

A NOTE ON *ILIAD* 9.524–99: THE STORY OF MELEAGER*

The story of Meleager as it is told in Greek literature clearly reflects two discrete versions, which may be termed the epic and the non-epic. The latter, as retold by Apollodorus (*Bibl.* 1.8.1–3), shows the folktale elements of love and the life-token (the brand which must not be rekindled).¹ The other version, as told by Homer (*Iliad* 9.524–99) followed by Apollodorus (1.8.3), is an epic story where Meleager is the great hero whose *μήνις* keeps him from fighting for his native Calydon against the neighbouring Curetes of Pleuron.

Scholars have divided on whether the epic version existed before Homer and whether he drew inspiration from it for Achilles' *μήνις*, or whether he himself reworked the folktale and imbued the story with heroic elements to generate parallels with Achilles and the *Iliad*.² The question is of considerable interest since it is central to the formation of the poem. As a contribution to it this note comments on the relevance of the Meleager tale to the *Iliad* and the extent of Homeric innovation.³

Most commentators agree that the folktale of the brand is the oldest version of Meleager's life and death.⁴ There is another factor which makes this probable. The story of Meleager is part of one of four more or less originally independent cycles of early Greek heroic poetry. The genealogy of all the heroes of this Aetolian–Elean–Pylian cycle (and of the older heroes of the Iolcus cycle) goes back to Deucalion.⁵ The point of interest is that the Deucalionids are not typically epic heroes, but persons with supernatural characteristics who were more suited to folklore. The epic traditions concerning these heroes were laid over the pre-existing structure.⁶ That is not to say that epic – especially the poems of the *Cycle* – contained no monstrous or magical elements (such as talking horses – Xanthus – or deathless heroes – Memnon); but one imagines that even the *Cycle* with its novelistic colours was like Homeric epic largely interested in the human (re-)actions of human heroes,⁷ and that its poets were aware that to use the monstrous and the magical was to draw from a non-heroic register.

* I should like to acknowledge the valuable introduction to the problem of Meleager given to me by C. J. Cressey.

¹ Cf. S. Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk Literature*² (Copenhagen, 1956), E765.1.2; J. Kakridis, *Homeric Researches* (Lund, 1949), pp. 127–48 (on modern survivals in Greece and elsewhere).

² For a basic bibliography of the question, see H. Bannert, *WS* 15 (1981), 69 n. 1.

³ For my approach, cf. esp. J. Rosner, *Phoenix* 30 (1976), 314–27.

⁴ This is convincingly shown by Kakridis, *op. cit.* (n. 1), pp. 14ff.

⁵ The other cycles are the Theban cycle and the Troy cycle; see M. L. West, *The Hesiodic Catalogue of Women. Its Nature, Structure, and Origins* (Oxford, 1985), p. 137. For the Deucalionids, see pp. 138ff.

⁶ West, *op. cit.* (n. 5), p. 139.

⁷ Of the summaries of the *Trojan Cycle* from Proclus the *Cypria* and perhaps the *Telegony* appear to have contained enough in the way of mystery/magic together with love and travel (Castor and Polydeuces, Iphigeneia, Helen and Paris, Achilles and Deidameia; Telegonus' unknown murder of Odysseus, Telegonus and Penelope, Telemachus and Circe) to set them apart from Homeric epic; but the other poems (*Aethiopis*, *Little Iliad*, *Iliou Persis*, *Nostoi*) appear quite close to Homer in their concern with life and death, and the monstrous or magical (Memnon, Laocoon) are perhaps exceptions. On Homer's own tendency to exclude monstrous or magical material (along with other 'unheroic' elements), see J. Griffin, *JHS* 97 (1977), 39–48, esp. 45, *id.* *Homer on Life and Death* (Oxford, 1980), pp. 165–7; cf. further on differences

