Alternatives to the Epic Tradition:
Homer's Challenges in the *Iliad* *

James V. Morrison
Phoenix College

Among the most tantalizing issues in Homeric studies is the poet's relationship
to his tradition. Scholars have lately been arguing that Homer was the first to
introduce the tragic death of previously immortal heroes, that the scenes set in
Troy were of recent invention, and that characters and mythological paradigms
were freely created.[1] Less attention has been given to Homer's own explicit
remarks concerning the events at Troy, comments made in what I call reversal
passages. These follow the scheme, "Then A would have happened, if B had not
occurred." This formulation is first found at *Iliad* 2.155–6. Agamemnon has
just told his troops that they will never take Troy. Although he is only testing
their morale, they take him at his word and rush to the ships:

(i)   Ἔνθα κεν Ἀργείοισιν ὑπέρμορα νόστος ἐτύχθη,
        εἰ μὴ Ἀθηναίην Ἥρη πρὸς μῦθον ἔειπεν·   2.155–6

Up to this point, Homer has vividly presented the possibility of an early
departure for the Greeks. But this runs counter to an essential feature of the
epic tradition: the Greeks sack Troy. When Hera sends Athene to the Greeks,
the possibility of a "homecoming beyond fate" (ὑπέρμορα νόστος) is averted.
Rather than sailing home, the Greeks come back to the assembly and receive

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[1]On the immortality of heroes, see W. Kullmann, "Gods and Men in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*,"
HSCP 89 (1985) 17. W. M. Sale, "The Formularity of the Place Phrases of the *Iliad*," *TAPA*
117 (1987) 37–9 suggests that scenes in the city itself were most likely of recent invention. On
characters, see H. E. Erbse, "*Ilias* und Patroclie," *Hermes* 111 (1983) 1–15; on paradigms, see
M. M. Willcock, "Ad Hoc Invention in the *Iliad*," *HSCP* 81 (1971) 41–53, with further
bibliography at 43 n. 11. J. Griffin, "The Epic Cycle and the Uniqueness of Homer," *JHS* 97
(1977) 39–53 provides a valuable perspective by comparing the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* with the
fragments of the Epic Cycle. For the sceptical view of this entire enterprise, see F. M.
Combellack, "Homer the Innovator," *CP* 71 (1976) 44–55.

orders to begin battle. The poet uses this reversal passage abruptly to return the story to its expected—that is, its traditional—path.

The present paper falls into two sections. First I describe the various proposals made in reversal passages in the *Iliad*. Throughout the epic, the traditional story or the plot of the *Iliad* is nearly upset; only sudden intervention prevents such an outcome. Then I attempt to reconstruct the poet's attitude toward the tradition as it emerges from these passages. Such pivotal passages have been explained in various ways.[2] Nagy (3, 40) interprets the phrase ὑπέρμορα (or ὑπὲρ μοῖραν) as indicating an untraditional incident, though he insists that the poet has no intention of presenting anything outside the traditional storyline. De Jong (81) says these passages contemplate imaginary, not real, alternatives. Fenik (81) argues that "the poet wishes to push a situation to the extreme, and yet avoid the inevitable consequences." I take these characterizations as a starting point. Beyond this, I think it is possible to uncover the poet's motivations for structuring his narrative in this fashion. Homer remains in many ways a traditional poet, yet this paper argues that he is determined to challenge that tradition by showing how easily events—and his song—might have followed a different course.

In the *Iliad*, there are thirty–three reversal passages introduced in the poet's own voice; five more are found in direct speech. Here I will limit myself to the poet's formulation.[3] To facilitate this survey, I distinguish three broad categories based upon the type of event which would have followed if intervention of some sort had not occurred. We find (A) violations of the traditional story of the Greek sack of Troy; (B) violations of the plot of the *Iliad*, particularly of Zeus' promise to honor Achilles by bringing defeat to the Greeks; and (C) minor shifts in fortune occurring in battle or in the funeral games honoring Patroclus.

