

## Conflicting Epic Pasts in the *Iliad*

This paper will argue that the *Iliad* hints against its own narrative voice that its vision of the past and the heroic ethos are fictions crafted by epic to justify its societal function. Iliadic heroes inherit their behavioral codes from the past through both paradigmatic stories and instructions from their elders. The value of such education, and hence the heroic ethos it teaches, therefore depends upon the modes by which heroes access their past and its relationship to their present. For the audience, this past coalesces through analeptic references to people and events for the most part already familiar in one form or another. Yet the variety among audience members, mythic versions, and sources from which the audience knew the different versions, to say nothing of the fact that many of the sources would have been fluid series of oral performances, in most cases prevents these references from evoking specific literary texts as the Neo-Analysts imagine. Rather, the references would have generated and tailored a mythic context in the mind of each audience member from his particular knowledge of the referenced elements' attestations in other works. The innumerable sources herein homogenize into an ideated construct that every Iliadic performance presupposes as its antecedent in the epic tradition from which it depends. I call this construct the 'epic past,' a phrase whose ambiguity captures the nature this construct. Thus the past in the *Iliad* is markedly 'epic' in relation to the heroes of the Trojan War, as Kullmann (1968) and Strasburger (1972) observe. In particular, earlier heroes are presented as having been more 'heroic': they were stronger, closer to the gods, and their world was more miraculous. By positing the same distinction between its own heroes and audience, the *Iliad* can use the interaction between its past and present to comment self-reflexively on the nature and function of heroic epic in the contemporary society of its audience.

Because the accuracy of old men's historical knowledge is guaranteed by their own autopsy, elders play a key role in constructing the epic past and mediating the transmission of the heroic ethos to the present. In performing this service, they overlap functionally with the Muses to whom, as Pucci (1980) and Ford (1992) explain, the Homeric narrator looks for accurate knowledge of the past guaranteed by personal autopsy. But Nestor and Priam present fundamentally different pasts and so espouse antithetical heroic values. Nestor, whose introduction characterizes him as an epic poet and disciple of the Muses (Dickson 1995), harmonizes with the Homeric narrator in celebrating past heroes as mightier than his audience. With his eye firmly rooted on the *kleos* of past deeds, he almost always propounds the traditional heroic ethos: respect every man's status and fight fearlessly to win individual glory, even in the face of certain death. Priam too is introduced as a speaker (*Il.* 2.796-797), but as one of peaceful discourse unsuited to the military atmosphere of the *Iliad* (Martin 1989). Unlike Nestor, Priam "looks both to the past (*prossô*) and to the future (*opissô*)" in order to ensure the best outcome for both Achaeans and Trojans (*Il.* 3.309-310). This form of wisdom is exceedingly rare in Homer, but it always describes counsel that explicitly seeks to safeguard human life at the expense of personal glory. Priam's view of the past reflects his ethos: he remembers former

heroes as less impressive than present ones (*Il.* 3.188-190) and so does not mine the past for behavioral models that current heroes should emulate.

The epic narrator—both Homer’s and Nestor—is a traditional vehicle for promulgating proper heroic deportment based on a particular view of the past predetermined by his genre. The different past and consequently different ethos that Priam presents break the monopoly of this traditional voice, calling into question its claims to unadulterated accuracy and, hence, the value of its ethical instruction. Reconsidering the actions and words of the other fathers reveals that Priam’s view is the norm rather than the exception, that most fathers neither followed the heroic ethos their sons attribute to them nor want their sons to risk death for glory. Even Nestor, when observed addressing his men rather than advising the Achaean leaders (*Il.* 4.303-309), concurs that earlier heroes won their famous victories precisely because they did not rush into the forefront seeking death and glory.

### **Works Cited**

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