It is also likely that the epic version of the Meleager story is of great antiquity and pre-Homeric. The genealogies of the heroes of the Aetolian–Elean–Pylian and other cycles crystallized not later than the eighth century.⁸ Since the lifeblood of these genealogies lies in the traditions which inform them, it is likely that the traditions themselves had been fixed by the same period and existed earlier. Support for this is offered by the Athenian heroes: with the Attic kings, for example, we know that already existing traditions were harmonized with genealogies which were invented later from the time of the sixth to fourth centuries.⁹ Thus Meleager's death in battle at the hands of Apollo in [Hesiod] *Eoiai* fr. 25.12, *Katabasis of Peirithoos* fr. 280.2 M–W, and the lost epic *Minyas* (Pausanias 10.31.3 = *Minyas* fr. 5 Kinkel), will not be an extension of the *Iliad* designed to fill in the parallels between Meleager and Achilles which Homer neglected, but part of an already existing epic tradition that is as old as Homer, if not older.¹⁰ That is what Homer himself suggests at 9.524–6 where the story of Meleager is numbered by Phoenix among 'the famous deeds of heroes of old [κλέα ἀνδρῶν ἡρώων]', clearly picking up the κλέα ἀνδρῶν which Achilles is singing of as the embassy arrives at 9.189.

How far did Homer incorporate and adapt this epic version, and how far did he invent for his own purposes? Phoenix's speech is a fine avowal of the requisite qualities of the Homeric hero, the 'speaker of words and doer of deeds' as he puts it at 443. Despite certain inconcinnities (especially the duals at 182–98 which exclude Phoenix),¹¹ the speech is clearly meant to be seen as more important than those of Odysseus and Aias which frame it. There is not only the story of Meleager, which is integral to it and fundamental to the whole *Iliad* (enjoying special links with Nestor's reminiscence and appeal to Patroclus in Book 11), but also Phoenix's personal history (438–95), and the allegory of the Prayers (502–12).¹²

between Homer and the *Cycle*, D. B. Munro, *Homer's Odyssey. Books XIII–XXIV* (Oxford, 1901), pp. 340–84; A. Severyns, *Le cycle épique dans l'école d'Aristarque* (Liège, 1928), pp. 141–9.

⁸ West, op. cit. (n. 5), pp. 164ff., suggests before 776 B.C. for the Elean–Aetolian genealogies. See also K.-E. Petzold, *Historia* 25 (1976), 151 on Meleager's probable 8th century integration into the heroic network; beware his seductive speculation (162f.) on the epithets applied to Calydon in the *Iliad* – ἐπώνυ in the Meleager story rather than αἰπεινή and περρήεσσα in other books reflects the pre-Homeric power and prosperity of the city and therefore Homer is incorporating earlier material: in fact all three epithets are consistent with what is known of Mycenaean Calydon (R. Hope Simpson and J. Lazenby, *The Catalogue of the Ships in Homer's Iliad* [Oxford, 1970], p. 109).

⁹ See R. Parker in *Interpretations of Greek Mythology*, ed. J. Bremmer (London, 1987), pp. 187–90, 193ff.; West, op. cit. (n. 5), pp. 132–3 on political affiliations of Erechtheus and Pandion invented in the sixth century (cf. p. 164, 'the Attic section [of the *Eoiai*] as a whole is not necessarily any more ancient').

¹⁰ Earlier scholars, trying to identify the sources of the *Eoiai*, saw what is now fr. 25.13 M–W (μαρνάμενος Κουρήσι περί Πλευρώων μακεδνή) as a reworking of Homer by reading μαρνάμενος Κουρήσι, γυναῖκι δὲ πείθετο κεδνή (A. Hunt, P.Oxy. 2075 fr. 1 col. i [1927]; J. Schwartz, *Pseudo-Hesioda* [Leiden, 1960], pp. 321, 404); the true reading was assured by E. Lobel, P.Oxy. 2481 fr. 5 (b) col. ii (1962).

¹¹ On the duals, see W. Schadewaldt, *Iliasstudien* (Leipzig, 1938), p. 136; D. Lohmann, *Die Komposition der Reden in der Ilias* (Berlin, 1970), pp. 229–31; A. Thornton, A. Köhnken, *Glotta* 56 (1978), 1–4, 5–14 respectively.

¹² On the autobiography and allegory, see D. Lohmann, op. cit. (n. 11), pp. 245–53, 267; Rosner, art. cit. (n. 3), 315–22; Bannert, art. cit. (n. 2), 69–82; A. Heubeck, *Kleine Schriften zur griechischen Sprache und Literatur* (Erlangen, 1984), pp. 134f.; G. Held, *CQ* 37 (1987), 247–53. The parallels between Phoenix's own life, Achilles, and Meleager, are especially strong (a simple example [cf. Lohmann, p. 259] is the unifying function of the routine *ἱππηλάτα* used of Phoenix at 432, of Meleager's father Oeneus at 581, and of Peleus by Phoenix *in loco parentis* [438ff.] at 438). On links with *Iliad* 11, 16, 23, see Lohmann, esp. pp. 261–71; Bannert, 91–3.