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[2]The fullest recent discussion of reversal passages is I. de Jong, *Narrators and Focalizers. The Presentation of the Story in the Iliad* (Amsterdam, 1987) 68–81. In addition, I have found the following to be especially valuable: K. Reinhardt, *Die Ilias und ihr Dichter* (Göttingen, 1961) 107–20, B. Fenik, *Typical Battle Scenes in the Iliad. Studies in the Narrative Techniques of Homeric Battle Description* (Wiesbaden, 1968), G. Nagy, *The Best of the Achaeans. Concepts of the Hero in Archaic Greek Poetry* (Baltimore, 1979), A. Thornton, *Homer's Iliad: Its Composition and the Motif of Supplication* (Göttingen, 1984) esp. 59–63, and S. F. Flory, "Thucydides' Hypotheses about the Peloponnesian War," *TAPA* 118 (1988) 43–56. Although Flory's focus is Thucydides, he contrasts Homeric usage. These works are cited hereafter by author's last name. For further bibliography, see de Jong 68–9.

[3]I follow de Jong 69 on which passages may legitimately be grouped together. Flory 48 limits the number to 28 (see his n. 14). For reversal passages in characters' speech, see note 10 below.

Before looking at examples of each type, the assumptions underlying my approach should be made clear. In particular, I have assigned certain passages to each category in accordance with my conception of the nature of Homer's enterprise. I do not insist upon an inflexible tradition: in performing an epic song, each singer may introduce minor variations. A basic story nevertheless persists.[4] I assume that according to the epic tradition (as Homer and his audience knew it) the Greeks succeed in sacking Troy, that certain heroes live to see the Greek victory, and that this success is achieved by the stratagem of the Trojan horse, not through an assault by Patroclus or Achilles, after which the surviving Greeks return home. Beyond this general outline, it is extremely difficult to determine which particular episodes in the *Iliad* are a part of the tradition. The story of Achilles' anger and the Greek defeat may well be an invention of Homer.[5]

(A) In the first category, the traditional story would be upset if intervention had not occurred. First, in passage (i) cited above, the Greeks would return home without sacking Troy (2.155–56). Second, various heroes, who traditionally survive the war, would die. Consider the close calls of Aeneas, Menelaus, and Nestor:

(ii)   Καί νύ κεν ἔνθ' ἀπόλοιτο ἄναξ ἀνδρῶν Αἰνείας,
        εἰ μὴ ἄρ' ὀξὺ νόησε Διὸς θυγάτηρ Ἀφροδίτη,
        μήτηρ, ἥ μιν ὑπ' Ἀγχίσῃ τέκε βουκολέοντι   5.311–3
                           (cf. 20.288–91)

(iii)   Ἔνθα κέ τοι, Μενέλαε, φάνη βιότοιο τελευτὴ
        Ἕκτορος ἐν παλάμῃσιν, ἐπεὶ πολὺ φέρτερος ἦεν,
        εἰ μὴ ἀναΐξαντες ἕλον βασιλῆες Ἀχαιῶν,
        αὐτός τ' Ἀτρεΐδης εὐρὺ κρείων Ἀγαμέμνων
        δεξιτερῆς ἕλε χειρὸς ἔπος τ' ἔφατ' ἔκ τ' ὀνόμαζεν. 7.104–8

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[4]A. B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, MA 1960) 119–20 remarks that for all the variants of a single song, such "multiformity is essentially conservative." Nagy 3 (paragraph 6 n.) allows for the singer adjusting to local traditions (see n. 19 below). The absence of non–Homeric epic dooms us to ignorance regarding how Homer's predecessors treated the tradition. Still, the brevity of several allusions in both epics—*Il.* 3.351–4, 24.27–30, *Od.* 11.543–65, e.g.—certainly implies an assumed familiarity with the general storyline. The specific plot of the *Iliad* may be set against this storyline once it is constructed in broad outline.

[5]Achilles' wrath may have been modeled on an earlier story. The recurring motif of a hero who has withdrawn from battle in anger, e.g. Paris or Meleager (6.325–42, 9.524ff., esp. 553–72), indicates a story pattern which is familiar to the audience. L. Edwards, "The Wrath of Paris: Ethical Vocabulary and Ethical Type in the *Iliad*," *AJP* 108 (1987) 223 (n. 8 and 9) lists words meaning anger. Fenik 121–2, 238 offers an excellent discussion of the question of model and readaptation. My point is that the *Iliad*, however familiar its plot, may be set against the context of the well–known story of the Greek sack of Troy.

