the Homeric

53 Heath 2005: 119–163 suggests that Achilles develops into a more effective speaker in the *Iliad*.

narrator to voice the memorable speech on the *condition humaine*, the fellowship of suffering which links friend and foe, Greek and Trojan (24.518–551).

Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued that Homeric characters are more individualized and have more depth than Homeric scholarship believed some half century ago.

Homeric characters show different moods (notably Achilles, who changes from clemency to harshness and back to clemency again in the *Iliad*) and some even develop, performing *rite de passage*-like actions such as going abroad or making public speeches (Telemachus) or learning from their experiences during prolonged travels to exotic lands (Odysseus).

And Homeric characters have secret inner lives. The few places where the narrator explicitly notes that a character does not say what he thinks seems an incitement for the narratees—within reasonable limits—to spot other places where they may read between the lines. A notable example is Odysseus' long silence about his name, which apart from creating suspense also actively engages the narratees and makes them ponder what it means to lose all of one's friends and goods and be away from wife, child, and home for twenty years.

It suits the covert Homeric narrator not to characterize his main characters in the form of explicit blocks of characterization but to let themselves show their virtues (or vices) through their deeds and words. The only small-scale forms of explicit characterization he employs are epithets and speaking names. Implicit characterization, on the other hand, is paramount and involves settings and objects, outward appearances, first appearances, similes, comparisons with persons from the past, and speech.

Homer's reticence has spawned heated scholarly debates on characters like Penelope, Helen, Agamemnon, Odysseus and above all Achilles, but his narrative art at the same time has made them unforgettable to all listeners and readers.