STRAIGHTFORWARD

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The Narrative Construction of
Heteronormativity from Homer to *The Hobbit*

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For JFB

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The Heroes and the Playwrights

You would think it couldn't be plainer.

'And if the dead forget their dead in the house of Hades, yet even there shall I remember my dear companion', Achilles says in Homer's *Iliad*, after his beloved Patroclus has been killed fighting against Troy.[1] There was no one more important in the hero's life, and his last promise – made to the ghost he tries in vain to embrace – is that they shall be buried together, for Achilles himself will not live long now.

And yet, later writers found much was left unexplained by Homer's description, and the Athenian tragedians felt free to fill in the details themselves. Aeschylus – we have only fragments – seems to have portrayed Achilles as passionately in love with Patroclus, but, says Phaedrus in Plato's *Symposium*, 'Aeschylus talks nonsense when he says that Achilles was Patroclus' lover: he was more beautiful than Patroclus (indeed, he was the most beautiful of all the heroes), and he was still beardless, as well as much younger than Patroclus, as Homer tells us.'[2] Young men were supposed to pursue good-looking youngsters, and well-brought-up youngsters, however responsive, did not seize the initiative. Clearly two such exemplary characters as Achilles and Patroclus would not have subverted the norm in the way Aeschylus suggests.

From the perspective of long centuries, the discussion may seem rather silly. There were two-hundred years or more between Aeschylus and Homer, another five-hundred between Homer and the Trojan War – of course half-mythical heroes did not conform to the customs of classical Athens. Phaedrus could not see beyond the confines of his own time, and we – somewhat smugly – conclude that the debate may teach us more about that particular layer of Attic society than about Achilles. And, provided that we take nothing Plato says as precisely representative, we may be right. There is nothing to be learned about the heroes in the loose interpretations of much later writers.

Apart, that is, from the obvious.

Some twenty-six centuries after Homer, another weaver of tales set in a mythical past told a story to his sons, about a group of dwarves trying to reclaim their lost kingdom. *The Hobbit* was a small-scale story, clearly intended for children, and

the grand sweep of the history of Middle-earth which Tolkien was already developing hardly intruded upon it. But when, seventy-five years later, the tale was turned into a trilogy of films, it was treated in the same grand mode as had been *The Lord of the Rings*. A historic background, mostly taken from Tolkien's other writings, gave the originally rather mercenary company of dwarves a noble purpose, a mighty enemy gave them a heroic one. The epic elements, even those not taken from Tolkien's own works, are in a manner he would certainly recognise. But the filmmakers added something else as well, an episode with no precedent in Tolkien. When the company is taken captive in Mirkwood, Kili, one of the younger dwarves, falls in love with the elf-woman Tauriel, and she with him, despite the tentative understanding she already has with one of her fellow elves, despite the traditional enmity between elves and dwarves. Love is not bound by these restrictions. When, in the great final battle, the dwarf dies, as warriors do, it is she who weeps at the injustice of Fate. It is a predictable addition to the material – and a necessary one, I think, since the original lacks female characters altogether – and there is nothing unexpected to us in these scenes. Isn't that the oldest story of all?

It isn't, of course. Ubiquitous is not the same as universal, and that we have heard the same story many times before does not mean it was always told in that way. Like the Athenians, we have forgotten that our ancestors fitted life into very different, even unrecognisable, frameworks. Somewhere between Achilles weeping over the body of Patroclus and Tauriel weeping over Kili's, something changed, and changed so completely that we have forgotten it ever used to be different.

Let's find out what.

– Introduction –

Boy Meets Girl

0.1 The same old story

A few years ago I made a list of the seven basic plots for someone. It doesn't matter here which they are, or whether there are really seven, only that one of them is always said to be 'Boy meets Girl'. While I was copying the list I noticed that while all the other plots were given classical examples, this one had *Romeo and Juliet*, a much later story. Surely there must be earlier exemplary male-female couples? But although the one that immediately sprang to mind was Lancelot and Guinevere, from the twelfth century, I was hard put to come up with anything from before that time. There did appear to be a scarcity of straight love stories from antiquity, while I could think of several male-male couples. Thinking that this might be a product of my own focus on the Middle Ages (or male-male couples), I asked a number of people without a medievalist bias to name one or two archetypal love stories.[1] The resulting list was instructive. Romeo and Juliet were the most named couple, with Tristan and Isolde second. There were a number of classical pairs, with Paris and Helen the stand-out example, but few of those would stand up to scrutiny as a love story (Jason and Medea – really?). This alerted me to the amount of reinterpretation that goes on when dealing with these old stories. The subconscious reasoning goes roughly like this: 'you get married to someone of the opposite sex after you've fallen in love with them; Jason and Medea got married, so they must have been in love'. It is rarely as simple as all that now, but for a long time, for centuries, it wasn't even true. Most of the examples from antiquity are stories of desire and necessity, and the – one-sided – desire is as often for land or gold as for a person. There are a few classical couples I would allow on the list, such as Hero and Leander, but those are not the ones of which we still tell the stories. For the recognisable and the reciprocal we must turn to Lancelot and Guinevere and the other couples of the French High Middle Ages. Love has even been called an 'invention of the twelfth century'.[2] That was always going to be too sweeping as statement, even when narrowed to 'heterosexual love' as it is in this case, and it has been contested from the first moment it was put forward, all in a tangle with the notions of 'courtly love' and 'chivalry'. It would be ridiculous to suggest that love between men and women

did not exist prior to ca. AD 1155 (and no one is arguing that), but there is something to be said for the newness at that time of celebrating heterosexual love in fiction, of presenting it as an ideal. If this is indeed the case, the idea did not appear out of thin air, and neither was it immediately complete and unchangeable. Consequently, this study seeks to propose answers to two related but distinct questions:

1. when and why did the heterosexual ideal become normative in our narrative tradition?
2. what was there before?

The investigation proceeds from the premise that retellings in particular, in their additions and omissions, can show us what their public found important and desirable, as we saw in the prelude with the addition of Tauriel to *The Hobbit*. So, starting with the *Iliad* in archaic Greece, we shall follow a growing number of love stories through the ages to find what they have lost and gained in their various tellings, and whether a pattern emerges over the long term. This is a personal quest, not an academic study, and as such it is inevitably skewed towards the fields I am most familiar with. My aim is to be neither exhaustive nor absolute, but to give the reader an impression of how my thoughts developed along the way. I have not sought out others' answers to my questions, but set out to find my own, taking the different versions of the stories as my starting point rather than the learned discussions about them. Thus I have undoubtedly reinvented a good many wheels along the way, but, I hope, also arrived at fresh insights.

I believe my reading of the whole sits well with the available evidence, but I am aware that it is only one of many possible readings. That is part of my point. What follows – apart from the specifically historical chapters – is concerned with fiction, and the relationship between fiction and real life is complicated. Fiction is wish-fulfilment, example positive or negative, and in the very nature of the thing, not real. It may provide escape even where it is intended to constrain. The reader should remember that although stories illuminate for us the times they spring from, they never give a clear reflection, and, then as now, there have always been resistant readers.

0.2 Narrative love

Apart from fiction, this investigation involves two other concepts which appear quite self-evident in my thoughts but are difficult to catch in words. One is the 'narrative tradition' referred to above. At the risk of sounding impossibly grandiloquent, this study is limited to western Indo-European stories from the last three millennia. This may appear to be casting the net too wide (it certainly

felt like that at times), but they do form a natural set providing both the variety and the uniformity needed to make sense of my questions. The twelve branches of the Indo-European language family cover much of the Eurasian landmass, and secondarily, most of the Americas as well. Of these we are concerned here with the Greek, Italic (Romance), Celtic and Germanic. The cultures that go with these languages all share basic narrative assumptions, and their worldviews overlap. Together they have made the storytelling culture I grew up with in the European West, and which is now globally familiar through the American film industry. So familiar and natural does it appear that we often assume that our modern, Western narrative assumptions are universal, that this is what all stories are like. A good look at Egyptian myth or Native American folktales should put paid to that idea. And of course our narrative tradition did not develop in isolation, and elements from other traditions may be identified wherever one of the Indo-European cultures met and mingled with another, for example the Greek with those of Asia Minor. It was, however, dominant in Europe, and remained so even with the advent of the originally Middle-Eastern Christian religion. Although I may have some things to say about the influence of the Church, with one conspicuous exception I ignore biblical influence on the stories under discussion, for two reasons: first, although biblical narratives were widely known and retold, due to their sacred nature they were mostly kept in their original shape; and secondly, the uneasy commingling of Indo-European with Semitic tradition in Western culture is an enormous and fascinating subject which could easily fill a book by itself.

The other concept which needs some clarification is 'love'. I am not proposing a definition of the thing itself here, but of its somewhat simpler fictional image. I call this 'narrative love' to distinguish it from the many other ways in which love has been categorised (romantic, platonic, companionate etc.). Deeply felt, mutual and enduring, narrative love is not predicated on sexual attraction or familial love, although it excludes neither. In reading the many stories that went into the making of this book, I have identified seven indicators which signal that a couple are lovers in this sense:

1. both partners enter the relationship freely (no love potions or forced marriage)
2. partners are outspoken in their dealings with each other
3. the relationship is exclusive (neither has a similar association with someone else)
4. partners are rarely and reluctantly parted
5. the couple's names are associated in the minds of others
6. the relationship lasts until outside forces end it

7. the couple are still together in death (buried in the same grave, or seen together in the underworld)

Note that the presence or absence of sexual relations and the narrator's use of the word 'love' are not indicative, and that there is no natural connection between love and marriage. We shall return to the interconnectedness of love, sex and marriage, and our contemporary confusion about them, throughout the book.

Although in theory narrative love might be found anywhere, in practice the subjects and objects of narrative love which we shall encounter are almost exclusively high-born individuals, or even gods and goddesses. This is a product of the circumstances in which the stories that have come down to us were told: only noble households had the leisure for such entertainment and only they had the money to maintain the poets who provided it. The aristocrats themselves would have it that only the nobly born are capable of such a refined emotion as love, the reality was, of course, that the lower classes just got on with their loves without making a song and dance about it. We shall regularly catch glimpses of this more everyday life carrying on beyond the world of stories, but it is the song and dance we will concentrate on. For it is this outward show which very early on, with the first stories we hear, teaches us what we are supposed to feel and what we had better hide away. Love in the stories is how we think love should be, and we measure our own lives against it. But narrative love is only the representation of feeling, and it is important to remember that although they often become inextricably linked, both representation and feeling may exist independently. So real life couples may model their love on fictional ones, like Alexander the Great and Hephaestion famously did on Achilles and Patroclus. Conversely, they may not even use the word 'love' to themselves because their time defines love differently, for example limiting it solely to male-female couples. And people may also go through the motions of courtship or companionage while inwardly indifferent. In the chapters that follow we will learn how different love could be from what we call by that name, but the fictional indicators listed above are transhistorical.

Besides telling stories, people in earlier times also thought about love theoretically, in the contexts of religion, philosophy and politics. In the conclusions to the chapters the contemporary theories of love are taken into account and compared with the view we get from narrative. These theories are mainly attempts to make sense of and regulate two different feelings which appear to be beyond human control and therefore disruptive: sexual desire and unselfish affection. There are two ways you can go about domesticating such overwhelming feelings: condemning them as dangerous and to be resisted by the virtuous, or elevating them as ennobling and exclusive to the virtuous. Singly and combined desire and affection have been subject to both treatments, with the

church's blanket condemnation of non-procreative sex as sinful at one extreme, and our own society's devaluing of non-sexual relationships at the other. But theories are a poor reflection of practice, and we shall see that the image provided by the stories and the theoretical view do not always accord. It is assumed here that stories have a much greater influence on the public at large than theoretical works, which were always read only by a few, and only a few *men* at that.

0.3 A note on words

The terminology of love is confused if not downright unhelpful, and our modern words ill suit ancient ideas. To a lesser extent, the same goes for more transparent-seeming concepts like 'family'. Rather than provide a glossary, I have chosen to highlight different understandings of terms where they are relevant, while always attempting to be as precise as possible in my choice of words. A few notes may be useful nonetheless:

- by 'heteronormativity' I mean the assumption that unless explicitly stated otherwise all people – in the context of this study, characters in stories – are sexually attracted to and desire to be loved by the opposite sex
- the word 'homosexual' is used meaning 'physically attracted to the same sex' without this implying a specific identity or lifestyle (for which 'gay')
- I use 'companion' for half of a male couple, which need not imply a sexual relationship, and 'lover' for half of an unmarried couple who are assumed to be sexually involved
- 'Romance' with a capital 'R' refers to the European languages descended from Latin, 'romance' with a lower case 'r' denotes the courtly stories written in the Middle Ages which take their name from the languages
- interesting though it is, I am not concerned here with authorship, so the composer of the *Iliad* is Homer, Marie de France is Marie de France without qualification, and anonymous authors are 'the narrator', without going into questions of composition, compilation and copying
- I have for each name selected the spelling most familiar in its context, without attempting to apply consistent rules, which is difficult at the best of times but impossible when dealing with versions hundreds of years apart

The book is arranged chronologically, each chapter beginning with a section introducing a dominant genre of the period in question. What the chosen genres have in common is not only their popularity in their day and their current availability, but also that they were all meant for an audience, as opposed to a readership. The tales under discussion were almost all chanted, acted, sung, or read as bedtime stories. There is an important implication in this: instead of private enjoyment, stories were a communal event, and anyone listening or watching would not only absorb their lessons, but know that the others would have learned the same. These communal stories thus had a greater normative force than the novels we read singly and accept or reject as we see fit. It is much harder to demur if everyone else agrees that *that* is how the story should go, and moreover, it has *always* been told that way.