(iv)   ⁻ ˘ ˘ καί νύ κεν ἔνθ' ὁ γέρων ἀπὸ θυμὸν ὄλεσσεν
          εἰ μὴ ἄρ' ὀξὺ νόησε βοὴν ἀγαθὸς Διομήδης.   8.90–91

Homer makes clear that Aeneas is destined to survive the war (20.300–308).
The *Odyssey* suggests that the successful homecomings of Menelaus and Nestor
contrast not only with the traditional fate of Achilles and Patroclus, who die at
Troy, but also with Agamemnon's ill–fated return and Odysseus' belated
reunion with his family (cf. *Odyssey* 3.130–98, 4.492–592, and books 9–12).
The audience expects that Aeneas, Menelaus, and Nestor will live to see the
sack of Troy. Yet reversal passages (ii–iv) call such a presumption into
question.

     Finally, we find the premature sack of Troy. Either Patroclus or Achilles
threatens to take the city.

(v)   Ἔνθα κεν ὑψίπυλον Τροίην ἕλον υἷες 'Αχαιῶν
          Πατρόκλου ὑπὸ χερσί· περιπρὸ γὰρ ἔγχεϊ θῦεν
          εἰ μὴ 'Απόλλων Φοῖβος ἐϋδμήτου ἐπὶ πύργου
          ἔστη, τῷ ὀλοὰ φρονέων, Τρώεσσι δ' ἀρήγων.   16.698–701

(vi)   Ἔνθα κεν ὑψίπυλον Τροίην ἕλον υἷες 'Αχαιῶν,
          εἰ μὴ 'Απόλλων Φοῖβος 'Αγήνορα δῖον ἀνῆκε,
          φῶτ' 'Αντήνορος υἱὸν ἀμύμονά τε κρατερόν τε.   21.544–46
                                                        (cf. 21.515–7)

If we rely upon the *Odyssey* (4.271–89, 8.499–520), Troy's destruction
follows the acceptance of the large horse within the walls: the city is not taken
through military assault.[6] Yet in passages v–vi Apollo must oppose the heroes'
attack to save the city. In sum, Homer raises the possibility of an early return,
the untraditional death of several heroes, and a premature sack of the city. The
reversal passages in category A indicate that, were it not for a specific action at
the last moment, the traditional story of the Trojan War would have been
fundamentally altered.[7]

     (B) Reversal passages do not always challenge the epic tradition in such a
direct way. Some suggest that, if not for a sudden shift, the Greeks would be
successful in battle. This, however, would contradict Zeus' plan to honor
Achilles. The passages in category B would violate the plot of Trojan victory

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[6]This is implied in the *Iliad* as well: see A. Haft, "'The City–Sacker Odysseus' in *Iliad* 2 and
10," *TAPA* 120 (1990) 37–56.

[7]Also in this category: Menelaus' defeat of Paris would bring about the negotiated return of
Helen (3.373–5); Hector's destruction of the Greek fleet would eliminate the possibility of a
Greek homecoming (8.217–9; cf. 9.232–46); and 20.288–91 noted in the text.

as foretold early in the epic. There are several passages where we learn that the Trojans were about to be driven back to Troy:

(vii)   Ἔνθα κεν αὖτε Τρῶες ἀρηϊφίλων ὑπ' Ἀχαιῶν
Ἴλιον εἰσανέβησαν ἀναλκείῃσι δαμέντες,
εἰ μὴ ἄρ' Αἰνείᾳ τε καὶ Ἕκτορι εἶπε παραστὰς
Πριαμίδης Ἕλενος, οἰωνοπόλων ὄχ' ἄριστος.   6.73–6

(viii)   Ἔνθα κεν αὖτε Τρῶες ἀρηϊφίλων ὑπ' Ἀχαιῶν
Ἴλιον εἰσανέβησαν ἀναλκείῃσι δαμέντες,
Ἀργεῖοι δέ κε κῦδος ἕλον καὶ ὑπὲρ Διὸς αἶσαν
κάρτεϊ καὶ σθένει σφετέρῳ· ἀλλ' αὐτὸς Ἀπόλλων
Αἰνείαν ὄτρυνε, δέμας Περίφαντι ἐοικώς,
κήρυκι Ἠπυτίδῃ, ὅς οἱ παρὰ πατρὶ γέροντι
κηρύσσων γήρασκε, φίλα φρεσὶ μήδεα εἰδώς.   17.319–25[8]

Elsewhere potential Trojan withdrawals are averted: 8.130–32, 13.723–5, 15.458–65.

