

THE CONCEPT OF PLOT AND THE PLOT OF THE *ILLAD*

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THE MEANING OF A WORK OF ART is not something which can be extracted from a container, like a message from a bottle; every element is potentially meaningful, potentially expressive of the author's mind and intention. And one potentially expressive element of a story is the shape of the plot. In this essay I examine the plot of the *Iliad*, using some concepts derived from recent theories of narrative. The complex nesting structure of successive conflicts in this narrative expresses, I believe, a world of radical instability, a world in which no resolution leads finally to peace. This pattern begins with the first incident in the story and continues to the very end.

Chryses' supplication of Agamemnon at the beginning of the *Iliad* (1.17–21) takes the form of speech, but it is also an action: a speech act, to use the terminology of the school initiated by J. L. Austin (1975 [1962]) and continued by John Searle (1979; 1985) among others.¹ It is also an action in a sense specific to narrative—without it, the story of the *Iliad* could hardly happen. Cedric Whitman (1965: 131) quite rightly calls Agamemnon's insult to Chryses "the germ of the plot." If Chryses had not come as a suppliant to Agamemnon, and if Agamemnon had not scornfully rejected the supplication, then Apollo would not have sent the plague, Agamemnon would not have argued with Achilles, and Achilles would not have withdrawn from the battle. Chryses' speech is part of the sequence of cause and effect which makes up the specific plot of the *Iliad*, and thus it is an action within the plot. Not every speech (or speech act) is an action in this sense.²

As it happens, the text of the *Iliad* provides a convenient test of this distinction. After Achilles and Agamemnon argue, Achilles calls to his mother for help. She comes to him from the depths of the sea and asks why he is grieving:

τέκον, τί κλαίεις; τί δέ σε φρένας ἵκετο πένθος;
ἐξαύδα, μὴ κεύθε νόω, ἵνα εἶδομεν ἄμφω. (1.362–363)

Child, why do you weep? And what grief has reached your heart?
Speak, do not hide it in your mind, so that we may both know.

Achilles answers:

οἶσθα· τίη τοι ταῦτα ἰδυίη πάντ' ἀγορεύω; (1.365)

You know; why should I tell all these things to one who knows?

¹ For discussion of Chryses' supplication as a speech act, see Clark 1998.

² "Some things that happen in the epic tale may be moving or frightening to the audience, but they are not essential for the story. Had they not happened, the *Iliad* would still be the *Iliad*" (Bakker 1997: 166). Bakker argues that the moments when "the very fate of epic characters, or the right course of epic action, are at stake" are the moments when epic characters receive their epithets (166–167).

Epic is inconsistent: in principle the gods know everything, but omniscient characters are inconvenient for a story, so in practice the narrative treats the gods as if they need to be told—even as if they can be deceived. Narratology trumps theology. And so Achilles summarizes for Thetis the argument and the events which led to it.³

Although the first few lines of Achilles' explanation introduce information new to the audience, the bulk of it simply repeats what we have already heard. Aristarchus athetized 1.366–392, but G. S. Kirk (1985: 91) defends the passage:

Aristarchus evidently noticed, as he would, that neither the summary as a whole nor the exact repetitions it contained are strictly necessary, and athetized on that account alone. But we know (a) that repetitions are part of the oral style, and (b) that so too, on occasion, are summaries or résumés.

After a close analysis of the passage, Kirk (1985: 92) concludes:

Such a survey demonstrates that the whole passage is far from being a mere mechanical summary of what has preceded; it naturally makes extensive use of the earlier language, but often departs from it in order to bypass the omitted speeches or make the condensation more fluent. This is not the work of a rhapsode or decadent singer, but of a singer working within the living oral tradition. There is no obvious reason for denying that he is the main composer himself

I have no doubt that the passage should stand in the text, but all the same we may take the athetization as a hint that the summary of the events does not have the same status as the events themselves. The events were narrative actions and their authenticity could not be questioned; this summary is not a narrative action and if it were removed from the text, the story could still proceed.