But stories do change in the telling, and after the introduction, each chapter has four sections examining a specific instance of narrative love (or its absence) in the genre under discussion and our modern response to it, where possible picking up stories that we have already seen in other ages. Only the first chapter, where we lay the groundwork, and the fifth, about the momentous twelfth century, fall in two parts of four sections each. The chapters close with a comparison of the tales with the theoretical love ideal of the time. In addition to the chronological chapters there are two chapters 'Outside Time' on stories that do not fit the historical framework, and three chapters 'Inside Time' about the specific historic background of the narrative tradition, including the final chapter, which attempts an answer to my first question. The whole must stand as my answer to the second.

References may be found in the endnotes, and all original research undertaken in the course of this study is detailed in the appendices.

– 1 –

A Thousand Ships, a Thousand Faces

Archaic and Classical Greece

1.0 Introduction: epic and the double past

We begin almost three millennia ago, in what is now Greece, where poets sang epic tales of a great war fought even further in the past. The short definition of an epic is 'a heroic narrative, usually in verse and of some size, set in an imagined past'. It is a form encountered in all Indo-European languages and has always been both popular and prestigious. The first Indo-European epics still extant are the Greek *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, traditionally ascribed to Homer and dating from the seventh century BC,[1] of which the first has become the standard by which all later examples are measured. But although Homer's poems were probably always unique in their length and quality, they formed part of a much larger cycle of stories about the Trojan War and its aftermath which have not survived, but of which we have enough citations and summaries in later works to give an idea of their contents. Together these are called the Epic Cycle. There were also Greek epics unconnected to the cycle, about other heroes and other cities, but none as long or as popular as the two great works ascribed to Homer. These two became canonical at Athens in the sixth century, when they were recited in their entirety at the quadrennial Great Panathenaea festival by a relay team of *rhapsodes* taking four days in all. The standard division of both epics into 24 books probably originates in this practice.[2]

All Greek epic was composed in hexameters (lines of six feet containing either two long, or one long and two short syllables each), a verse form which evolved from an Indo-European one which also gave rise to the characteristic shape used in the Sanskrit *Vedas* (sacred literature) and has been identified in the Iranian languages as well. The Sanskrit exponents of epic, the *Mahābhārata* and *Ramayana*, although written down later, share subject matter as well as style with their Greek counterparts, and it was the similarities between the grammar of Sanskrit and Greek which first led scholars to posit a shared parent language. Older epics were originally composed orally, but by the time the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were given their present shape writing had been reintroduced to the Greek

world, although it is disputed whether their poet(s) made use of it in composing the epics. Later Greek writers were in constant dialogue with their great predecessor: lyric poets used Homer's characters as easily understood allusions, tragedians examined and expanded on single episodes, and scholars debated the meaning of obscure passages. Of all this much is lost, but we still have a wealth of material to study.

Greek (literary) history is conventionally divided into the Archaic period (eighth to sixth century BC), the time of the epics; followed by the Classical period (fifth to fourth century), the time of the tragedians and philosophers such as Socrates and Plato; and the Hellenistic period (from the conquest of Alexander the Great in 323 BC into the period of Roman dominance), when the centre of the literary world moved from Athens to Alexandria. We shall consider the Archaic period in the first half of this chapter and the Classical in the second. My use of the word 'Greeks' for people from all these periods and its many places is both inaccurate and anachronistic, but it remains a convenient and easily understood label. The people themselves would have used the demonym of their *polis*, or if speaking of the wider Greek world, called themselves *Hellenes*. Homer uses *Danaans* or *Achaeans* when speaking of the enemies of the Trojans.

The generally agreed outline of the story of the Trojan war is as follows:

> To the wedding of the sea-goddess Thetis and the mortal hero Peleus the uninvited goddess of discord brings a golden apple inscribed with the words 'for the fairest'. The three Olympians Hera, Athena and Aphrodite fall to quarrelling over it, and their dispute is resolved by the Trojan prince Paris, son of Priam, who assigns the apple to Aphrodite in exchange for the most beautiful woman on earth. This is Helen, and despite the fact that she is already married to Menelaus, Paris carries her off to Troy.
>
> Because he feared the choice would be contentious, when selecting a husband for his daughter, Helen's father Tyndareus, on the advice of the cunning Odysseus, had made all her suitors swear that they would come to the aid of his chosen son-in-law if he was ever at war. So now Menelaus summons the many Greek kings to arms, and they plan to sail for Troy to get back Helen and the treasure that was stolen with her. The names and numbers of the entire fleet are detailed in the *Iliad*. Thetis, fearing for the life of her mortal son Achilles should he go to war, hides him at the court of king Lycomedes of Scyros, dressed as a girl. But when wily Odysseus comes to the court disguised as a pedlar, the king's daughters all select jewellery from his wares, while Achilles grabs a sword. Thus discovered, the hero joins the Greek expedition.
>
> For a time the fleet is becalmed at Aulis because their leader Agamemnon, brother to Menelaus, has offended the goddess Artemis, and it is only after the sacrifice of his daughter Iphigenia – summoned on the pretext of marriage to Achilles – that they set sail. The Greeks besiege Troy for nine long years, and the Olympian gods take sides and even join in, with Athena supporting the fleet and Apollo aiding the city.

> The *Iliad* begins at this stage of the war, when Chryses, the priest of Apollo, wishes to ransom his captive daughter from the Greeks, and is haughtily denied by Agamemnon. The god visits a plague upon the camp, and when its cause is discovered, the girl is sent back to her father. This leaves Agamemnon without a concubine, and he claims in her place another captive, the woman Briseis who had been assigned to Achilles, leader of the Myrmidons. Insulted by this slight to his honour, Achilles retires to his shelter, refusing to fight until Agamemnon has given him his due. The other Greeks, knowing how much they need their best fighter, plead with him in vain. Finally, Achilles' companion Patroclus asks at least to be allowed to lead their men into battle wearing Achilles' armour. He fights bravely, but is killed by Priam's son Hector. Achilles is beside himself with grief, and re-joins the fighting to avenge Patroclus, not caring that this will mean his own death. He kills Hector and mutilates the body before relinquishing it to Priam. Here the *Iliad* ends, but the story continues. Achilles himself dies by a shot from Paris' bow, guided by the hand of Apollo, and his ashes are placed in the same urn with the remains of Patroclus. The Greeks, pretending to retreat, leave the famous wooden horse in front of the gates of Troy and are brought inside with it, the city is sacked, and Helen returned to Menelaus. Few of the Greek leaders have an easy voyage home after the expedition, and their wanderings were told in the epic *Nostoi*, 'Returns'. Odysseus takes a full ten years to reach his home in Ithaca, having many adventures on the way while his wife Penelope cleverly resists a band of boorish suitors who want her husband declared dead so she can marry one of them. This is the subject of the *Odyssey*.

The Trojan War story is the first Indo-European plot we can confidently outline, and going back as it does for 2700 years and more, that is remarkable enough. But the Mesopotamian *Epic of Gilgamesh* predates it by about a millennium, and a quick comparison with this tale from a different tradition may be illuminating. At first glance, the heroic exploits of King Gilgamesh and wild man Enkidu don't seem so different from stories in the Greek mould, and indeed, some of the Greek stories may have been influenced by Mesopotamian ones. But when Enkidu dies, although Gilgamesh laments his companion's passing in much the same way as Achilles will, his reaction otherwise is very different. Achilles knows that with Patroclus' death, his own life is over, and he goes back into battle knowing he will meet his end there. Gilgamesh, on the other hand, goes in search of the source of eternal life, almost succeeds, but eventually acknowledges the pointlessness of it all. Enkidu's young death – in bed, not in battle – is a waste, Gilgamesh's realisation of his own mortality resigned. Their deaths are mourned, not celebrated.

But Achilles, even before the fateful events at Troy, knows he will die in war. He has been told, by his divine mother, that if he stays at home in Phthia he will live a long, contented life in obscurity, but if he goes to Troy he will die young and

never be forgotten. And Achilles chooses this fate, for the greatest good of Indo-European epic is glory. From India to Ireland, numerous names attest to this obsession, containing derivatives of the element **ḱléwes-*, meaning 'glory' or 'fame', Patroclus himself being the most apposite example, with a name deriving from the Greek for 'father' and *kleos*.

> Cattle die, kinsmen die,
> the self must also die;
> but glory never dies[3]

This was written down in Iceland in the thirteenth century AD, but it would have raised no eyebrows with Achilles and his compatriots. Glory, the sung glory which disregards death, is what a true hero longs for and earns. In contrast, Gilgamesh only wants glory when he is alive to enjoy it, and does not naturally link it with falling in battle. He is not *lofgeornost*,[4] 'most yearning for fame', as Indo-European heroes without exception are.

With that yearning for glory comes the need for poets to spread the hero's name far and wide, and make it last through the ages. It is thanks to poets like Homer that Thetis was proved right: up until now her son's fame hasn't died. In the epics themselves we find poets singing of earlier heroes, and with no fighting to do, Achilles himself indulges in this pastime. It is a constant feature of epic that it is always set in a past when there were still real heroes, not like the weaklings of today. Actually, it is a little more subtle than that. The heroes of epic perform their feats in an age which is already in decline, and the *poets in the epics* tell stories of a past when there were still real heroes, not like the weaklings of yesterday. Old Nestor in the *Iliad* reminisces about the men he fought with in his youth, and the young warriors encamped before Troy are not a patch on them. The Heroic Age of Greek myth ended with the Trojan War, or at the latest, with the children of its heroes.

This double past is found in other epics as well. After Beowulf has fought Grendel in Heorot – an impressive enough feat, one would think – one of Hrothgar's men sings of Sigemund the dragonslayer, a true hero of the earlier days. The events of the *Mahābhārata* mark the change from the third (*Dvāpara*) to the present, and much inferior age (the *Kali yuga*).[5] Even Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* takes place in the third Age, when the high deeds of the past are constantly referred to in story and song but no longer feasible, and the end of the war is the start of the fourth Age. I believe this curious doubling of the past serves to bring the larger-than-life figure of the hero closer to the audience. In their imperfection, epic heroes are easier to recognise and emulate than the lofty and incomprehensible gods or the impossibly perfect men of the first, golden age, but

being part of an unchanging past, neither can they be encountered face to face, losing their glamour or their power to inspire a younger generation.

The poets singing of the past inside the epic point to another important feature of the genre. These stories were part of an oral tradition before they were written down, and continued to be retold and improved upon. The Attic tragedians, to which we will turn in the second part of this chapter, extensively reworked episodes from the epics, and these are often the versions that have come down to us. But evidence of variant readings is plentiful for all periods. Sometimes Iphigenia dies, sometimes a hart dies in her place. Sometimes Helen is in Troy, sometimes it is the phantom sent by Aphrodite. But there is a limit to this variety: no version asserts that Agamemnon refused to sacrifice his daughter or that Helen stayed at home. The core of the story is handed on unchanged, and the interest is in how it is told. The poets who performed epic stories in the halls of kings were great artists, with a large repertoire, which they knew by heart or could reconstruct from the poetic building blocks of formulaic phrases when they did not. But the trick of remembering long narratives is not only in rhythm, rhyme and formulaic phrases. It lies also in an attentive audience. The listeners would have heard the story before, and would be quick to correct any slips on the narrator's part, or to curb any flights of fancy that were felt to depart too far from the 'canonical' version. In this way plots and stock phrases could be preserved even though the shape of the whole drifted slowly apart from its first telling, and some elements were repeated long after they had ceased to make sense. The historical events which were later called the Trojan War are lost in time, but they were a little less lost to Homer, who did not invent the details of the heroes' Bronze Age armour. So even the first story we have is a retelling, an interpretation through which we see only indistinct shades about whose actions and motivations we can make at best educated guesses.