Early in the epic, Zeus' solemn vow to Thetis guarantees a Trojan victory (1.508–30). In book 11, he promises Hector success until sunset (11.191–4~11.206–9). Yet again and again such promises come close to being nullified, as these passages indicate. Although the larger tradition is not confronted, the central plot of the *Iliad* is nearly undermined.[9]

(C) In this category, less momentous events are avoided. Either Odysseus would have continued to kill more Lycians, or Achilles would have continued his slaughter of Trojans.

(ix)   Καί νύ κ' ἔτι πλέονας Λυκίων κτάνε δῖος Ὀδυσσεύς,
εἰ μὴ ἄρ' ὀξὺ νόησε μέγας κορυθαίολος Ἕκτωρ.   5.679–80

(x)   καί νύ κ' ἔτι πλέονας κτάνε Παίονας ὠκὺς Ἀχιλλεύς,
εἰ μὴ χωσάμενος προσέφη ποταμὸς βαθυδίνης,
ἀνέρι εἰσάμενος, βαθέης δ' ἐκ φθέγξατο δίνης·   21.211–3

Rather than presenting uninterrupted success in battle, Homer introduces Hector or the River Scamander to oppose these Greek rampages.

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[8]Nagy 81 (paragraph 25 n. 2) interprets ὑπὲρ Διὸς αἶσαν (17.321) as something which goes beyond the traditional plot of the *Iliad*. I would limit the scope of this phrase to what goes beyond the plot of the *Iliad*, however traditional that may be.

[9]Others in category B: 11.504–7 and 12.290–93 would contradict Zeus' promise of success until sunset; Apollo spurs Hector on to continued glory at 17.70–73; the loss of Patroclus' corpse or Hector's "premature" death (18.165–8, 22.202–4) propose other significant violations of the *Iliad*'s plot.

We find several reversal passages in book 23 at the funeral games of Patroclus. Diomedes, for example, would have made a serious challenge in the chariot race if Apollo had not been angry.

> (xi)   Καί νύ κεν ἢ παρέλασσ' ἢ ἀμφήριστον ἔθηκε,
>   εἰ μὴ Τυδέος υἷι κοτέσσατο Φοῖβος 'Απόλλων,
>   ὅς ῥά οἱ ἐκ χειρῶν ἔβαλεν μάστιγα φαεινήν.   23.382–4
>   (cf. 23.490–91, 23.540–42, 23.733–4)

Although the story might have taken a slightly different path, neither Zeus' plan nor the tradition are at risk.[10]

At this point we can make several general observations about reversal passages. First of all, reversal passages follow the predictable pattern of a past contrary–to–fact condition with certain formulaic elements. The apodosis always comes first, introduced by καί νύ κεν or ἔνθα κεν, while the protasis begins εἰ μή or εἰ μή ἄρ.[11] The verb is usually aorist.[12] The formulaic quality of the reversal passages and parallel usage in the *Odyssey*, in the Homeric Hymns, and in Hesiod imply that reversal passages were part of the epic tradition as Homer received it. Although the *Iliad*'s poet most likely has not invented such a formulation, he has introduced it into this epic with great frequency: approximately once every 450 lines.[13] Secondly, the source of intervention is often divine: a god intervenes seven out of nine times in category A, seven of ten in category B, and four of fourteen in category C. Overall, a god is introduced in slightly more than half of the reversal passages

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[10]Others in category C: 5.22–4, 7.273–6, 11.310–12, 15.121–7, 17.530–2, 17.613–4, 23.154–5, 24.713–5. Of the reversal passages found in direct speech, four of five in the *Iliad* tell of one god saving another god from destruction: 5.388–90, 14.258–9, 18.394–9, 18.454–6. That is, they take on a hyperbolic quality (cf. Sch. bT 5.388–90). The fifth instance occurs in Nestor's tale of past exploits (11.750–52).

[11]Almost without exception: ἀλλά introduces the protasis only three times (5.23, 8.461, 17.321). The apodosis always begins at the start of the hexameter line except at 8.90, 17.613.

[12]On tenses, see de Jong 69.