The parallels of the Meleager tale to the general situation of the poem are striking. The Aetolians are fighting the Curetes: 'The Curetes and battle-keen Aetolians were fighting | About the city of Calydon, slaying one another, | The Aetolians defending lovely Calydon | And the Curetes eager to destroy it in war' (529–32). Meleager's prowess, like Achilles', is a decisive factor: 'Now as long as Meleager, dear to Ares, was in the war, | Things went badly for the Curetes, and they could not | Remain outside their wall, though they were very many' (550–2). There is no difficulty about *τείχος* in 552 signalling the Curetes' own wall (of Pleuron) rather than Calydon,¹³ for Meleager is on the attack here (*πολέμιζε* 550) and in the epic tradition he, like Achilles, was unstoppable when he chose to rampage across the battlefield 'fighting the Curetes about lofty Pleuron' ([Hesiod] fr. 25.9–13 M–W., cf. Bacchylides, *Ode* 5.144–51). Homer expects his audience to recall the total context of the epic story of Meleager and so lines 550–2 clearly recall 352–3 where Achilles tells Odysseus that as long as he was in the war, 'Hector had no wish to start fighting away from his wall'.

In the particular situation of the poem Achilles has, of course, withdrawn from action because of his *μῆνις*. Meleager does the same: 'But when anger came upon Meleager, which in others also | Swells the spirit in the breast, wise though they be, | He, then, enraged at heart by his dear mother Althaea, | Stayed lying beside his wedded wife, beautiful Cleopatra' (553–6). The reversal of fortune in the main story is brought about by Thetis' entreaty to Zeus; in the Meleager story this is again achieved *mutatis mutandis* by a mother's intervention (566–72). And the parallel with the situation of the Achaeans is plain: the Trojans reach and surmount the Greek palisade while the Curetes are at the gates of Calydon. The desperate situation produces in both instances an embassy of supplication to the disgruntled hero; in both cases conciliatory gifts are offered.

Homer makes mention several times of heroes who lived before the Trojan war.¹⁴ Some of these have a paradigmatic function. So, Tydeus is presented by Agamemnon as an example to his son Diomedes (4.370ff.); Niobe by Achilles to Priam (24.602ff.);¹⁵ Eurytion as a bad example by Antinous to Odysseus (*Odyssey* 21.295ff.). At *Iliad* 9.524–6 Phoenix suggests to Achilles that there were other examples of earlier heroes similarly affected by *χόλος* who had mended their ways.¹⁶ The tale of Meleager's *μῆνις* was also an old one. Meleager's rage clearly goes closely with Althaea's curse which caused it and the embassy which sought to resolve it, and a comparison of the order of suppliants in this embassy with that of similar embassies led Kakridis to suggest that, although Homer had upped the status of Meleager's friends (585–6) for obvious reasons (cf. 521–2), he showed that he was tied to his source by retaining the wife as the principal influence behind Meleager's return to battle.¹⁷ Kakridis' observations on a stock 'scale of affection' had some virtue in helping to account for the presence of Meleager's mother among the petitioners (despite her curse). But if Homer could move the *ἐταῖροι*, he could, had he wanted, have moved also the *παράκοιτις* or have removed the mother.¹⁸

¹³ M. Willcock, *CQ* 14 (1964), 149–50, finds a reference to Pleuron 'without any warrant'; cf. similarly Rosner, art. cit. (n. 3), 323. For the correct interpretation, see Lohmann, op. cit. (n. 11), pp. 254, 260, 262–3.

¹⁴ Griffin, op. cit. (n. 7, 1980), pp. 95–6.

¹⁵ On these two paradigms, see Willcock, art. cit. (n. 13), 141–2, 144–5.

¹⁶ In the *Iliad* itself we hear of the *χόλος* of Paris (6.326ff.), and 'the continual *μῆνις*' of Aeneas (13.460).

¹⁷ Kakridis, op. cit. (n. 1), p. 24: 'the wife, in whom Phoenix has no reason to be interested' etc.

¹⁸ Cf. Petzold, art. cit. (n. 8), 157.