1.1 Insult and reparation: the stories of the *Iliad*

The long poem that has come down to us as the *Iliad* tells the story of the warrior Achilles, set during the Trojan War, which presupposes the seizing of Helen. But these three things, twisted together as they are, did not start out as parts of the same story. In this section we will try to discern how the different strands came to be part of the same thread, and identify some of the problems posed by the epic. The next two sections will deal with the tales of Helen and Achilles in more detail.

Whether the poet of the *Iliad* (henceforth 'Homer', although that was probably not his name) composed his long epic orally or with the help of writing is

disputed, but for us this does not matter so much as that we may consider it the work of a single poet.[6] It is not a cobbling together of a number of shorter ballads (*Einzellieder*), as nineteenth-century scholars assumed, but an original composition which makes some use of earlier material, by a poet who knew what he was doing. That said, it has long been recognised that the *Iliad* as we know it contains many interpolations by others. It is generally agreed that Book 10, a self-contained episode known as the *Doloneia*, is an addition by someone else, and there are many more additions of a few lines here and there. The single mention of Achilles' son Neoptolemus may be one of these, for example, as the poet shows no awareness of his existence otherwise. Conversely, other parts which were once dismissed as extraneous on grounds of poetic quality, perceived impropriety or narrative discontinuity are now regarded as genuine.

The basic framework of the *Iliad* is what could be called the *Achilleis*, the tale of the hero's wrath, his withdrawal from the fighting, his comrades' entreaties for him to return, Patroclus' death fighting in Achilles' armour, and Achilles' revenge by slaying Hector and mutilating his body, followed by his yielding the body to Hector's father Priam. But Homer greatly expands this story by looking at the battles which take place in Achilles' absence and at what happens in the city, as well as showing the machinations of the gods which will eventually bring about the hero's return and the fall of Troy. Many of the events before and after, such as the gathering at Aulis or the sack of the city are not recounted, but must have been known to Homer and the audience of his poem. The *Iliad* is an episode in a much larger story already familiar, and it could not have been structured the way it is without presupposing the surrounding events.

The hero Achilles was not part of the muster of the Greeks when the story of the war was first told, although he had probably been appended to it before Homer embarked on his narrative. He is never mentioned among the suitors of Helen – which later writers explained away by saying he had been too young – and his exploits before the *Iliad* opens, sacking cities and acquiring booty, although they are recounted as having taken place on the way to Troy, happen in the wrong place for this to be plausible, and must have started out as freestanding narratives. But placing so great a hero, mortal son of an immortal mother, on the winning side of the greatest conflict must have been irresistible. Whether Patroclus was already part of Achilles' story before it merged with that of Troy is unclear. Some scholars consider him a character invented for the *Iliad*, which would be interesting if the case, though it is not readily verifiable.[7] But Achilles certainly already possessed his other outstanding properties: great stature and beauty, special armour and a weapon only he could wield, and a boundless lust for glory. Once Achilles is placed at Troy, he becomes indispensable, both in the

sense that his not fighting is disastrous for the Greeks, and in the sense that without him there is no story.

The connection between the abduction of Helen and the Trojan War probably goes back further, but here there is little we can say with certainty. There may have been a conflict between Mycenae and the Hittites of Anatolia at the end of the second millennium BC which took on epic proportions in the telling, but we cannot say when or why (it would have been surprising for two such great powers not to have been occasionally in conflict). There was a Hittite king called Alaksandu of Wilusa in the thirteenth century BC who may be identified with Paris (= Alexander) of Troy (= (W)Ilios). This is interesting and suggestive, but it is where our knowledge starts and ends.[8] Whatever the nature of the conflict, it was not fought for a woman called Helen. A parallel to her story in the *Iliad* occurs in the *Mahābhārata*, where the princess Draupadi chooses Arjuna as husband from among a large host of suitors, is stolen away by his enemy Jayadratha, and has to be recovered by Arjuna and his four brothers. Like Helen on the walls of Troy, Draupadi identifies the enemy's warriors for her new family. A wife carried off by a rival is of course not a difficult plot to invent (it is also central to the *Ramayana*), but the last detail suggests that these two stories may have had a common ancestor. In the *Mahābhārata* Draupadi is married to all five brothers (because when they announced to their mother that they had won a great prize, she told them to share equally), and the awkward memory of something like this may underlie the curious prominence of Agamemnon in the wooing and recovery of his brother's wife: it is he who offers the bride price to Tyndareus, and he who rallies the Greeks on Menelaus' behalf. But the parallel between the women is not exact, and in some ways Draupadi has more in common with Briseis: both are known by their father's names (Drupada, Brises), and both are quarrelled over in public.

In the so-called Dark Ages of Greece, between the fall of Mycenae around 1200 BC and the reintroduction of writing in the eighth century, the story of the stolen woman and the story of the great war grew inextricably into one great tale. And preserved in Homer's epic, this tale has continued to be told ever since. In the last fifteen years alone there have been ten new translations of the *Iliad* into modern English, and they tend to proclaim the relevance and timeless character of the epic, one introduction speaking of its 'universal appeal' even while acknowledging the poem's difficult subject matter.[9] But I wonder if this spate of translations – surely one competent rendering per decade should suffice? – is not an unconscious acknowledgement that the opposite is the case (see Appendix A for a further analysis). Far from being universal in its appeal, the *Iliad* is a difficult, even alienating book. Modern readers are impatient with repetition, and disconcerted by the poem's habit of announcing what is going to happen before it

does, it lacks the story arc we expect. Much of the action consists of graphic and varied descriptions of young men meeting horrible ends, and it is hard not to conclude, with Simone Weil, that the poem's true protagonist is 'Force'.[10] And the elements which are urged upon us as universal are nothing of the sort: the relationships between its men and women are so skewed as not to deserve the name, and the insistence on men's powerlessness against fate, though perhaps salutary, stands in sharp contrast to our own society's belief in self-determination.

I leave aside here the appeal of its poetry, with which the translators are much occupied, since this is simply inaccessible to readers without Greek. But I do wish to draw attention to an element of the writer's technique: the *Iliad* is a poem of parallels. When Achilles is maintaining his resolution not to fight, his old tutor Phoenix tells him the story of Meleager, another headstrong young man who refused to fight, and was only persuaded to join battle by his wife Cleopatra. The comparison falls down, as Achilles is not persuaded to fight by Patroclus (Cleopatra's name was chosen to be a deliberate inversion of 'Patroclus'), but the parallels are never exact, they are there to invite us to think over the alternatives. When Andromache is anxious her husband Hector will not return from battle, he gently instructs her to return to her woman's work, and let him do a man's. But when Achilles is anxious Patroclus will not return from battle, well, shouldn't he have been doing that job himself? The greatest parallel of all is that between the first scene and the last: high-handed Agamemnon would not allow the girl Chryseis to be ransomed, thus setting in motion a fatal chain of events, but great-hearted Achilles releases Hector's body to his father, knowing the events will soon be brought to a close by his own death.

The poet of the *Iliad* is interested in character and personal interaction, but within a framework which makes it easy for us to misinterpret these. When Agamemnon takes away his prize, Achilles' honour is insulted, and he takes drastic action to maintain his reputation as 'the best of the Achaeans'. Modern readers tend to feel Achilles is overreacting when he punishes the whole army for Agamemnon's crime, and compensate by assuming that Achilles cares so much because he cares about Briseis, 'whom he had come to love' as one translator puts it.[11] In the introduction to his translation E.V. Rieu called it the 'the central problem of the *Iliad*', and considered that the first book presented the hero in a 'sordid light'.[12]

It is clear that within the story even the hero's friends consider he is being unreasonably stubborn when he continues his strike after reparation has been offered. But his initial reaction is not out of proportion to the insult. A hero's honour was constituted in the courage of his body, the generosity of his spirit, the chastity of his women and the loyalty of his men. Should any of these be compromised, the result was shame. Modern notions of honourable behaviour,

such as honesty or restraint towards women, did not figure in this complex, although they may have been valued for their own sake. Knowing your place in life meant showing proper respect for the gods, but humility in the face of other humans was not a virtue for an aristocratic male. Knowing your place in life also meant upholding your honour. Achilles' standing as a warrior is such that the Trojans daren't even take the field against him. Consider what would have been said, by both Greeks and Trojans, if Achilles had given in to Agamemnon's demand: ordered about like a common soldier, can't even defend his own property, not much of a hero, really. Honour is what you are seen to do and what is said about you. This is why characters in Greek tragedy so often seem to care more about what other people will think than about what they themselves believe is right. Shame is conscience externalised. The insult to Achilles' honour is real, and Homer leaves us in no doubt that Agamemnon is in the wrong. It should also be noted that Achilles is perfectly within his rights to withhold his men from the fighting. Agamemnon is at the head of a loose alliance of armies each with their own leaders, not the highest in a strict chain of command, and all decisions for the host as a whole are decided in the assembly, where wise old Nestor and wily Odysseus have at least as much influence on proceedings. That Agamemnon tries to assert absolute command over Achilles and the means he uses are serious missteps in a culture which considered the ability to distribute treasure fairly one of the hallmarks of a great leader, and his behaviour has serious repercussions as he alienates his most important asset. Both Achilles and Agamemnon, typically for high status males, don't know where the boundaries are: neither knows when to give in, and their friends are caught in the middle. Homer adds interest and pathos to this conflict by making the object of their quarrel a woman who, however briefly expressed, has feelings of her own. Even if it is a case of 'better the devil you know', she clearly would have preferred to stay with Achilles rather than go to Agamemnon. But although this serves to underline for the audience the wrongness of the situation, within the story Briseis' feelings are irrelevant. She is a spear-captive, and she goes where she is ordered. As West observes: 'the injury to Ach[illes'] honour would have been as great if the trophy confiscated from him had been a bronze tripod.'[13]

Which brings us to that other situation it is so easy to get wrong. West's observation about the bronze tripod holds for the greater story as well. Menelaus wants his wife back, which we would consider motivation enough to go after her. But it is not so simple. If Paris had killed Menelaus in war, Helen would have been rightfully his. But he carried her off while staying with Menelaus in Sparta, breaking the trust between host and guest. This was one of the most important relationships to the ancient Greeks, and *xenia* – 'guest-friendship' – could be handed down through generations.[14] It has been described as an 'alternative to marriage in forging bonds between rulers'.[15] When Glaukos and Diomedes meet

on the battlefield in Book 6 of the *Iliad* they discover they are in such a relationship, initiated by their grandfathers, and, instead of fighting, exchange gifts. By carrying off Helen, Paris offends against such a bond, and it would have been no different if he had carried away only bronze and gold. When the Greeks demand the return of Menelaus' wife, they also ask for the treasure that was stolen with her. Clearly Paris has added insult to injury, and all Greece is up in arms as a result. Modern commentators tend to make the Greeks look like the aggressors and the Trojans peace-loving and put-upon, but this is a distortion. The killing sprees of the Greek heroes are more violent because they are more successful in the end, not for want of trying by their enemies, who only appear less warlike because we see them at home as well as in battle. Moreover, however sympathetic we are made to feel towards Hector and his family, they are clearly in the wrong, since they persist in refusing to return Helen and make reparation.

Agamemnon, although he needs to be prodded by Nestor, eventually acknowledges the unfortunate results of his actions, and offers Achilles full reparation: the return of Briseis, with tripods, cauldrons, horses and seven other women, as well as his daughter's hand in marriage.[16] It has been noted that he does not apologise or offer redress in person, but that is not the point. In a society which would otherwise descend into endless feuding, reparation for an insult, however grave, has to be possible, and needs to be accepted. By continuing in his monumental strop, it is now Achilles who is in the wrong, and he knows it. But the hero's proud nature will not allow otherwise. Why the Trojans continue to be stubborn is less clear, but then, throughout the poem it is difficult to determine why the characters act as they do. The ultimate and unsatisfactory answer is that they act as they do because the gods want them to. When Aphrodite bids Helen go to Paris' bed, is that a personification of the woman's desire or is she powerless in the face of a higher order? When Athena stays Achilles' hand from killing Agamemnon when they first quarrel, is that the prompting of his own wisdom or a goddess preventing her favourite people from falling out fatally? The answer to both is 'both'. Throughout the *Iliad* human actions are overdetermined by divine ones, and this makes psychological readings hazardous, although that has not prevented them from being offered. One should also not underestimate the force of narrative necessity. People act as they do because that's how the story goes, and without Achilles' insulted honour, without Paris' impetuous actions, there would be no *Iliad*. Imagine an epic based on the following:

PARIS Run away with me!
HELEN I can't– I've a husband and child here.
PARIS Oh well, it was worth a try…

Leaving aside divine machination and actions essential to the plot, the relationships which motivate the actors, with one obvious exception, are those of negotiation and alliance, of patrilineal ties and guest-friendships, not of personal feeling. Hector has no patience at all with pretty-boy Paris, but this does not prevent him from fighting in his brother's cause. Menelaus' quarrel with Paris is about the rupture of a formal relationship between two men, not about the severing of a loving marriage bond. Nonetheless, it is to personal feelings we now turn: those which have been read into the poem, and those which have been overlooked.