[13]The situation in the *Odyssey* is somewhat more complicated, since only 7 of 15 reversal passages are presented in the poet's own voice: 5.526–7, 5.436–7 (Odysseus' death would be ὑπὲρ μόρον), 14.32–4, 21.128–9, 21.226–7, 23.241–2, 24.528–30. Several are found in the speech of Menelaus (4.363–6, 4.502–3, reporting Proteus' speech) and of Odysseus (9.79–81, 11.317–20, 11.630–35, 12.71–2); see also 20.222–5, 24.50–52. Cf. Hesiod *Theogony* 836–38, *Aeolidae* fragment 54a 11–12; *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* 242–7, 310–13. The most frequent protasis, εἰ μὴ ἄρ' ὀξὺ νόησε..., is found at *Iliad* 3.374, 5.312, 5.680, 8.91, 8.132, 20.291, *Theogony* 838; cf. *Odyssey* 23.242, *Hymn to Demeter* 313. Fenik 221 remarks that while the reversal formulation does not constitute a typical scene, it is "a stylistic habit whereby a dramatic situation and rescue are quickly and easily created." Flory 46–9 demonstrates that only Thucydides and Homer introduce such hypotheses with comparable frequency.

(18 of 33). Finally, to state the obvious, the story would in each case be changed in some way—either fundamentally or trivially—if such intervention had not occurred. I would now like to consider Homer's purpose in using this formulation. What poetic attitude lies behind the repeated recourse to reversal passages?

Reversal passages may be interpreted from the perspectives of either the audience or the poet. From the audience's point of view, we can explain the introduction of reversal passages in terms of their effect. They often appear at critical junctures in the narrative as momentous events are averted at the last moment, thus providing excitement for those hearing a traditional story. A scholiast has labelled Hera's response at 2.155–6 a *peripeteia*. In chapter 6 of the *Poetics*, Aristotle argues that tragedy's greatest means of emotional power (ψυχαγωγεῖν) is brought about either by reversal (*peripeteia*) or by recognition (1450A33–5). This applies no less to epic narrative.[14]

From the poet's vantage, the function of the reversal passage is quite distinct. The reversal passage allows the poet to comment upon his own story. It expresses a self–conscious reflection upon the shift in the narrative by pointing out the abrupt turn. Beyond this, the poet can use the reversal passage to respond to the epic tradition by posing an alternative to it. When the Greeks take Agamemnon at his word and rush to the ships in book 2, Homer does not simply say, "And then Athene came down and the Greeks returned to assembly." The narrative does not move directly from Greek flight to Odysseus marshalling troops. Instead the poet interposes an editorial comment, going out of his way to emphasize how close the story comes to moving in a different direction. This episode has a logic of its own. Within the reversal passage the poet remarks that, if allowed to continue, such an outcome would follow. Homer disrupts the likely consequences at the last minute, but he makes it obvious that he could have continued by sketching how such an episode would turn out. Homer of course raises such possibilities only to reject them. As far as we can tell, he does not violate the tradition in the *Iliad*. What is noteworthy is the fact that the poet raises the possibility of untraditional events at all. Although he pulls back, Homer shows how the traditional story might have been changed.[15]

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[14]See Sch. bT 2.156: εἰς τοσοῦτον προάγει τὰς περιπετείας ὡς δύνασθαι θεὸν μόνον αὐτὰς μεταθεῖναι. Cf. also Sch. bT 1.195–96 (discussed below) and bT 3.380. The ancient commentators often interpreted reversal passages in terms of the audience's response, as the poet promotes anguish (ἐναγώνιον—bT 8.217; cf. bT 18.151–2, T 23.382) and suspense (πάντα ἤρτηται ἕως τοῦ εἰ μὴ ἄρ᾽ ὀξὺ νόησε—AT 20.288–91). See de Jong 78–9.

[15]W. Schadewaldt, *Iliasstudien* (Leipzig 1938) 153 (note 3) argues that it appears as if events could have broken out of their prescribed route. See also Reinhardt 109, M. M. Willcock, *A*

Earlier I distinguished three categories: the value of such a discrimination is most obvious when considering the function of the gods. In the first two categories, gods intervene to "preserve" the tradition or the plot fourteen of nineteen times. In category C, they act in four of fourteen instances. That is, Homer is more inclined to introduce an intervening god into a reversal passage when the tradition or the plot is at stake.[16] In a sense, though, there is no qualitative difference between reversal passages. They sometimes entail a contradiction of the tradition, but even when this does not happen, Homer shows how easily he might have deviated from the story he is telling. Taken as a group, the reversal passages imply that it is as likely for the Greeks to return home prematurely as it is for Diomedes to win a chariot race; or as easy for the poet to sing one song as another. Although these potential transgressions are never realized, Homer implies that he has the capacity to violate the tradition. The rhetorical assertion and its apparent implications are the key points. The function of reversal passages then may be interpreted at different levels. It is possible to appreciate the dramatic effect of such shifts. The formulation may be seen as the poet's self–conscious reflection on the process of storytelling. I wish now to explicate further the way in which reversal passages contemplate untraditional events, in effect setting a challenge to the tradition itself.