The distinction I am making here—between narrative actions and those actions which are not properly a part of the narrative—is roughly equivalent to the distinction made by Roland Barthes between “kernels” (also called “cardinal functions”) and “catalysts.” Kernels are the hinges of the story: “Pour qu’une fonction soit cardinale, il suffit que l’action à laquelle elle se réfère ouvre (ou maintienne, ou ferme) une alternative conséquent pour la suite de l’histoire, bref qu’elle inaugure ou conclue une incertitude . . .” (Barthes 1981: 15). Catalysts, on the other hand, serve to fill in the narrative space which separates the kernels: “entre ces points d’alternative . . . , les catalyses disposent des zones de sécurité, des repos, des luxes . . .” (Barthes 1981: 16). As Seymour Chatman (1969: 14) notes, “catalysts are always deletable,” and thus they are the passages which in the Homeric text may be subject to athetization. It is not the case, however, that catalysts are insignificant: “un récit n’est jamais fait de fonctions: tout, à des degrés divers, y signifie . . .” (Barthes 1981: 13). The issue is not the signifying

³For discussion of *Il.* 1.366–392 as a “mirror story,” see de Jong 1985. De Jong argues that Achilles temporarily assumes the same “authorial position” as the narrator, that the mirror story allows us to understand Achilles’ mental state, and that the repetition of long passages can be explained not only in terms of oral composition, but also defended in terms of narrative technique.

power of the narrative unit, but the position of the unit within the narrative act: "disons qu'on ne peut supprimer une noyau sans altérer l'histoire, mais qu'on ne peut supprimer une catalyse sans altérer le discours" (Barthes 1981: 16).

The method of analyzing narrative in terms of its kernel events, its cardinal functions, has been elaborated by Claude Bremond; in his system, cardinal events occur in triads, "elementary sequences," made up of the three obligatory phases of all processes: the event which opens the process, the event which realizes the process, and the event which closes the process (Bremond 1981: 66).⁴ Bremond notes, however, that any triad can be left unaccomplished, so the complete triad is an ideal form not always realized and closed. Furthermore, the last element of one triad can become the first element of another triad: thus the last element in the triad "méfait à commettre/malfaissance/méfait commis" may be the same event as the first element in the triad "fait à rétribuer/processus rétributeur/fait rétribué." The linking and subordination of kernel events can produce complex structures. The power of this analytical system has been demonstrated in practice by Thomas Pavel; in Pavel's modification of Bremond's system, the fundamental narrative unit is the "move," which is composed of only two parts, the "problem" and the "solution"; in addition, a move may include an "auxiliary" in order to reach its solution (Pavel 1985: 17-18).

In these terms, the story of the *Iliad* begins with Chryses' problem: his daughter has been taken by Agamemnon. Chryses tries to solve his problem through supplication, but his supplication fails, and this failure becomes a problem in its own right, an act of evil to be revenged. Chryses attempts to solve this new problem through appeal to Apollo, which succeeds, and this success is the act of revenge, in the form of the plague. The plague itself is a problem for the Achaeans, but (after some other events) it is eliminated: Chryses' daughter is returned to him and he prays to Apollo to relieve the suffering of the Achaeans. But in the meantime, the elimination of the problem which is the plague has produced another problem: the quarrel of Agamemnon and Achilles, and Achilles' subsequent withdrawal. It would be possible to chart the whole plot of the *Iliad* in this way, and although such an analysis would demonstrate the complexity of the narrative structure, it is not clear that a complete analysis of every move in the plot would repay the effort.

A notable feature of Bremond's system which is retained by Pavel is that all the elementary sequences are at the same level of analysis: no sequence is marked in the theory as particularly important in the formation of the plot as a whole. It seems clear, however, that not all events in a plot are on an equal footing.⁵ Following Eugene Dorfman, we may divide the incidents of a story into two

⁴ Bremond's system of plot analysis, like most modern plot theory, can be considered an attempt to elucidate Aristotle's fundamental but rather enigmatic remark (*Poet.* 7) that a plot must have a beginning, a middle, and an end.