1.2 Two brothers, one sister: Helen's prehistory

Let us start with the woman who started it all. Although a particular story about Helen came to stand at the centre of the conflict between Greeks and Trojans, there were earlier, older stories about her as well. For before Helen was a mortal bride, she was a goddess. Not Leda's husband Tyndareus was her father, but Zeus himself, and the twins Castor and Pollux, one mortal, one immortal, were her brothers. The twins, together known as the Dioskouroi ('god's boys') were so close that when Castor was killed, undying Pollux refused to live without his brother, and he was allowed to share his life with Castor on alternating days, with both being dead on the other. And so, when Helen stands on the walls of Troy, identifying Greek warriors for Priam, she does not see her brothers among the Greeks, because 'already the life-giving earth covered them'.[17]

Paris is not the first to carry her off. Theseus and Pirithous (for whom see section 1.4 below), in one of their more foolhardy exploits, decide that they are both going to marry daughters of Zeus, and abduct Helen from her mortal father's house, installing her with Theseus' mother Aethra until she is of marriageable age. But Castor and Pollux rescue her, and take Aethra away to be the girl's slave. The twins, incidentally, do not do this because they are opposed to the carrying off of young women in general. They themselves snatch the daughters of Leucippus, and their conflict with the two brothers who were promised these girls leads to the death of Castor and their shared-and-halved immortality. But the abduction which led to the war at Troy is the best known:

> Helen's abductor Paris, also called Alexander, is a Trojan prince who has been exposed as a child because of a prophecy that he would cause the city to burn. He is found and raised in the countryside, and becomes a shepherd like his adoptive father. Guarding his flocks, he is spotted by the three goddesses quarrelling over the golden apple, and they decide that, since he will not know them (it is never explained why he won't), he can be their judge. Aphrodite wins the prize by promising him the

most beautiful woman on earth. Later, the shepherd's real mother Hecuba recognises her son and he is received back into Priam's family, which is how he comes to be visiting with Menelaus.

Paris' story belongs to a set of tales about exceptionally beautiful Trojan shepherd-princes whom the gods can't seem to leave alone. A few generations earlier Zeus had carried off Ganymede to Olympus, the dawn goddess Eos snatched Paris' uncle Tithonus for her own, and Aphrodite seduced their cousin Anchises, becoming the mother of the hero Aeneas. Perhaps Paris and Alexander were once two characters, one who encountered the goddesses and one who abducted Helen, and they merged so Aphrodite's promise provided a justification for an otherwise unexplained act.

For Helen was always being carried off, always being taken in marriage, promised by Aphrodite or not. When she reaches marriageable age, more than thirty suitors vie for her hand, and her father is worried that those disappointed in their suit will turn violent. After Paris' death, some versions assert that she is given to his brother Deiphobus, while there were those who insisted that the real Helen had never been in Troy at all, Paris being deceived by a phantom, and that she spend the Trojan war in Egypt. There, you've guessed it, the local king pressured her to marry him. She clearly is the most desirable of girls, memorably described as 'a woman manned by many' by Aeschylus.[18] Helen's repeated and variously explained 'marriages' suggest that there is an older story behind them. So who was she?

In the same way that comparative linguists have reconstructed the Proto-Indo-European language from the evidence of its daughter-languages, comparative mythologists have attempted to get an idea of the myths of the Proto-Indo-Europeans. This is an enterprise fraught with danger, since stories and traditions carry over into other cultures so easily that it is often hard to tell whether they are ancient custom or recent import, and because the names for divinities are frequently subject to replacement because the real name is taboo. Nonetheless, comparative mythology has succeeded in identifying a number of divinities and fragments of stories which may confidently be called Indo-European. One of these is Father Sky, appearing as 'Zeus' in Greek, 'Dyaus' in the Sanskrit *Vedas* and as the Latin compound 'Jupiter' (= *Dyew-pater*). The divine twins, his sons, also appear in many cultures, and they have one sister or consort, daughter of the sky or the sun.

The similarities between the Indian Aśvins, the horse twins, and Castor and Pollux have long been noted. They find a parallel in the Baltic *Dieva Dēli*, who are among the suitors of the 'Daughter of the Sun', and more shadowy reflexes turn up in the Germanic and Celtic West. They are young warriors associated with

horses and chariots, and, as we have seen, they both rescue and kidnap young brides. The Aśvins have a single sister, but also a single wife, *Sūryasya duhítr* (also 'daughter of the sun'), whom they carry off in their chariot. Helen, daughter of the sky god Zeus and sister to the Dioskouroi, is her Greek counterpart.[19] That the sun's daughter's original husbands/brothers were twins may be the source of the curious fact that Helen and Draupadi are won by sets of two and five brothers respectively, polyandry being otherwise unknown either in Greek or Indian myth.

A late but neat example of this scheme of two brothers and one sister is provided by Nor and Gor in *Orkneyinga Saga*. Their sister Goi disappears during a sacrifice, and they search up and down the country for her, in the process founding Norway. When, after years, their sister is found, abducted by a certain Hrolf of Bjarg, they make a settlement allowing her to remain with him in exchange for Hrolf's sister as a bride for Nor.[20] This somewhat paradoxical resolution – why take such trouble in the search if you're not getting her back? – points to the interpretation that the myth is a codification of the exchange of women by two different families or tribes, a classical example of women functioning as the counters by which men conduct their relationships with each other, and a way of proceeding which among the aristocracy would live on through the Middle Ages and beyond. A bride for a sister is a fair exchange.

While all this snatching and carrying off is thus unlikely to reflect the real practice of marriage by capture, it does point to an exogamous system in which women moved out of their own kingroup. For the young woman involved, whether she was taken or given, marriage in an exogamous and patrilocal society did mean dislocation from her father's to her husband's or his father's house, a new environment some brides must have wished their brothers would come and rescue them from.

But even when the marriage is endogamous, it is imagined as a more or less violent removal of a daughter from her father's house. A stark view of this is provided by the story of Persephone, daughter of the grain goddess Demeter.

> While gathering flowers with her friends, Persephone is carried off by Hades, the god of the dead, who has been promised her as wife by her father Zeus – but without bothering to consult her mother. Demeter is distraught, and agriculture comes to a halt while she searches for her daughter, while Hades doesn't see the problem: 'I shall not make you an unsuitable husband,' he tells Persephone, 'by being here, you will be mistress of everything that lives and moves'.[21] Eventually, a compromise is reached by which Persephone spends two-thirds of the year with her mother and one third (winter) with her husband in the realm of the dead.

This story – which I have very much abridged here – provides explanations for the religious rituals associated with Demeter and her daughter, the Eleusinian

mysteries, while also, almost by the way, providing an aetiology for the seasons. It is also a narrative account of Persephone moving from one status to another, which all young girls would have to go through. Ancient Greek society thought in age classes, and where we have the categories 'girl' and 'woman' blurring into each other as an individual grows up, they had the clearly demarcated categories of 'maiden', 'bride' (in its broad sense of marriageable or newly married woman) and 'wife', and individuals moved visibly from one class to the next through initiation rites. Although they sound familiar, these classes do not correspond precisely to what we are used to, and in particular the Christian obsession with the purity of virginity should not be retrojected on the Greeks, who put the transition from one state to another differently:

> The word often translated as "maiden" is *parthenos* in Greek. The word "maiden" is preferred to "virgin" because a *parthenos* need not be a physical virgin in the modern understanding. Instead, one might understand a *parthenos* to be a female who is not yet socially recognized as a mother (…) a newly wed female is called a *nymphê*, translated as "bride." This is a female who is probably no longer a physical virgin as we would understand it, but who has not yet given birth to a child. She is in a liminal state that lasts until the birth of her first born. Once a socially recognized wife and mother, a female becomes a *gynê*, a word which means both "wife" and "woman" in ancient Greek.[22]

The division into such life stages was not particular to girls, although boys followed a somewhat different path. Whereas marriage generally followed soon after a girl became marriageable, boys first became 'youths' (late teens, warriors in training), then, cutting off the long hair of their boyhood, they became 'young men' (up to about 30, warriors) and finally mature men, with all the responsibilities that this entailed, including marriage and begetting heirs. A husband would thus typically be about twelve to fifteen years older than his bride, and might already have children by other women, but only those of an official marriage with a woman of the same status could inherit.

Although with a few exceptions – such as the mythographer Hesiod, Homer's contemporary, who saw woman as a necessary evil – Greek authors described marriage as a positive institution, but it should be noted that their approach was entirely practical: few things were so important to a man as begetting heirs, and that is what wives were for. Although the bond could be amiable, there was nothing passionate about it, and nothing sacred. The indissolubility of marriage is a Christian idea, and a man could divorce his wife simply by declaring his intention (vice versa was also possible, but more laborious). The marriage ceremony used in Athens in the classical period – and it would not have been

very different in spirit elsewhere – was quite clear about the purpose of the whole thing: this was to 'tame a woman for the ploughing of legitimate children'.[23] It is a formal, regulated version of what happens to Helen and Persephone. These young goddesses show what goes wrong if marriage is not properly regulated: distraught mothers, vengeful siblings. The association between marriage and death, so obvious in Persephone's story and much on modern commentators' minds, is not as sinister as it first appears. Every initiation enacts the death of one state to facilitate the birth of the new, and the girl must pass away before the bride can emerge, as Persephone passes through the underworld. And despite the association with the seasons, Persephone is never afterwards shown absent from her husband's house. From a maiden she has become a wife, while Helen is always a bride.

In the light of this study, what is notable in these early myths is a glaring absence of affectionate behaviour. The only truly affective bonds are between Demeter and her daughter and between the brothers Castor and Pollux, and the exchange of brides is the – not always successful – attempt to extend this natural familial love to a group of potential enemies. These bonds are formalised, communal instead of personal, and meant to minimise the danger of violence between men. The expression of the feelings of these men for their newly acquired 'brothers' comes later, and the feelings of the bride arrive on the literary stage later still.

Helen, then, whose name means 'radiant',[24] was the first daughter of the first father, the first bride to be given in marriage by her brothers. She is not a woman who chose to elope with her handsome lover. She is not even a woman free to act within the constraints of her society. She is a goddess whose role is to be taken as a bride. And when a story was told of a beautiful woman over whom a great war was fought, she became 'Argive Helen', Menelaus' wife and Paris' prize. And with her new status as a mortal woman came something else as well: guilt.

When I realised that others saw the affair of Paris and Helen as a love story where I had always read it as a case of abduction I was curious about how Homer treated Helen. Was she in love with Paris? Was she kidnapped against her will? These turned out to be naïve questions. The reality of Homer's time as well as of the Bronze Age he was writing about was that women were in the gift of men. A girl was given to a husband by her parents or brothers, and then became her husband's responsibility. Women captured in war provided labour as slaves and were expected to be sexually available to their masters. Seduction and rape were both considered offences against a woman's father, husband or master rather than against her person, and although the difference between the two is enormous in our eyes, they were often denoted by the same word. This attitude,

which persisted well beyond the classical period, is illustrated by the reaction of the hero Theseus when the centaurs attempt to carry off Pirithous' bride:

> What senselessness impels you,
> mad Eurytus, to harm Pirithoüs,
> while I still live? Do you not understand
> that in harming one, you harm the two of us?[25]

There is no awareness here that the harm is to the woman, who is entirely incidental in the relationship between two men and their enemy. Seen from this point of view, Paris has taken Helen from her husband's house and must face the consequences, and whether she came willingly or not is immaterial for the plot of the *Iliad*. This explains why the question is of not much interest to Homer. Helen both blames herself for the war and behaves like a dutiful wife to Paris. It is not that Homer does not credit women with feelings, but that they are as irrelevant to men as those of men are to the gods, acknowledged occasionally, but ultimately trifling. And although they may bluster and boast, the men of the *Iliad* are equally the playthings of fate. We should remember that the servile state of women in antiquity was shared by many men. Only nobly born and mature males were able to act autonomously in a way that we would find familiar. The world of the *Iliad* is remote from our own not only in its sexual politics, but in the entire structure of its society. To minimise this difference some unwarranted assumptions creep into modern interpretations, a rather innocent example being that Menelaus is almost always portrayed as 'too old' for Helen, and Paris as a young, attractive alternative. But the epic tradition gives no indication that there was more than the usual age difference between husband and wife, and Menelaus is frequently called 'fair-haired' (or 'red-haired', depending on the translation), so not yet grey, while Paris himself, in character so much the younger brother, is of the same age class as fully grown Hector. The 'old man with a young bride' pattern is just a way we have of explaining the situation to ourselves, but it should be clear now that Helen's preferences, whether for Paris or her husband, count for very little.