A far better suggestion was offered by Lohmann.¹⁹ The first three groupings, priests, family members, comrades, represent in turn Odysseus (the official representative), Phoenix (the father-figure), and Ajax (the friend), the plurals making for a sort of 'alienation' effect in order to indicate the failure of these groups to persuade Meleager. The fourth group is Meleager's wife Cleopatra, and as Schadewaldt and others realized before Lohmann, when Meleager yields at the eleventh hour to the person he loves and retires with, when she points out the woes of Calydon (591ff.), Homer is hinting strongly at Achilles relenting to Patroclus, the one he loves and retires with, when Patroclus finally confronts him with the woes of the Achaeans at the beginning of Book 16. That the audience was supposed to see a connection between *Κλεο-πάτρη* and *Πάτρο-κλος*, as Howald thought, is unlikely, for the parallel is simply one of affection (which may account for the apparently irrelevant stress on Cleopatra's family history at 556ff.; cf. also below, p. 275).²⁰ As for the presence among the petitioners of Althaea, Meleager's mother, one might suggest that just as she first of all recalls Thetis' part in bringing about the withdrawal from action, so in helping to bring Meleager back to battle we might think of Thetis' rôle in aiding Achilles' return in Books 18–19.

Willcock well remarked that Meleager's anger has been thoroughly adapted to Homer's own requirements.²¹ That does not mean that we are dealing with an Homeric fiction whose internal details were of little concern. Rather, we can see an 'abbreviated-reference style' to known facts.²² In the Homeric version no clear reference is made to the cause of dissension between mother and son, only the clue at 567:

πόλλ' ἀχέουσ' ἥρᾱτο κασιγνήτοιο φόνοιο.

As Willcock pointed out, the allusion depends on Homer's assumption of knowledge of the story (rather than careless abbreviation).²³ Similarly, Homer would expect his audience to remember that the origin of the war involved a woman, Atalanta, and the wrongful appropriation of spoil (Apollodorus 1.8.2–3). The spoil, of course, was given by Meleager to Atalanta and taken from her by Meleager's relatives – nevertheless, while there is no exact balance to the Agamemnon–Briseis–Achilles nexus, the connection is close enough (Phoenix's own troubles were due a woman too, 447ff.).²⁴ Again, the cause of the dispute between Meleager and his relations began with the boar, the *κακόν* (533), sent by Artemis against the land of Oeneus on account

¹⁹ Lohmann, *op. cit.* (n. 11), pp. 255–60.

²⁰ E. Howald, *RhM* 73 (1924), 411. In support of the idea: Schadewaldt, *op. cit.* (n. 11), p. 140; Lohmann, *op. cit.* (n. 11), p. 260; Bannert, *art. cit.* (n. 2), 82; opposed: W. Kraus, *WS* 63 (1948), 17; Kakridis, *op. cit.* (n. 1), pp. 29–30; Willcock, *art. cit.* (n. 13), 150 n. 4 (Howald alone thought that Patroclus was based on Cleopatra rather than *vice versa*). For the love of Achilles and Patroclus, see e.g. Aeschines, in *Timarchum* 133, 142 (K. Dover, *Greek Homosexuality* [London, 1978], p. 197, denies unreasonably, I think, an erotic side to their relationship). On the stress given to Cleopatra herself by her family history, see Bannert, *art. cit.* (n. 2), 83–7.

²¹ Willcock, *art. cit.* (n. 13), 153; 'clear signs of being a paradeigma invented to fit the *Iliad* story'.

²² As described by G. S. Kirk, *The Songs of Homer* (Cambridge, 1962), pp. 164–9.

²³ Willcock, *art. cit.* (n. 13), 149.

²⁴ The close association of Atalanta with Meleager was doubtless established firmly by Euripides' lost *Meleager*, which spanned the time from the preparations for the hunt to Meleager's death; see T. Webster, *The Tragedies of Euripides* (London, 1967), pp. 233–6. In art, interest in Atalanta, Meleager, and the boar's hide is not shown until the later fourth century B.C. (J. Boardman, in *LIMC* II.1, 942 no. 27ff.). However, her earliest appearances from ca. 580 B.C. are in a series of black-figure vases portraying the hunt (id., 940 no. 1ff., 948f.; she is present with Meleager in nos. 2 and 11), and it is not unreasonable to suggest that her part in the origin of the war was known in Homer's time.