⁵ "In any given narrative, some incidents are more important than others; it would be difficult to imagine an artistic narrative in which every happening carried equal weight in the development of the story" (Dorfman 1969: 5).

classes: “*central or core incidents*, whose function is to serve as the central focus of a larger episode, and marginal incidents, which cluster around the core, supporting it and filling out the episode” (Dorfman 1969: 5).⁶ It is not necessary here to detail the results of Dorfman’s study, which is restricted to a particular class of narrative, medieval romance epic, but his general conclusion is quite relevant to our topic. In Dorfman’s analysis, the core incidents of medieval romance epic fall into a sequence of four types: Quarrel, Motive, Act, and Result. Each of these has subtypes; thus, the Quarrel may be Family, Dynastic, Lovers’, or Lovers’-triangle; the Motive may be Insult, Killing, Inheritance, or Marital break; the Act may be Treachery or Prowess; and the Result may be Punishment or Reward (Dorfman 1969: 71).

Dorfman’s schema can be simplified, I believe, leaving only two types of core incidents: the Motive, which is for the most part some kind of Insult, and the Result, which may be either Punishment or Reconciliation; the Quarrel is really identical to the Insult or the setting for it, while the Act is really the means by which the Result is brought about. This simplification assimilates Dorfman’s system to Pavel’s system of Problem and Solution, but with the crucial stipulation that two incidents, one at the beginning and one at the end, have a special importance in the architecture of the plot.

Although this system seems intuitively reasonable, it is not, therefore, trivial, especially since only a very few kinds of incident seem to fall in these two positions. In the narratives analyzed by Dorfman, the crucial incident at the beginning of the story is almost always some kind of Insult, while the crucial incident at the end is either Punishment or Reconciliation. A broader selection of narratives, including, for example, novels, would also discover Birth and Death, Meeting and Marriage, Arrival and Departure, Departure and Return, with some variations and combinations of these pairs; although other pairs occur, these seem to account for a very large number of narratives, perhaps something like nine out of ten.⁷ This system, which distinguishes a structural hierarchy of incidents and which also specifies that only certain kinds of incidents ordinarily occur in the crucial structural positions, is more powerful than earlier models of narrative construction.

Some narratives fit the schema I have proposed quite easily. The *Argonautica*, for example, is fundamentally a plot of Departure and Return, although a Meeting and Marriage plot is embedded in the larger story. The first part of the *Aeneid* is fundamentally a plot of Arrival and Departure, with an embedded Meeting,

⁶ Note here that this distinction between core and marginal incidents is not the same as Barthes’s distinction between kernels and catalysts; both core and marginal incidents are kernels.

⁷ To say that some incidents have a particular structural importance is not to say that the other incidents are unimportant: “The superstructure, defined here as the total inventory of incidents that occur from the beginning to the end of the story, is not to be considered a minor or inferior aspect of the narrative to be analyzed, but simply a functionally different kind of structure from that of the narremic core” (Dorfman 1969: 6).

though the corresponding Marriage notably does not occur, except in the mind of Dido. There is no requirement, however, that the fit be easy, and difficult cases do not invalidate the system if the system can show how and why the difficulties occur; a failure of fit may be significant rather than faulty.

In the terms of the schema which I have derived from Dorfman's model of narrative, Chryses' supplication of Agamemnon, which we have seen to be both a speech act and an action of plot, and which according to Whitman (1965: 131) is the germ of the plot, must nevertheless be a subordinate element, at least in the structure of the narrative; its structural subordination, of course, does not deprive it of thematic significance. The crucial incident at the beginning of the poem must be the Quarrel between Agamemnon and Achilles and the resulting Insult:

μήνιν αἶδε, θεά, Πηλεΐάδεω Ἀχιλῆος . . .
 ἐξ οὗ δὴ τὰ πρῶτα διαστήτην ἐρίσαντε
 Ἀτρεΐδης τε ἄναξ ἀνδρῶν καὶ δῖος Ἀχιλλεύς. (1.1, 6-7)

Sing, goddess, the wrath of Akhiles, Peleus' son . . .
 From the time when first they stood apart in contention,
 The son of Atreus, king of men, and brilliant Akhilleus.