Although Homer is neutral about Helen, later writers were usually condemnatory, considering Helen to be the cause of the Trojan War in a way that is reminiscent of patristic writers blaming all the world's ills on Eve. When in Aeschylus' tragedy Agamemnon, returning from the war, is murdered by his wife (and Helen's sister) Clytemnestra, the chorus calls to mind 'wild, maddening Helen' and 'the thousand lives [she] murdered under Troy',[26] and Euripides calls her and Clytemnestra 'a vicious pair of daughters'.[27]

Apart from the knee-jerk blaming of a woman's beauty for a man's desire, and with it causing a war, what Helen is accused of is not only eloping with a man other than her husband, but choosing a man who is the inferior of her husband.

Paris may be good-looking, but he is a bit of a coward, clearly not a great man like Menelaus. Women are supposed to love, or at least honour, men for their qualities, and that is where Helen went wrong. What it is never presented as is a great love, although few versions are so disenchanting as that of Dictys Cretensis, in which the Trojans in council suggest returning Helen to the Greeks when Paris has had enough time to satisfy whatever love he had for her.[28] In the Epic Cycle Helen returns to Menelaus after the war and has more children with him. She appears at home with him in the *Odyssey*, apparently quite content.

No other examples of love between a man and a woman are forthcoming in the *Iliad*. The happy marriage of Hector and Andromache comes closest, but compare her lament at her husband's death with that of Achilles for Patroclus: 'There could be no worse suffering for me,' he says, 'not even if I heard of the death of my father',[29] whereas Andromache's more formal mourning dwells on the fate of her young son, now fatherless and unprotected. Caught up in the realities of conflict as she is, one cannot fault her for thinking of a living child rather than a dead husband, but as an example of narrative love it falls some way short.

1.3 Achilles and Patroclus: a war of words

Love between males was often celebrated in the *classical* Greek world, and this is widely known, which is probably why a recent introduction to Greek epic found it necessary to categorically state that *archaic* epic 'strictly excludes homosexual love',[30] a sweeping statement that would have come as a surprise to classical and Hellenistic writers. The reason that this claim may be made with such confidence is a confusion of 'love between men' and 'sex between men'. It is true that the latter does not occur, or at least not phrased in such a way that it is unmistakable. But Greek readers of Homer weren't coy about speculating on the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus, and in Aeschylus' *Myrmidons* a mourning Achilles recalls their 'countless kisses'.[31] The *Library* of Apollodorus bluntly states that Achilles became Patroclus' lover when the two met at the court of his father Peleus,[32] and there is no reason to suppose that this was a minority view.

Classicists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, working on the assumption, owing as much to Plato as to the teachings of the church, that love is noble, lust is base, would insist the 'friendship' (a much safer word) between Achilles and Patroclus was unsullied by such acts. Modern scholarship would err in the other direction, assuming love to be indicated by *erōs*, and *erōs* to mean exclusively 'sexual desire', and from lack of the latter would infer the absence of the former. Absence of evidence thus becomes evidence of absence, and Achilles

and Patroclus now no longer even love each other. The epic strictly excludes homosexual love.

But *erōs* is not just sexual desire, it can denote any deeply felt longing. When talking about enduring love, of any kind, the Greeks used *philia*, and there is plenty of this between Achilles and Patroclus. Patroclus is the hero's 'far dearest companion',[33] whom he cares about as much as his own life and addresses as 'joy of my heart',[34] and this love is not divinely engineered, as so much else in the story is. Patroclus is the only man Achilles will acknowledge as an equal, as brave and handsome as himself, and the only man with the right to tell him he is behaving in a way unbecoming to a great warrior: 'Peleus was not your father, nor Thetis your mother!' Patroclus scolds the sulking Achilles.[35] When his companion is dead, Achilles sees no reason for living any longer, and it isn't long before they share the same grave. Later tradition reported seeing their ghosts on the White Island in the Black Sea, together still in death. [36]

The view an interested reader gets of the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus depends entirely on the direction from which it is approached. The introductions to modern translations of the *Iliad*, if they see fit to mention them at all, usually do so to assure the reader that 'the text gives no warrant' that the two were more than friends[37] (they may be quite insistent about this, see Appendix A). Should you happen to open a history of homosexuality though, you'll find the two have pride of place in the introduction as the first great example of love between men.[38] Nor are references in other fields as cautious: under its entry for 'Achilles' *The Oxford Dictionary of First Names* describes Patroclus as his lover without further qualification.[39]

What's going on here? Clearly the classicists are aware that the language in which the relationship is described is love language, and they are of course perfectly right in saying that this does not have the same connotations as it does for us. The problem is that we don't have a category for this kind of passionate-but-possibly-not-sexual relationship. The commentators can only say what it is not, and leave us with the insipid 'best friend' or the unsatisfying 'ritual substitute'. The problem with this is that the *Iliad* makes less sense if you play down the relationship between the hero and his lover. We read that Achilles' grief at his friend's death is 'based on injured self-esteem', it is 'disproportionate' and 'excessive', disregarding that those who love passionately may also grieve passionately. Patroclus is seen as the hero's alter ego, making Achilles appear self-centred even when he is clearly thinking of someone else. Elaborate reasons are constructed for his making peace with Agamemnon after Patroclus' death, while the truth is simply that nothing matters anymore.

The description of Patroclus as *therapōn* to Achilles, which came to mean 'attendant' but which originally denoted someone whose function was 'to take on

the impurities of the figure for whom the substitute then dies',[40] has led to suggestions that his role was originally to take Achilles's place, his death standing in for that of the hero, which somewhat contradicts the theory that he was a character invented for the *Iliad*, which after all presupposes the hero's death even as the description of it is displaced onto Patroclus. Although interesting in itself, note that this question of origins, despite the above-quoted author's insistence to the contrary, says nothing about what the role of Patroclus is *within the story*, but only on how he came to be there. To take a less contentious but analogous situation, it is as if we concentrated on the reasons Achilles has a goddess for a mother (the hero needs to stand out from his peers by certain special qualities, the young man's mortality becomes more poignant if his mother is undying), and somehow asserted that this is the reason they share a close and affectionate bond. But not all mothers are close to their grown sons (think of Clytemnestra), and Thetis' concern for Achilles says everything about how Homer wanted us to see their relationship: it is a motivational force *within the story*. So also with the hero and his substitute. A more promising line of enquiry sees a Mesopotamian influence at work, specifically the friendship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu. There was a constant exchange of cultural ideas between Mesopotamia, Anatolia and the Aegean, with Semitic and Indo-European languages and stories freely mingling, and it is possible that Homer or one of his predecessors considered the friendship between the king and the wild man the perfect model for articulating the love of the hero and his companion. The most obvious parallel is the dream in which Patroclus' ghost appears to Achilles and the hero tries to hold his companion:

> 'But stand near me, even for a little time let us embrace
> each other and take solace in painful lamentation.'
> So speaking he reached out with his arms,
> but did not take hold of him;[41]

Gilgamesh also converses with and embraces Enkidu's ghost (successfully, in this case).[42] Although the *Epic of Gilgamesh* is only marginally more explicit than the *Iliad* (Gilgamesh and Enkidu at least get to hold hands), it is interesting that its scholars have no problem with acknowledging the possibility that its protagonists' relationship may be interpreted as homosexual. So why is it different for Greeks?

There are three distinct points to be made here: first, Achilles and Patroclus are clearly the most important person in each other's lives, and whether their affection is expressed sexually or not is immaterial to the plot of the *Iliad.* Second, those who insist that 'there is no trace of erotic feelings between them'[43] apparently think it *does* matter and that 'sexual love' is qualitatively different and

more worthy of discussion than just 'love'. Third, those who find 'no trace of erotic feelings' are reading with their eyes closed.

The reasoning in the second case appears so confused because it is not reasoning at all: it starts from the assumption that sexual love between a man and a woman is the standard and that anything which diverges has to be explained away. Anyone who started from the equally untenable opposite assumption would arrive at the conclusion that Achilles and Patroclus are a gay couple in the modern sense. The relationship thus falls victim to the tendency to privilege heterosexual love. And although those who see Achilles and Patroclus as lovers in every sense are generally very careful in their choice of words and arguments, this cannot be said for those who argue that Achilles was a lover of women. Instead of at Achilles and Patroclus, interpreters of the *Iliad* would have us look at the relationship of Achilles and Briseis. I will pay some attention to this, as it is important to realise how much we are influenced by the standard patterns of our own time, but think for a moment what your reaction would have been if I had just announced we would be analysing the relationship between the hero and a bronze tripod….

Achilles himself says he loves Briseis and calls her his wife, in words which really don't invite a different translation.

> No, for any man who is decent and wise
> loves her who is his own and cares for her, as I too loved
> this one from my heart, spear-won though she be.

Noble words, but they are doubly out of context, here because I have not quoted the whole speech, and within the story because Achilles is twisting the situation to make his point:

> Other prizes of honor he doled out to the noblemen and to the kings;
> theirs remain unplundered; mine alone of the Achaeans
> he took away, and holds the bride fitted to my heart. Let him lie with her
> and take his pleasure. But why must the Argives be at war with
> the Trojans? Why did the son of Atreus assemble and lead
> an army here? Was it not for Helen of the lovely hair?
> Do the sons of Atreus alone of mortal men love their wives?
> No, for any man who is decent and wise
> loves her who is his own and cares for her, as I too loved
> this one from my heart, spear-won though she be.[44]

The scene is Achilles' shelter, and he is speaking to the ambassadors from Agamemnon who have come to offer him reparation for the insult: the return of Briseis, an impressive hoard of treasure, and Agamemnon's daughter's hand in marriage. The hero declines. His vehement assertion that he loves Briseis is part of an argument for refusing to have her back. He rhetorically promotes her to the status of wife to make the comparison with the insult to Menelaus possible, but she is not and never will be, and neither will Agamemnon's daughter:

> His gifts are hateful to me …
> I will not marry a daughter of Agamemnon son of Atreus
> not if she rivals golden Aphrodite in beauty,
> and in skill matches Athena the gleaming-eyed;
> not even so will I marry her …
> For if the gods preserve me so long and I reach my home,
> there Peleus himself will seek out a woman for me;[45]

Achilles is saying anything he can think of to justify continuing in his anger, and like most words spoken in anger, they are contradictory and should not be taken as proof for anything except the hero's temper. What it does illustrate is that Achilles is still a young man, who hasn't reached the stage of life when a man thinks of marriage, and because everyone knows by now that he will die in this war, he never shall. But from this, and the fact that Briseis leaves him 'reluctantly' when Agamemnon's heralds come for her, some have felt confident enough to speak of 'deep feelings between them'.[46]

For the moment, though, Briseis is firmly in Agamemnon's possession, and the embassy having been unsuccessful Odysseus and Ajax leave, while a bed is made up for Achilles' old tutor Phoenix in the forecourt of his shelter. Inside:

> … Achilles slept in the inner recess of his well-built shelter,
> and with him lay a woman, one he had taken from Lesbos,
> the daughter of Phorbas, Diomede of the lovely cheeks;
> and on the other side lay Patroclus, and by him
> Fair-belted Iphis, whom godlike Achilles gave him[47]

This is a so-called 'retiring scene', a standard description, like the arming of a warrior, often employed by Homer. We will encounter another such in section 1.6 below. A retiring scene needs an appropriate consort: the hero's wife if he has one, or a suitably lovely woman. All translators render this as the women 'sleeping beside' the heroes, all commentators assume it means 'sleeping with', sometimes even construing it as a kind of unfaithfulness to Briseis on Achilles' part. Besides the lack of imagination evinced here in thinking of reasons to share

a bed – it's warmer, the shelter, however 'well-built' presumably is not large, and the supply of bedding not endless – it also fails to take into account the context. For this is another one of those parallels: both heroes have the sleeping companion such a stock description requires, showing their status by pointing out the quality of the women at their disposal. But Patroclus has one 'whom godlike Achilles gave him'. Unlike Agamemnon, Homer is saying, our hero does know how to distribute prizes.

Much later, after Patroclus has fallen fighting in his companion's armour, Achilles is again found in bed, but alone, tossing and turning, unable to sleep because he is missing Patroclus, 'his manhood and his great strength'.[48] So upset is he that his mother Thetis appears to him and tries to console him.