Homer is grappling with a difficult problem. How can he examine or question the tradition within which he is working? Homer uses reversal passages to propose alternative outcomes to the tradition. He has adopted a method of storytelling which treats not only what happened, but what might have happened. Even as he tells a traditional story, the poet is inclined to introduce possibilities which would contradict the tradition. In fact, this formulation is merely one of several techniques designed to explore

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Companion to the Iliad (Chicago, 1976) 19, and H. Pestalozzi, *Die Achilleis als Quelle der Ilias* (Erlenbach–Zürich 1945) 40–41. For an analogous situation in the *Odyssey*, see S. D. Olson, "The Stories of Agamemnon in Homer's *Odyssey*," *TAPA* 120 (1990) 57–71, who argues that confidence in Odysseus' safe return (in accordance with the tradition) is repeatedly undermined.

[16]Fenik 39 remarks that frequently in the *Iliad* "a god prevents something that both the poem and, apparently, the tradition forbade." Cf. Reinhardt 419. The Homeric means of returning the story to its traditional path, of course, finds later use in Attic tragedy. For example, in Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, just as Neoptolemus and Philoctetes are on the point of returning to Greece, the divine Heracles appears. The scholiasts viewed Homer as the inventor of such a technique: Sch. bT 2.156 πρῶτος δὲ καὶ τοῖς τραγικοῖς μηχανὰς εἰσηγήσατο. The key distinction is between (A)—the Trojan story—and (B) and (C)—the *Iliad* as we have it. Further subdivision is not essential, yet the poet's tendency to introduce gods into categories (A) and (B) more frequently than (C)—in addition to what appear to be significant differences in importance—has led me to distinguish (B) major plot alternatives from (C) minor ones.

possibilities outside the standard myth. To go no further than the first 200 lines of the epic, Homer depicts Achilles on the point of killing Agamemnon.

> ˘ ˘ ˘ Πηλείωνι δ' ἄχος γένετ', ἐν δέ οἱ ἦτορ
> στήθεσσιν λασίοισι διάνδιχα μερμήριξεν,
> ἢ ὅ γε φάσγανον ὀξὺ ἐρυσσάμενος παρὰ μηροῦ
> τοὺς μὲν ἀναστήσειεν, ὁ δ' Ἀτρείδην ἐναρίζοι,
> ἦε χόλον παύσειεν ἐρητύσειέ τε θυμόν.
> ἧος ὁ ταῦθ' ὥρμαινε κατὰ φρένα καὶ κατὰ θυμόν,
> ἕλκετο δ' ἐκ κολεοῖο μέγα ξίφος, ἦλθε δ' Ἀθήνη
> οὐρανόθεν· πρὸ γὰρ ἧκε θεὰ λευκώλενος Ἥρη.   1.188–95

Athene appears promising later compensation for Agamemnon's insult, and Achilles restrains himself. Yet if not for Athene's intervention and Achilles' acceptance of her counsel, the Greeks would have lost their leader and the success of their expedition would be thrown into doubt.[17]

The inevitability of the Greeks' success is repeatedly challenged. In book 1, Achilles nearly slays Agamemnon; in book 2, the Greeks almost return home; in book 3, the proposed duel leads to the possibility of a negotiated settlement (cf. 3.67–372). We find such episodes throughout the epic. If not interrupted, they would lead away from the traditional story.[18] The most prominent instance, of course, is Achilles' threat to return home (1.169–71, 9.356–63; cf. 9.393–429). Although Homer does not always express these possibilities with a reversal passage, the narrative is repeatedly pushed toward untraditional outcomes. The reversal passage is simply the most explicit acknowledgement that the narrative has moved in such an unexpected direction.

At each stage of his story, Homer marks out the limits of the tradition by "transgressing" them in this speculative manner. An integral feature of Homer's narrative is its continual exploration of the ways in which the traditional storyline might be upset. The reversal passage is consonant with a manner of storytelling which suggests alternatives, even as the poet ends up telling a traditional tale. Homer demonstrates his own freedom to move in accordance with or contrary to the tradition. In essence, Homer has defined an aesthetic position of independence not by violating the tradition, but by

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[17]Cf. the discussion of this passage by H. Fraenkel, *Early Greek Poetry and Philosophy*, transl. M. Hadas, J. Willis (Oxford 1973) 68–9.