The placement of the first crucial incident can vary: it can come directly at the beginning of the story or it can follow a few other incidents which lead to it. In the *Iliad*, the first crucial element, the argument between Achilles and Agamemnon, follows the "germ" of the plot, the supplication of Chryses. If a large number of incidents precede the first crucial incident, they may be held off and told in retrospect.⁸ These choices are not simply a matter of convenience. Henry James noted in his preface to *Roderick Hudson* that "Really, universally, relations stop nowhere, and the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally but to draw, by a geometry of his own, the circle within which they shall happily *appear* to do so" (James 1934: 5). However, some authors—Balzac is a good example—like to emphasize the relationship between the events which lie within the circle of the story and those which lie outside it, and thus we often find a long and leisurely account of the events which precede the first crucial incident.

The epic stories are not just like novels. The epic poet could not simply draw a circle around his story, even if he wanted to, and pretend that the rest of the tradition did not exist. The epic cycle is larger than any epic's narrative circle. Of course the poet can emphasize, alter, or omit particular incidents within the tradition: the death of Iphigeneia, for example, is never explicitly mentioned in the *Iliad*.⁹ But the tradition as a whole cannot be omitted; the narrator of *David Copperfield* knows nothing about *Oliver Twist*, but the narrator of the Homeric epics knows about Herakles and Niobe and Jason—and so on.

⁸In the *Aeneid*, for example, the Arrival is narrated in Book One, but Books Two and Three are retrospective. A more complicated deployment of the same structure occurs in the *Odyssey*, and even in the *Iliad* we see traces of a retrospect with the Catalogue and the Teichoskopia.

⁹But I argue in Clark 1998 that this incident may be implied in Book One.

Even so, the poet has some considerable power to deploy the elements of his particularly story. The deployment of the first crucial event, the Quarrel, after a number of other incidents suggests that the Quarrel is part of a larger world, a world which contains characters like Chryses and his daughter, who may play no further role in the story, but who exist in the epic world nonetheless.

Could the *Iliad* have begun directly with the Quarrel and the Insult? Analysis of time relationships in the Homeric poems suggests that the sort of massive dislocations of time common in modern narratives was not a feature of the Homeric style, but some summaries and flashbacks do occur (Richardson 1990: 89–108). In effect we have a summary of the events leading up to the Quarrel, in Achilles' report to Thetis (*Il.* 1.366–392). What about a plot which would leave out the Chryses episode, which would begin, say, with Agamemnon's taking Briseis from Achilles just because he wants to and because he can enforce his will? The effect of such a plot would surely be very different from the effect of the *Iliad*; it is not our task, however, to construct other, inferior poems, but to analyze the poem which we have.

The episode of Chryses is in itself a little epic of Insult, Punishment, and Reconciliation.¹⁰ Moreover, the episode of Chryses does not so much lead to the Quarrel, since the plots are not chained end-to-end. Rather, the first crucial incident of the *Iliad* proper is contained within the little epic of Chryses. In Pavel's system, this first crucial incident is embedded and subordinate—even though, as we have seen, in Dorfman's model, it is the episode of Chryses which is subordinate to the larger plot: the two models give two different accounts of a complex plot. In the world of Homeric narrative, one problem leads to another problem; moreover, the second problem is contained within the first, and yet that which is contained is larger than its container. The story of Chryses is settled by the end of Book One, but the conflict which it produced grows beyond its boundaries.