> "My child, how long will you devour your heart
> in weeping and grieving, mindful neither of food
> nor bed? Indeed it is good to lie with a woman
> in lovemaking; you will not be living long with me, but already
> death stands close beside you and powerful destiny."[49]

We need to look very closely at this. What Thetis tells her son is: 'It is good to have loving intercourse even with a woman.'[50] These words have both been described as 'quite inappropriate' advice for a mother to give her son[51] and accepted as understandably admonishing him to re-engage with life. However, few commentators have thought very deeply about their meaning. One author paraphrases Thetis' words as urging Achilles to 'enjoy earthly pleasures while he may.'[52] Never mind indelicate, how about insensitive? But this is not really what she says at all. First, she urges a course of action that is strangely impersonal, 'it is good' not 'it would do you good'. Then there is the matter of 'even with a woman'. It may not be the only way to read the Greek, but displacing the 'even' makes for odd grammar ('it is a good thing even to lie…')[53] and insisting that it 'must be taken to emphasise the whole phrase',[54] sounds like special pleading. Really the most obvious way is to understand this is as meaning that Achilles was usually in the habit of making love to a man, which seems entirely likely to me. Modern translators uniformly omit that little word 'even', having Thetis insist that it is 'good to make love' with 'to a woman' appended as a sort of line-filler, almost redundant. But why does Thetis feel she needs to specify the sex of her son's putative partner at all?

Let's assume for the moment that the poet and his intended audience had no preconceptions about whether lovemaking should be with a man or a woman, or had at least no firm opinion which of the two Achilles would prefer. Why would Thetis specify 'with a woman'? There is only one end for which heterosexual

lovemaking is clearly to be preferred: children. Achilles' mother goes on to say that he has only a short while to live, and she is urging him to leave a part of himself behind. Thetis wants a grandchild. This should really have been obvious all along: in any age but our own, straight sex means babies, and heterosexual encounters in Greek myth are *always* productive.

If Thetis was urging her son to beget an heir, I think we can be fairly sure he did not follow her advice, as is frequently asserted.[55] While he does share a bed with Briseis in the poem's final retiring scene, we never hear about her again afterwards, and we are certainly not told she bore his child. An argument from absence can never be certain, but consider the similar situations of the other spear-won women in the Greek camp: in post-Homeric tradition Ajax had a son by Tecmessa, Cryseis was returned to her father already pregnant with Chryses junior, even Cassandra was said to have had Agamemnon's children, somewhere between being taken captive at Troy and arriving at his house to be murdered by his wife.[56] Achilles himself was credited with fathering Neoptolemus while hiding among the girls on Scyros before the war began, a tradition which was inserted into the *Iliad*. If classical authors, who read the *Iliad* very closely indeed, had understood Achilles to have had sex with Briseis, inevitably someone would have invented a son for them. But they did not, and it is only modern classicists who read a loving relationship into a stock description. The final retiring scene, like the earlier one when Patroclus was still alive, is always taken to imply sex, even though Homer does not say it in so many words. One commentator cites this as 'another wonderful example of Homeric reticence, of which we make whatever we will.'[57] It appears we can have it both ways after all: if Achilles is not said to get physical with Patroclus it is because they are not lovers, and if he doesn't with Briseis it is because Homer is being 'reticent'. But Homer had no problems with being direct when he wanted to be, as when Paris recalls the time when he and Helen first joined 'in love and sex'.[58]

Consider this also: these (male) authors are reading affection into what by our standards would certainly be rape. Not so by the standards of the time, for a man was free to do with his slave as he wished, but if Achilles does find comfort in a woman's arms, of which I am by no means convinced, Briseis has no voice at all in the matter, and it is not, cannot be, love. Those who consider this scene as one of moving conclusion, with the hero at peace at last, are wilfully blind to the real story.

Given the licence to make of Homer's reticence what I will, in conclusion I would like to draw attention to where the scene with Thetis takes place: Achilles is found tossing and turning in bed, unable to sleep. Presumably, once Patroclus is dead, Achilles feels his absence all the time, but Homer chooses to show him missing his friend in the most intimate setting. It is a trace, only a trace,[59] but if we can build a passion for a slave-girl from a few ill-chosen words spoken in

anger, surely we may infer it from Achilles' need for his lover's 'manhood and strength'?

What inevitably gets lost in this discussion of 'did they or didn't they?' is the matter of love in its non-sexual sense. Remember that love is something that happens between equals, and that the Greeks would never have regarded a man and a woman to be equals. A man might feel *erōs* for a woman, and he might feel affection for her, 'any man who is decent and wise loves her who is his own and cares for her' as Achilles puts it, but this was always a matter of rights (mostly his) and duties (mostly hers). The love that gives and takes equally, the kind of love which makes the greatest of egos accept it when he is bluntly told he's being an even bigger fool, is not possible there. Reciprocal love was only possible between men, and for other heroes as well as for Achilles, women, if not quite interchangeable, are certainly ephemeral, while their relationships with their companions are exclusive and enduring. Herakles bounces around the Aegean begetting children on all and sundry, and Theseus, as we shall see, is a much married man, but they each have only one companion, whose friendship long outlasts their associations with women.

So Achilles may already have a child by Deidamia, he may assert he 'loves' Briseis, he sleeps beside a woman from Lesbos, and in later tradition even finds time to lust after one of Priam's daughters before he gets killed. But he only ever loves one man. That love is undeniable; how it was expressed is neither here nor there.

1.4 Hero, lover, whipping-boy: the lives of Theseus

So far we have concentrated on one story, but there were many more Greek heroes whose stories were told in other epics besides those of Homer. None were preserved from the same age, but through summaries and quotations by later writers we can nonetheless get a good idea of their contents. The legendary history of Thebes, with its incestuous King Oedipus and his quarrelling sons, was a popular subject, as were the adventures of individual heroes. Of these, Herakles was the perennial favourite, he was a pan-Hellenic presence early on. Others were more strongly associated with one city or region. Their stories tend to follow a common path, which I shall outline here before turning to the story of the Athenian hero Theseus in particular. That the life stories of heroes (whether Greek or from elsewhere) strongly resemble each other has led several scholars to formulate a prototype or archetype (most famously perhaps Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*). The following is the pattern identified by Lord Raglan in 1936:

(1) The hero's mother is a royal virgin;
(2) His father is a king, and
(3) Often a near relative of his mother, but
(4) The circumstances of his conception are unusual, and
(5) He is also reputed to be the son of a god.
(6) At birth an attempt is made (…) to kill him, but
(7) He is spirited away, and
(8) Reared by foster-parents in a far country.
(9) We are told nothing of his childhood, but
(10) On reaching manhood he returns or goes to his future kingdom.
(11) After a victory over the king and/or a giant, dragon, or wild beast,
(12) He marries a princess, often the daughter of his predecessor, and
(13) Becomes king.
(14) For a time he reigns uneventfully, and
(15) Prescribes laws, but
(16) Later he loses favour with the gods and/or his subjects, and
(17) Is driven from the throne and city, after which
(18) He meets with a mysterious death,
(19) Often at the top of a hill.
(20) His children, if any, do not succeed him.
(21) His body is not buried, but nevertheless
(22) He has one or more holy sepulchres.[60]

The idea of most heroes is fixed at the monster-fighting stage, which often gets duplicated, and heroic time is flexible, and sometimes appears to be stuck in a loop: after a very short infancy and precocious youth, heroes remain young warriors for most of their active lives.

As heroes go, Theseus fits this pattern well. A biography of him is given by the first-century AD author Plutarch in his *Parallel Lives*, but some of its elements go back at least to the sixth century BC, and most of it was widely known when the hero was promoted by Athens as its founding figure in the fifth. I synthesise the different versions here.

> Aegeus, king of Athens, consults the oracle at Delphi because he doesn't have any children, and the oracle tells him 'not to loosen the neck of the wineskin' until he reaches Athens again if he wants a hero for a son. On his way back he relates this advice to Pittheus of Troezen, who understands the oracle's meaning that Aegeus is not to have sexual intercourse before coming home, opens a literal wineskin and having plied the king with drink, puts him to bed with his daughter Aethra. Shortly before or after, Aethra is also visited by the sea-god Poseidon, leaving her child's parentage doubtful. Before he continues home Aegeus leaves a sword and a pair of

sandals under a great stone, and tells Aethra that if she has a son, to tell him to come and find his father if he is capable of lifting the stone out of the way and claiming these tokens. Nine months later Theseus is born, and he is raised in his grandfather's house and equipped with the sword and sandals when the time comes. Disregarding the advice of his mother and grandfather to travel by sea, he takes the land route to Athens, defeating villains as he goes. Arriving at Aegeus' court, the latter's new wife Medea considers him a possible rival to her son, and after failing to get him killed by the bull of Marathon, persuades the king to have him poisoned, but Aegeus just in time recognises his own sword and welcomes his son instead.

In those days, every seven years the city paid a tribute of young men and maidens to King Minos of Crete in payment for the murder of his son at Athens. The young people where fed to the monster which lived in the labyrinth built by Daedalus, the Minotaur, who was a hybrid sprung from the passion of Minos' wife for a prize bull. Either voluntarily or by lot, Theseus was included in this tribute and joined the party bound for Crete, promising his father to change the colour of his ship's sails from black to white should he return alive. Before going into the labyrinth Minos' daughter Ariadne gave Theseus a ball of thread to help him find his way back through it, on the condition that he take her away with him. The young hero succeeded in killing the Minotaur and finding his way out, but reneged on his promise to Ariadne, stranding her on the island of Naxos on his way back, where the god Dionysus found her and took her as his wife. Returning home, Theseus forgot to have the sails changed when he came within sight of the city, and thinking his son was dead, Aegeus committed suicide.

Having become king of Athens after his father, Theseus led an expedition against the Amazons, whose queen Antiope or Hippolyta he married, or carried off, or had an affair with, resulting in the birth of his son Hippolytus. When he later married another woman, the jealous Amazon queen attacked the wedding party and was killed. This was not the only brawl at a wedding Theseus was involved in, for at the marriage feast of his friend Pirithous the uncivilised centaur guests became intoxicated and tried to seize the bride and the other young women and youths, and were defeated in the 'battle of the Lapiths and Centaurs', a popular subject with classical sculptors. Theseus was also said to have wed Aigle and Perigune, and he was certainly married to Ariadne's sister Phaedra. It is when they have both become widowers that Theseus and Pirithous decide on carrying off daughters of Zeus for the both of them, although I wonder if this episode has become displaced: it is so very much a thing for headstrong youth to attempt. Whenever it happened, once they arrive in the underworld they are seized by Hades, bound to the chair of forgetfulness by snakes, and so they are encountered by Herakles as he makes his own journey into the world below. Some accounts say he was allowed to rescue Theseus only, others that they were both brought back to the land of the living. After his return to Athens, we only see Theseus again as the – not always wise – old king

in the stories of others: he receives both Oedipus and Herakles as they come to Athens seeking purification from their crimes. The reason that Theseus became an exemplary citizen where Herakles remained an unreconstructed strongman is Athens's aggressive promotion of her own democratic values. Theseus is an archaic hero reimagined in the shape of a classical ideal.

We can see Theseus following the hero's usual path: the double parentage, the youthful feats of arms and the achieving of his father's status. Once he has become king, with his youthful deeds Theseus also leaves his youthful affairs behind; after the adventure with Ariadne, who is said to have fallen in love with him, the other women are all taken in marriage on the hero's own initiative, as befits a grown man.

There is one part of the story of Theseus which is not touched upon in the outline of a hero's life above, and which you will not find in other accounts of the 'figure of the hero'. Somewhere along the way, a hero acquires a companion from whom he becomes inseparable. There is no trace of this in the stories of Perseus and Bellerophon, of whom little is told apart from the most recognisable episodes, but Herakles is always accompanied by Iolaus (said to be his twin brother's son, but in story only a little his junior) and of course we have already encountered Achilles and Patroclus.

For Theseus, uniquely, we have a description of when they first met. Plutarch relates how the young Athenian's feats had become celebrated far and wide, until they came to the ears of Pirithous, the equally impetuous son of Ixion (or Zeus) and Dia. Coming to see for himself if these reports were true, Pirithous decided to rustle some of Theseus' cattle and see what happened. But when he was caught in the act and challenged, they did not at once fall to fighting. Instead they were struck with admiration at the sight of each other, and decided to become sworn friends. This is the only account we have of a hero and his companion, for want of a better term, falling in love.

Once they have met, Theseus and Pirithous are said to 'seal their friendship with an oath',[61] as Apollo and Hermes also do in the *Homeric Hymn* to Hermes, and from non-literary sources we know that all over the Greek world forms of sworn companionship between men were recognised. Sometimes these would solemnise sexual relationships, but this was not necessarily the case. Such a formal bond inevitably gets compared to marriage, but we should be careful here. Because marriage is the only type of sworn kinship we still recognise, it becomes the standard by which any other form we encounter gets measured. But it would be more accurate to say that what we call marriage – an association of companionship entered into when desired by both partners – is much closer to sworn friendship than marriage in the ancient world – an economic alliance initiated by two families with the purpose of having children – is to either. But

there were always more ways for two individuals to be sworn together. We have already seen the importance of guest-friendship to the Greeks, and we shall encounter blood-brotherhood in Chapter 4 and companionage in Chapter 5. What is important about sworn friendship is not whether it was in any way like a marriage (which the Greeks involved would probably have found an odd comparison) but that the troth-plighting was not just a phrase: it was exclusive, enduring and publically acknowledged. The words and rituals required by such vows would have varied from place to place, but there is plenty of evidence that they were taken by real people as well as the heroes of story. And sometimes the heroes of story were deliberately associated with the vow: male couples from Thebes would make their promises at the tomb of Iolaus, Herakles' companion.[62] So when we read that Theseus and Pirithous 'swore eternal friendship' this is not a poetic way of saying they got along rather well. It means lasting commitment, loyalty and a conscious choice.