of a religious infringement. In *Iliad* 1 Apollo sends plague against the Greeks because of the impiety of Agamemnon in the treatment of the priest Chryses, and the resolution of this problem is what initiates the quarrel between Agamemnon and Achilles. This is another reflection, subtler and less overt, to be remembered from the full story. Likewise, Apollo's introduction into the sub-story of Meleager's mother-in-law, Marpessa (557ff.), is perhaps not fortuitous – his violence tacitly suggests his later rôle in the death of both Meleager ([Hesiod] fr. 25.12, fr. 280.2 M–W) and Achilles himself.²⁵

Homer expects full knowledge of the cause of the war between Calydon and Pleuron. We have seen above (p. 273) that he expects his audience also to be aware of Meleager's progress on the battlefield during the war, a war in which Apollo provided the fitting end for a great hero (p. 272). These facts and details were clearly in a pre-Homeric epic version. Homer did not pluck Meleager the hero out of thin air. What, then, of the curse and the *μῆνις*? The curse might have been in the epic tradition – Meleager was here equally responsible for the death of Thestius' sons, and so there was potential for a mother's anger and imprecation.²⁶ Meleager's rage also has some internal coherence, for it is a part of the process which results in his death (alluded to at 571; cf. 2.642) at the hands of Apollo. However, the *μῆνις* is so intimately connected with the embassy that, given Lohmann's persuasive demonstration that the embassy is Homer's invention to fit the particular context of the delegation of Odysseus, Phoenix, and Ajax, and given too the obvious links between Cleopatra and Patroclus, it is hard to believe that Meleager's *μῆνις* is not also part of Homer's plan, mirroring the poem's most important theme. We must then accept that the cause of that anger, Althaea's curse, is a part of this Homeric fiction, which would seem to be confirmed by the parallel curses of Phoenix's father and his like instigation of an *Ἐρινύς*/*Ἐρινὺς* and *ἐπαινὴ Περσεφόνηια* (454, cf. 571; 457, cf. 569), and so on.²⁷ In sum, we cannot say that Homer falsely claims the existence of earlier heroic tales of *χόλος* at 524–6; but we must reject the statement at 527–8 that in the story of Meleager as he tells it he is about to recall *τόδε ἔργον... πάλαι, οὗ τι νέον γε | ὥς ἦν*.

The Meleager digression has several functions: it looks back over earlier incidents in the *Iliad*; it is contemporaneous when an old horseman tells a stubborn prince how an old horseman *inter alios* addressed another stubborn prince; and it carries the story forward by promoting a possible resolution – that Achilles will eventually give way, like Meleager, and be worse off for his delay. Indeed, even after the abrasive words of Aias (624–42), Achilles has modified his position to the extent that he says he will fight when Hector reaches his own ship and those of the Myrmidons (650ff.; 16.62ff.) – cf. Meleager at 588ff. The parallelism of the two stories is not complete – Meleager yields to a wife, not a friend, and mother is against son, not for him. But the extent to which Homer has been able to exploit and remodel an earlier version shows he was content with the imperfect match, and perhaps ultimately this was necessary to prevent artifice from becoming blatant. Quite apart from the fine

²⁵ Although Pausanias (10.31.3) distinguishes between the Erinyes in Homer and Apollo in the *Eoiai* and the *Minyas* as the cause of Meleager's death, in Homer himself the rôle of the Erinyes is unclear and Homer does not contradict the version in which Apollo brings about the hero's death.

²⁶ Cf. Willcock, art. cit. (n. 13), 153 ('The mother's curse may have existed in a previous epic version, but we have no evidence'). In the situation envisaged by Homer Meleager has so far killed only one of Althaea's brothers before the curse; Apollodorus says he had killed *τινας* before and killed *τοὺς λοιποὺς* when he returned to action (1.8.3).

²⁷ For the parallelism, see Heubeck, op. cit. (n. 12), p. 135; Bannert, art. cit. (n. 2), 78f.

characterization, contrast and relief, all achieved within the martial ethos of the poem, the number of similarities, direct and covert, to the central theme must preclude attempts to condemn the story of Meleager and the speech of Phoenix as somehow un-Homeric.²⁸

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²⁸ Un-Homeric – cf. D. L. Page, *History and the Homeric Iliad* (Berkeley, 1959), pp. 297, 310ff.; Kirk, op. cit. (n. 22), pp. 217f.