Essentially the same structure continues in the larger story of the poem. In Book Nineteen, as we have seen, the issue of the Quarrel has been settled and some measure of reconciliation in the ranks of the Achaians has been achieved. But now Achilles is consumed by another story, the story of the death of Patroklos, which has its beginning within the Quarrel, but which is larger than the Quarrel. Thus the microcosmic structure of the Chryses episode is mirrored in the plot of the whole poem.

The death of Patroklos is thus an unforeseen consequence of the initial plot of Insult and Reconciliation, which begins in Book One and which ends in Book Nineteen, and which itself was the consequence of another story, the story of

¹⁰ For a similar analysis of the place of the first incident in the *Iliad*, see Lord 1960: 188: "The events leading up to the wrath of Achilles in Book I follow a pattern similar to that of the poem itself." Lord's analysis of the plot of the *Iliad* recognizes the repeated plot structures; the vocabulary provided by Bremond, Pavel, and Dorfman allows for a more specific account of how these patterns fit together.

Chryses' supplication. The narrative problem created by the death of Patroklos should be satisfied with the death of Hektor; but even if the plot may be satisfied, Achilles is not. The psychology of the hero thus fails to match the shape of the plot: Achilles can no longer fit comfortably within the boundaries of heroic narrative. Form is essential to art, but this earliest work of the western tradition shows the art of rejecting a slavish adherence to formal principles.

Achilles' attempts to defile Hektor's body are frustrated by the gods, but it is hard to imagine that if they were successful Achilles' anger would be appeased. The psychological ending of this plot must await the development of a new plot, initiated by the death of Hektor. This plot, however, shifts to the other side of the war: Priam's problem is like the problem which faced Chryses in Book One.¹¹ Like Chryses, he dares to approach the enemy camp to make his supplication, and, also like Chryses, he has divine help. In the chiasmic structure of Books One and Twenty-Four, divine assistance comes after Chryses' supplication, but before Priam's. Thetis comes to Achilles with a message from Zeus, and Achilles agrees, with no argument, to release Hektor's body; perhaps he now realizes that there is nothing more he can do to satisfy his anger.

Just as the story began before the beginning of the crucial Quarrel, with a hint of a larger world in which the story occurs, so the story ends after the resolution of the final problem, after the reconciliation of Achilles and Priam, with the return of Hektor's body to Troy, with the laments of Andromache, Hekabe, and Helen, and with Hektor's funeral. In fact, the tradition supplied two endings for the poem. The text which we usually read ends with a summary line:

ὦς οἱ γ' ἀμφίεπον τάφον Ἑκτορος ἵποδάμοιο. (Il. 24.804)

So they attended to the burial of Hektor, the tamer of horses.

But the scholia offer a different ending:

ὦς οἱ γ' ἀμφίεπον τάφον Ἑκτορος ἦλθε δ' Ἀμάζων
Ἄρηος θυγάτηρ μεγαλήτορος ἀνδροφόνοιο . . .

So they attended to the burial of Hektor. And the Amazon came,
the daughter of great-hearted Ares, the slayer of men . . .

This version drops the adjective following the bucolic diaeresis and begins there a new sentence which leads directly into the *Aithiopsis*, the next part of the epic cycle.¹² Although the text we read ends with Hektor's funeral, the tradition allowed an ending which looks forward to other parts of the cycle.

The mentality of a work of literature is displayed not only in the overt meaning of its words, nor even in the symbols which it may deploy, but also in the shape and

¹¹ The parallel between the beginning of the *Iliad* and the end has often been noted: see, for example, Whitman 1965: 257–260; Lohmann 1970: 169; MacLeod 1982: 32–34.

¹² For this treatment of adjectives after the bucolic diaeresis, see Bassett 1905. A different continuation is found in one first-century A.D. manuscript: see Richardson 1993: 361.

structure of its narrative. In the world of the *Iliad*, stories are not independent and divisible; they connect to a larger world of narrative, a world which exists before and after the particular story which has been selected for narration. Moreover, even within the boundaries of the selected story, before one problem is resolved, a new problem begins. This is a world of constant disruption, with no vision of any final resolution.

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