That this happens on a cattle raid may point to the great age of this episode, but that may also be just the kind of detail that was added by a learned Hellenistic author as an archaising touch. But although the testimony of their meeting is late, the names of Theseus and Pirithous already occur together in the *Odyssey*, where Odysseus mentions that he did not see them when he called the spirits of other heroes from the underworld, 'those men of still earlier times'.[63] Here we clearly see the tendency of epic to put the heroic past at a distance. Although heroic time is flexible, by no stretch of the imagination is Theseus far in the past of Odysseus; they have both pursued Helen, and there is no more than a generation between them. Odysseus is here speaking with the narrator's voice, invoking another age and incidentally informing us that Pirithous was already part of the story of Theseus long before the latter became the kingly ideal of democratic Athens. Pirithous is not present during Theseus' greatest deed (as monster-slaying should be done alone, see Chapter 4), and he really isn't very useful to the hero at all, as Iolaus clearly is to Herakles. Later scholarship hasn't found much to say about him, 'he tends to appear as little more than the pendant of his friend'.[64] But he is present in the vase paintings of the kidnap of Helen, at Aegeus' court, and when Theseus carries off the Amazon. It seems Theseus and his friend do everything together, up to and including a descent into hell, for no other reason than that they want to. And that, for those who told the stories, was apparently reason enough.

As I had originally planned it, this section was going to be called 'Hero, lover, citizen' and to detail, from this point onward, how Athens appropriated Theseus and made him the contradictory king of democracy. But as I came across references to the hero while researching later parts of this book, another subject became unavoidable, and much more interesting: the modern reception of

Theseus. The hero from Troezen hasn't had a good press recently. To give a few representative examples, Theseus is 'a legendary rapist' and 'a hero whose exploits include rape and betrayal';[65] the abduction of Helen is 'the most outrageous of the young delinquent's rapes' to a study of early Greek myth;[66] and the introduction to Mary Renault's novel about him wonders why the author chose as her subject a hero who 'tricked, bludgeoned and raped his way through life'.[67]

All this is rather startling to someone familiar with, for example, Bacchylides' account of the youth who protected a young Athenian maiden from Minos' lust, and who was, according to Callimachus, so polite to the old woman Hekale who sheltered him before he caught the bull of Marathon.[68] So how did we get from well-bred youth to violent and overbearing manhood? The negative view of Theseus stems in part from Plutarch, who is disapproving of the hero's many affairs with women, but Plutarch realised full well that in collating different sources he was doubling and trebling the hero's exploits:

> There are, however, other traditions about various marriages of Theseus which had neither an honourable beginning nor a happy ending … For example Theseus is said to have carried off Anaxo, a girl from Troezen, and after killing Sinis and Cercyon to have ravished their daughters, and besides this to have married Periboea … and Iope, the daughter of Iphicles. Then again it was because of his passion for Aigle, the daughter of Panopeus, that he is accused of having deserted Ariadne, as I have mentioned earlier, and this was neither an honourable event nor even a decent action. Lastly, his kidnapping of Helen is said to have plunged Attica into war and brought about his own exile and his death.[69]

The most damning for our impression of his character is of course his leaving of Ariadne, of which very disparate accounts are given in antiquity. We will examine Ariadne's own story in section 1.9 below, and focus here on Theseus' actions – or lack of them. Minos' daughter falls in love with the handsome stranger and offers him her help, in return for which he will take her away and/or marry her. In the most negative version, he fulfils the first part of this promise and then simply tires of her, slipping away while she is still asleep, while in the most positive she is claimed by Dionysus and Theseus is heartbroken (well, maybe not – but at least 'vexed'). Taking the contradictory accounts together, one is left with the impression that he didn't care much either way; Ariadne is a means to an end, neither love object nor rape victim.

Counting down the other women mentioned in ancient sources, Theseus is said to have seduced the daughters of most of the bandits he slew on the road to Athens, which are obvious doublings of the Ariadne story. Most interesting is

Perigune, who is said to have hid from him in among the wild asparagus and only came out when he promised not to hurt her. Short of taking this for a blatant lie, we shall have to assume their child was consensually conceived. Aigle is a shadowy figure. We know nothing about her, and that Theseus was in love with her may be no more than a convenient way to explain his leaving Ariadne. Of the other women, Helen we have already touched on in her own section above, while to Phaedra Theseus was properly married, though we are never told how that came about. This leaves the Amazon, whose name varies. Theseus either defeated her in his own expedition against her people, or he was given her as a prize when he joined Herakles against them. Why he would have been fighting against the Amazons at all is not made clear, but the story was old, as witnessed by vase paintings from the sixth century onwards, where Theseus is always depicted as youthful, as he is for most of his adventures. The people who painted and appreciated these pictures would not necessarily have been disapproving, for Greek marriage customs included the groom taking the bride away from her parents' house in a chariot, and such a carrying off may be a visual sign for marriage as well as rape.

No one in antiquity, as Plutarch knew, would have believed, or even known, all these tales at once. And no one would have concluded, from what they knew, that the hero's actions were criminal. That is not to say they were always regarded positively. Hellanicus of Lesbos, trying to get the chronology of Theseus' life in order, concluded that the hero was over fifty when he abducted Helen, and thus that he carried youthful indiscretion shamefully into old age. But heroic time is flexible, and the timeline of Theseus' life is enough to give Doctor Who a headache (to give just one example, if Herakles on one of his labours rescued Theseus from Hades after the friends' attempt on Persephone, how can Theseus' feats on the way to Athens, in which he emulated Herakles' labours, already have taken place?). We are not dealing with a man showing inappropriate behaviour for his age, but with mythographers trying to stitch together many contradictory accounts, and we must be content to view all Theseus' warriorlike feats (as opposed to the judging and purifying he does as king) as taking place at roughly the same time.

His friendship with Pirithous is another case in point, their meeting being placed by Plutarch after Theseus has become king of Athens, while much earlier vase paintings show Pirithous already in his company (together with Medea) when he has just caught the bull of Marathon, so before the Minotaur adventure. Pirithous is part of the problem we are dealing with here. The two friends' plan to carry off daughters of Zeus for wives is certainly marked as transgressive in the sources, but modern readers tend to misunderstand the reasons. When he has carried her off, Theseus places the underage Helen in his mother's household, a procedure quite natural for a man betrothed to a child (medieval nobles would

have found the idea familiar). The problem is not that he wants to make her his wife, but that he does so against her family's will. His desire for the not-yet-woman is neither here nor there, and the poet Pindar explains his choice as a wish to be related to the Dioskouroi. But if the abduction of young Helen has modern commentators tutting in disapproval, it is nothing to the opprobrium Pirithous gets for wanting to carry off Persephone. Despite the fact that he gets nowhere near the queen of Hades, Pirithous is a rapist to the modern mind.

But how was the maiden married to the lord of the underworld? She was carried off against her will. For all we know Persephone would have welcomed a hero to bring her back to the sunlit lands. The crime, in any case, in classical eyes is not against her but against her husband. But it never happens, and the fate of Theseus and Pirithous, stuck to their chair, appears to confirm the transgressive nature of their adventure. But that is our Christian past speaking. The underworld is not Hell, and Hades is not punishing sin, but defending his property. Marrying daughters of Zeus is not very presumptuous for the supposed sons of Poseidon and Zeus respectively, but they should have followed the proper procedures.

Pirithous' mortal father Ixion is one of those few who do get eternal punishment in the Greek underworld. He was the first murderer, and although Zeus was willing to purify him, he called down the wrath of the gods by attempting to seduce Hera. Zeus sent him a cloud in Hera's image, and, Ixion's purpose accomplished, he had the man bound on an eternally revolving wheel. But, for such is the divine double standard, Zeus in his turn seduced Ixion's wife Dia, and Pirithous was the result. Perhaps some of Ixion's reputation rubs off on his heir, for I am otherwise at a loss why his abortive attempt on Persephone should earn Pirithous the title of 'arch rapist',[70] and why he has so often been viewed as a negative influence on his companion.

Even taking everything together, which is of course an anachronistic way of looking at it, I do not think the sources justify the contemporary condemnation, and I would propose a very different reading of Theseus. What the hero's enemies have in common is that they are wild creatures, creatures of excess: the half-human Minotaur, product of an unnatural lust; the sow and the bull, domestic creatures which ravage the land; the uncivilised centaurs; the Amazons who cross the bounds of womanly conduct. Theseus does not just kill enemies or accomplish meaningless tasks like Herakles, he tames, he brings the transgressive within bounds. With his primitive cattle raid, even Pirithous may belong in this list, as enemy turns friend. Far from 'tricking, raping and bludgeoning' his way through life, Theseus brings civilisation. But he brings it on ancient terms, and this means making the Amazon safely subordinate. The carrying off of Antiope/Hippolyta comes the closest in the stories to the modern definition of rape, but it is doubtful if it was ever seen as such until quite recently.

Any conqueror may be offered his enemy's sister or daughter in marriage, and this goes unremarked. The only difference in this case is that the young woman in question was herself the enemy. And since, according to one version of the tale, Hippolyta was angry enough when Theseus married another to attack the wedding party, we must allow for the possibility that she herself thought it her rightful place. Pausanias refers to a version in which Antiope fell in love with Theseus while Herakles was laying siege to the Amazons' city and betrayed her people, imagining her more on the pattern of Medea and Ariadne.

Despite this common theme of restraint, modern readers have taken it all for uncontrolled violence. And the phrases quoted above are not the judgements of people unfamiliar with the material or the distancing effect of history, they are academic opinions. Of course they repeat each other, but even so, one wonders how so much condemnation has so suddenly accumulated. For despite the assertion that Theseus, 'as any half-educated person in the Renaissance could tell you, was a notorious rapist',[71] this is a modern, not a renaissance view. The Middle Ages and the Renaissance often renounced the behaviour of classical heroes as contrary to Christian morals, and Theseus' perceived womanising certainly falls into this category. But this is a far cry from complete rejection, and it is strange that we should have retained the renaissance view (if that is what it is) in this case and not in others. No one complains much about Herakles, whose exploits do include rape, and as we have seen, when Achilles beds down with Briseis it's not force, it's love. So why, in the case of Theseus, have we taken Plutarch's disapproval and run with it?

The answer, I think, is that all the uneasiness we feel about heroic violence, all the revulsion at the privileged male's treatment of women, have been concentrated here. I have not always found it easy to deal with this myself, and I know I have to close my eyes to certain aspects of the myths if I want to retain my sympathy for Achilles or Orestes, if I want to continue enjoying their stories. And the natural human impulse, when we wish to ward off blame from ourselves or those we love, is to place the guilt elsewhere. It seems this happens even when the loved ones are characters in stories. And once the scapegoat is marked, it is easy enough to convince people he deserves his punishment. There is no archaic 'Theseid' to admire, and it is often obvious that Athens spared no effort to make its hero look good compared to those of other cities, so positive evidence is easily dismissed. Theseus has become the hero who has heaped upon him the sins of all the others, to enable us to go on upholding Herakles as the archetype, so we may go on loving the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. It is an irony and a pity that the punishment has fallen on one who, on the ancient evidence, and despite some lapses of judgement, was better behaved than most. The 'legendary rapist' never raped anyone.

1.5 Reintroduction: the chains of tragedy

Every year at the festival of the City Dionysia at Athens three sets of four plays were performed. Each set consisted of three serious pieces followed by a so-called 'satyr play', which provided light relief by having the weighty world of myth invaded by boisterous and lustful satyrs, wild men with the hooves, tails and ears of horses, and very obvious phalluses. From the word for the serious plays in the tetralogy, *tragôidia*, we have our word 'tragedy'. Each tetralogy was presented by a different playwright, and these were in competition, the writer of the best set of four being declared that year's winner. Hundreds of tragedies were performed in the fifth century BC, of which only thirty-two are extant, all by the three most famous tragedians Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. In addition to these complete plays we know the titles of many others, and for some we have summaries or considerable fragments. Tragedy dealt with the same heroic stories as epic did, but with a very different approach. Each play illuminated an episode of no more than a single day, focusing on human decisions and their often calamitous results. Each play had a central catastrophe, which never happened on stage but was related by the characters. There were at most three speaking actors, all men, who wore masks to distinguish their parts, and also a chorus which was constantly in dialogue with the protagonist but did not join in the action. Since we have only plays written for the Dionysia, the tragedic view of the world tends to come across as rather Athenocentric, but the stories told and the concerns they raised would have been recognisable all over Greece. They deal with the consequences of war and the implacability of fate and above all with what it means to be a citizen, that is, a free, aristocratic male, often defined against the female or barbarian Other.