[18]Reinhardt 107 remarks that the danger of a premature homecoming is an ever-recurring accompanying motif (*immer wiederkehrendes Begleitmotiv*) which he feels is a real possibility. See 1.59–61, 2.149–56, 4.170–82, 6.526–9, 8.196–7, 8.510–11, 9.26–8, 9.417–20, 10.310–12, 14.75–81. For a negotiated settlement, cf. also 3.159–60, 7.350–53.

showing how easily he might have deviated from the story as it had been told for many generations.[19]

In his recent book *The Language of Heroes*, Richard Martin argues that the speech of heroes is agonistic. Heroic discourse is competitive; they speak to win. Martin extends this paradigm to Homer's own activity as bard: the singer is also a competitor. The "epic tradition" to which Homer responds then may best be understood concretely as Homer's predecessors and contemporaries.[20] Homer reacts to the story of the Trojan War as it has been sung for many years by challenging the other poets of the day. By driving his song outside its usual course—and by highlighting his challenges to the tradition with reversal passages—Homer can effectively distinguish himself from his peers.[21]

The tradition places constraints upon the final outcome of the *Iliad*. An overwhelming Greek invasion appears to spell doom for Troy, and that fate is ultimately realized. Homer remains a traditional poet to this extent. He refuses, however, to offer a mere chronicle. Although in the end Homer acknowledges the tradition as preeminent in some sense, this does little to diminish the force of his challenges. Beyond telling the tale of Achilles' wrath, Homer makes clear at each stage of his narrative that, were it not for a particular action, decision, or intervention, the story of the Trojan War as we know it would be fundamentally changed. As he takes the opportunity to gesture toward

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[19]Nagy 272 says that "generations after generations of audience [were] conditioned to expect from the performer the most extreme degrees of fixity in content, fixity in form." G.B. Walsh, *The Varieties of Enchantment. Early Greek Views of the Nature and Function of Poetry* (Chapel Hill 1984) 14 describes the danger of a performance receiving only "an impersonal and passive response from the audience." Homer endeavors to avoid this by using unexpected episodes to challenge whatever complacency the audience may feel in hearing a traditional story. Fraenkel (above, note 17) 18–19, Reinhardt 119, and Flory 50–52 all comment on this ability. Although reversal passages always return the story to plot and tradition, the audience would still appreciate the poet's near violations of the plot and tradition over the course of the narrative. We are in a position to recognize this pattern as integral to the poet's method of storytelling.

[20]R. Martin, *The Language of Heroes. Speech and Performance in the Iliad* (Ithaca 1989) 65–77 illuminates the competitive aspect of each Iliadic character's speech. The poet, Martin maintains, competes with previous generations of singers (227–30). On the agonistic aspect of Greek poetry, see M. Griffith, "Contest and Contradiction in Early Greek Poetry," in *Cabinet of the Muses. Essays on Classical and Comparative Literature in Honor of Thomas G. Rosenmeyer*, ed. M. Griffith, D. Mastronarde (Atlanta 1990); on Homer's own competitiveness, see M. Edwards, "Neoanalysis and Beyond," *ClAnt* 9 (1990) 311–25.

[21]That is, there is a kernel of truth in what Telemachus tells Penelope:

> τὴν γὰρ ἀοιδὴν μᾶλλον ἐπικλείουσ' ἄνθρωποι
> ἥ τις ἀκουόντεσσι νεωτάτη ἀμφιπέληται. *Odyssey* 1.351–2

Although, in a very real sense, Homer is telling an old traditional story, he reanimates it—making it "new"—by considering possibilities outside the traditional story as handed down by singers before him.

innumerable other stories, the traditional tale is seen as just one of many possible narratives. This analysis of reversal passages suggests that Homer has chosen to set the events of the *Iliad* against a context of potential crises which could have brought the story to a far different outcome.[22]

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[22]I have limited my discussion to the *Iliad* solely as a story delivered by a singer. To the extent that this song was meant to transmit a historical past—the reality of the sack of Troy—it is possible to interpret Homer's exploration of alternatives as a questioning of the historical inevitability of actual events in the Greek past. Cf. de Jong 80–81.