Since the stories the tragedians told were already known to their audience (although Euripides especially was also capable of delivering surprises) the interest lay in the explanation the events were given within the plays and how the protagonists felt about them. Everyone knows Orestes killed his mother, but sometimes he does so reluctantly, sometimes cold-bloodedly; sometimes Apollo has ordered him to, sometimes he acts on his sister's urging; sometimes he believes he is justified, sometimes guilty. Orestes himself is in two minds about it, and therein lies the interest.

Although a few such as Aeschylus' *Persians* dealt with more recent history, most tragedies consisted of one episode chosen from a long concatenation of mythical events which were already well-known to the audience. I will here set out two such chains of events, that of the house of Thebes and that of the house of Atreus, which will allow us to place the stories discussed in the next sections in their proper context.

Both chains start with the same man: Tantalus, a son of Zeus who offended the gods and was punished forever in Hades. The greatest of his crimes was to have his young son Pelops killed and served to the gods at a feast to test their divine perspicacity. Only Demeter, grieving over her daughter's absence, distractedly ate a piece of the shoulder. The youth was resurrected by the gods, and given an ivory patch for the missing bit of shoulder. The sea-god Poseidon was so struck by the handsome youth rising from the ashes that he kept him as his lover on Olympus. But after this supreme example of hubris from Tantalus none of his descendants ever fared well:

Pelops wins Hippodamia, daughter of Oenomaos of Pisa, by defeating the latter in a chariot race, with the help of divine horses given him by Poseidon. He is cursed either by Oenomaos or by the king's charioteer whom he had bribed to help him and later killed. Here the chain divides in two:

Pelops has a bastard son who Hippodamia fears will be favoured above her own sons Atreus and Thyestes, so she persuades them to kill their brother.

Atreus succeeds his father, but his brother Thyestes seduces his wife, and Atreus takes revenge by serving Thyestes his own young sons at a banquet. To avenge him, Thyestes begets a son on his own daughter. This is Aegisthus.

The sons of Atreus, Agamemnon and Menelaus, take the daughters of Tyndareus, Clytemnestra and Helen, in marriage. Helen is seized by Paris, and the Trojan war follows.

While the Greek fleet is becalmed at Aulis, Agamemnon learns that he has offended the goddess Artemis, and they may only leave for Troy if he sacrifices his daughter Iphigenia. She is duly sent for under the pretext of marriage to Achilles. Either she is sacrificed or Artemis provides a deer to take her place.

Laius, dispossessed son of the king of Thebes, was welcomed in Pelops' house, but an offence against this hospitality caused Pelops to curse Laius and *his* descendants as well.

Going against the oracle which warns him not to have children – because any son he has will kill his father and marry his mother – when reinstated at Thebes Laius begets a son on his wife Jocasta. The child, called Oedipus, is exposed but found and reared in Corinth.

Travelling to Thebes when he is grown, Oedipus quarrels with and kills a man he doesn't know, but who is of course his father. In payment for freeing Thebes of the sphinx which has been terrorising the country, Oedipus is given the widowed Jocasta in marriage.

The incestuous couple have several children before the truth comes out. Jocasta hangs herself and Oedipus is ruled unfit for kingship by blinding.

While he is away Agamemnon's wife Clytemnestra begins an affair with his cousin Aegisthus. When he returns they murder him and his Trojan concubine Cassandra.

Orestes, Agamemnon and Clytemnestra's son, has been raised at the court of his kinsman Strophius. When he is grown to manhood he avenges his father by killing his mother, encouraged by his remaining sister Electra.

With a mother's blood on his hands, Orestes is driven mad by the Furies until he is purified by Apollo and acquitted of his crime by Athena, who placates the Furies by giving them the status of deities of justice rather than revenge.

In expiation for his crime Orestes is charged with bringing back a statue of Artemis from the land of the Taurians. There he finds the lost Iphigenia serving as its priestess, bound to sacrifice every stranger landing in the country to the goddess. After recognising each other the siblings manage to escape with the statue.

In response to a misstep by his sons Eteocles and Polynices (they have either reminded him of his father or served him the wrong cut of the sacrificial meat) Oedipus curses his sons.

After their father's death Eteocles and Polynices agree to rule in alternating years, but at the end of his Eteocles refuses to make way, causing his brother and his allies to lead an unsuccessful expedition against the city, an episode known as the Seven Against Thebes.

Polynices having been killed in the conflict, his sister Antigone wishes to have him properly buried, but the new king, her uncle Creon, has forbidden the burial of traitors. Antigone defies Creon and is condemned to die.

The sons of the Seven Against Thebes, known as the Epigoni, finally do manage to take the city, putting Polynices' son Thersander on the throne.

Whenever one of the tragedians chose to explore an episode from one of these chains, all the other events would be in the background, providing motivations and parallels. Clytemnestra and her lover murdering her husband on his return home appears in a different light if you know she blamed him for her daughter's death. Oedipus' rather querulous cursing of his sons may just be a renewal of a much older ill-wishing. The way the inexorable events come about within the story invited reflection: should Orestes have let his father's murder go unpunished? Should Antigone have left her brother unburied? Both had very little room to move, but they had some. Tragedy is not about divine punishment for human missteps, but about human handling of situations which have gone wrong already, quite outside their power to do something about it. As in other genres, the gods are as quarrelsome and rancorous as humans, and their

motivations are those of men with no one to hold them in check. There is no concept of sin as an offence against the divine in Greek thought, guilt means what you are publicly known to have done wrong. Above, I described Tantalus' crime as 'hubris', and this is an important concept, but not in the way it is often understood. It has come to mean arrogance, especially in the face of the divine, but for the Greeks it denoted a crime, 'intentionally dishonouring behaviour',[76] a going out of bounds. Rape could be denoted by 'hubris', as the violent appropriation of what was not a man's own, as could other crimes which disregarded the rights of fellow men.[77] Etymologically its closest equivalent in meaning in English is perhaps 'outrage'. There is a lot of hubris in the tragedies, but not in the sense it used to be understood, as an offence against the gods.

Although the two chains outlined above have the strongest causal links as well as the direst ends, the stories about Minos, Jason, and of course Herakles were just as familiar and just as enthusiastically reworked. So were episodes from the Trojan War, although tragedians tended to avoid competing directly with Homer. Only Aeschylus presented a trilogy about Achilles – *Myrmidons*, *Nereids* and *Phrygians* – of which sadly only a few lines survive.

Here it should be noted that the range of subjects was much wider than that implied by the surviving plays, and that the most popular now where not necessarily the most popular then. The obvious example is the story of Oedipus, of which Sophocles' version has become canonical, and since Freud has ousted all other versions from the public consciousness. So also for other stories. There were just as many tragedies about Philoctetes as there were about Orestes and Electra, but no one tells his story anymore. In drawing conclusions, it should be kept in mind that the sample of extant plays is too small to rely on as a guide to what the Athenians thought important in their stories, and in what follows I consider alternatives wherever possible.

Although the shared subject matter between epic and tragedy suggests continuity, we should not forget that their cultural backgrounds were different. Achilles' copious tears after his lover's death have made modern readers uneasy, but so they did classical Athenians, who considered loss of control over the emotions as unmanly.[78] And as we shall see, it is when masculine control is absent that the terrible events of tragedy occur.

1.6 To the gates of hell: Orestes and his brother

We have already seen it stated that archaic Greek epic excludes homosexual love. Apparently the emotional life of the classical hero was even poorer: 'Friendship is not often found in Classical myth, Theseus and Peirithoös being the only genuine

example.' In the corresponding note to this surprising statement, the author clarifies: 'Of other well-known pairs, Orestes and Pylades are cousins and Herakles and Iolaos, uncle and nephew; the relationship between Achilles and Patroklos is both eroticized and unequal.'[79]

Again, we have here a confusion over categories. Achilles and Patroclus are lovers(!), the argument goes, so not friends. Orestes and Pylades are cousins, so not friends. This is odd. We have no trouble at all with the concept of two people being at the same time family and enemies – quarrelling brothers are plentiful in Greek myth – yet kinship by blood and friendship apparently occupy the same conceptual space, they cannot both be there at once. Even a cursory examination should show that it doesn't work that way at all. Achilles and Telamonian Ajax are first cousins, they get along fine, but there is no special bond between them. Achilles and Patroclus are sometimes also said to be cousins, but whether they are or not makes no difference to their story (although it did provide a way out to writers who reimagined it for a more squeamish public). Surely it is how they behave towards each other which decides whether a couple of brothers, cousins or strangers are also friends?

The argument that it is not friendship when the relationship is unequal makes more sense. But, to coin a phrase, some relationships are more unequal than others. In a society in which everyone's rank and age class was immediately obvious, almost every relationship would have a senior and a junior partner, and if we counted every small difference against friendship we would be left with Castor and Pollux as the only truly equal partnership (twins hatched from a single egg, so no question of primogeniture). Some gaps were unbridgeable or nearly so: between master and slave, between man and woman, Greek and barbarian. But the gap between a king's heir and the foster brother he grew up with is more easily forgotten. The litmus test is in how the partners talk to each other: friends don't stop to think how to address their betters, but say what is on their minds, and the senior partner doesn't take offence when he is told the truth. When this is the case, the relationship's inequality is nominal, and we may accept the couple in the ranks of friendship. I would call all the couples listed above companions, that is, lovers regardless of sexual involvement, and so necessarily friends as well. Here, we shall look more closely at Orestes and Pylades.

The story of Orestes avenging his father by murdering his mother and his resultant haunting by the Furies was told in the lost epic *Oresteia*, and was a favourite subject of the tragedians. It is presented in *Libation Bearers* and *Kindly Ones* by Aeschylus, forming a trilogy with *Agamemnon,* as well as *Electra* by Sophocles, and *Orestes*, *Electra,* and *Iphigenia among the Taurians* by Euripides, and all these were preserved for posterity.

When Orestes was still a toddler, he was taken away by an old slave who feared he would come to harm from his mother's lover Aegisthus, and was

brought up in the house of Strophius, who was either brother-in-law or guest-friend to his father. Strophius had a son, Pylades, who accompanied Orestes when he returned to Argos, and on all his subsequent wanderings. Although Pylades does not always have a speaking part in the tragedies about Orestes – which is not surprising considering the limit of three actors to a play – the two always act in concert, and whether Pylades gets to speak or not, their attachment is made very clear. Pylades tends Orestes when the madness is upon him, and when Iphigenia, unaware yet of their identity, asks Orestes whether the two are brothers, the answer is: 'Brothers in love. We are not related.'[80] (And there goes another argument…)

The role of Pylades remains constant throughout the fluctuations of Orestes' character, aiding him when he is presented as acting justly, as in Aeschylus' trilogy, as well as when he is decidedly unsympathetic, as in Euripides' *Orestes*, with its ill-conceived plot to murder guilty Helen and take her daughter hostage to bargain for their own freedom. Here, Pylades' insistence on their friendship becomes as petulant as his companion's character: 'Dearest to me of my friends – yes, you are!' [81] Pylades was already said to have helped Orestes kill his mother in the *Nostoi*, and although he is not mentioned by Homer, there is some indication in the *Odyssey* that he belonged to the story from the start.

When Telemachus, the son of Odysseus, has set out in search of news of his absent father, he arrives at the court of old Nestor, where he hears much about the adventures of the Greek heroes after the sack of Troy. He is specifically urged by Nestor to emulate Orestes, who avenged his father, although as usual the parallel is not exact: Penelope resists her suitors where Clytemnestra is a willing accomplice to hers, and Telemachus' role must accordingly be different. But Nestor is saying to Odysseus' young son that Orestes successfully took on the responsibilities of a man, and so must he. After this exchange of news and stories follows a retiring scene:

> [Nestor] bade Telemachus, the staunch son of divine Odysseus, to sleep there on a corded bedstead under the echoing portico, and by him Peisistratus, of the good ashen spear, a leader of men, who among his sons was still unwed in the palace. But he himself slept in the inmost chamber of the lofty house, and beside him the lady his wife brought him love and comfort.[82]

(As an interesting observation by the way, when the two youths are visiting with Menelaus and Helen later in the story, two separate beds are made up for them, but they apparently wake up together in one.) [83]

This scene has raised some eyebrows. There are instances of fathers sticking their unmarried daughters in bed with their guests, as Pittheus did with Aethra