# STRUCTURES OF PROGRESSION
# IN THE PLOT OF THE *ILIAD*

### BRUCE HEIDEN

**A**lmost everybody knows a story plot when they see one in a movie or a tale. But it is hard even for experts to articulate what story plot is, what it does, and how readers or audiences follow one. Since the 1970s, theorists of narrative have expanded our sense of how plot functions, but many actual plots still elude satisfactory analysis. Somewhere in the experience of every story lies a plot that the fans of that story have somehow seen and engaged with. If it could be retrieved into awareness, the whole story experience and its significance might come into a clearer light.

For most stories and their readers, an intuitively satisfactory answer to the question "what is the plot?" would probably supply, at minimum, a sketch of the main characters of the story, the main events that happen to them, and some explanation of how these events progress toward a conclusion. Secondary characters and secondary events might also need to be identified when they play roles in causing the main events. The characters and events considered primary would probably be those that the story is "about," i.e., those that make it worth telling. For a story is not a disinterested record of events, whether historical or fictional, but an act of telling that has some purpose as discourse.[1] The plot has some relationship, albeit often an implicit one, to this purpose, which may also be implicit.[2]

---

1 See Labov 1972.366–75 on "evaluation" in extemporaneous narrative, "the means used by the narrator to indicate the point of the narrative . . . why it was told, and what the narrator was getting at."

2 Cf. the stronger formulation of Prince 1987.71–72, defining plot as "the global dynamic (goal-oriented and forward-moving) organization of narrative constituents which is

When conceived of as a sketch like this, a story plot sounds like an entity that exists somewhere all at once, perhaps as a conception in the mind of the teller that he conveys via the story to the mind of the reader/audience. But minds are not containers and memories are not objects; it might be more accurate to describe "plot" as a cognitive process performed in the comprehension and appreciation of a story (Brooks 1984.37). Yet even this formulation may offer little real improvement if it is taken to imply a process in which a defined sequence of steps leads to a definite conclusion from which the whole plot can then be seen at once in retrospect. A reader—or even an author—would rarely construct and retain a single mental schema of all the relationships pertaining to the story's interest (Gerrig 1993.6). More likely, one's perception of a story's plot might remain quite vague and inchoate unless crystallized by the question "what is the plot?" But the plot is not therefore a mere illusion called into being by the question. Readers must *be able* to establish the relationships that support the story's interest as the need arises, and the story must provide the material with which to do it.

One partially satisfactory analysis of a story's plot, therefore, would be a schema or set of schemas that render visible, simultaneously and continuously, narrative relationships that, in the actual act of telling, listening, or reading, might have been apprehended discontinuously, or in a different order, or, in some cases, might have remained implicit altogether. They might also have been apprehended non-verbally, in images, concepts, or emotions. In short, the relationships will be more clear and stable in the schemas than they would ever appear during an actual reading experience. But readers of the story should recognize in these schemas relationships they deem important to "what the story is about" and that they feel the story really does suggest. An acceptable plot schema may reveal the already obvious or the allusively remote, but not the fanciful, arbitrary, or trivial.

An analysis of the plot of the *Iliad* that attempted comprehensiveness might (at the current state of research on story plot) include a section on the causal relationships of events narrated in the epic (or more loosely their relationships of *progression*), another on the causal relationships of background events (e.g., the "Plan of Zeus"), semantic domain analyses of the rational and emotional factors that motivate the characters' decisions and affect their modes of conflict, cooperation, and reconciliation, semantic

---

responsible for the thematic interest (indeed, the very intelligibility) of a narrative and for its emotional effect."

domain analysis of unfulfilled possibilities evoked in the narrative and their function in the plot, and, finally, analysis of the thematic and emotional implications of all the foregoing. An even more elaborate treatment might go on to analyze the sequential presentation of the story in recitation and its effects of anticipation, surprise, disappointment, fulfillment, and so forth. Needless to say, the discussion that follows will be much less ambitious, restricting itself only to the first topic and adding a few thematic observations. Nevertheless, the investigation takes its orientation from the premise that a great deal of the "point" of the *Iliad* comes from audiences' emotional investment in its themes, and the analysis—here still in a preliminary stage—ultimately aims to provide a model that might relate the structure of events in the story to the emergence of themes.[3]

## RELATIONSHIPS OF PROGRESSION AMONG EVENTS IN THE *ILIAD*

Some existing discussions of the plot of the *Iliad* (e.g., Owen 1947) adopt the form of a traditional *argumentum fabulae* (sequential plot summary). But analysis of how the plot advances immediately brings to the fore certain features of the story that a sequential summary cannot capture.[4] For example, some motivational connections between events transgress chronological sequence: the death of Patroklos in *Iliad* 16 causes Achilles' killing of Hektor, but this does not occur until many events in the story and many lines in the narration have intervened. More importantly, certain events motivate numerous other events: Zeus's agreement to Achilles' request in Book 1 initiates all of his efforts to assist the Trojans through the beginning of Book 16; these, in turn, initiate (1) the resistance of Hera, Athena, and Poseidon, and (2) Hektor's incautious attack on the Greek fortifications, both of which, in turn, motivate many other, less consequential actions. Thus the events of the epic constitute a motivational hierarchy in which the great majority of events are subordinate to only a few. While scholars sometimes loosely touch upon this feature of the epic, e.g., in references to Book 9 as a "turning point," the motivational hierarchy has never been rigorously analyzed.

---

3 Unfortunately, I have not been able to take account of Lowe 2000 and Latacz 2000, which appeared after this article was complete.

4 On the relative independence of the logical narrative structure of the plot and the chronological sequence of events, see Pavel 1985.34–37.

About fifteen years ago, the comparatist Thomas Pavel drew upon game theory to develop a model for schematizing the way story plots advance (Pavel 1985). Taking over from earlier theorists the observation that the basic unit of narrative is the "event," defined as a change of state,[5] Pavel stresses that in stories these changes occur because of actions performed by particular characters, who perform them for particular reasons (Pavel 1985.14). Thus a story event usually involves a decision, even if the outcome is not that at which the decision aimed. Pavel brings out the decisions that advance a story by analyzing each event into two main parts, a "Problem" and a "Solution."[6] The combination of Problem and Solution Pavel terms a "Move" (like a move in a board game) (Pavel 1985.10). Pavel uses the following diagram (Figure 1.1) to illustrate a Move in the plot of Shakespeare's *King Lear* (Pavel 1985.18).

Adapting this feature of Pavel's system to the *Iliad*, we could observe that the initial Problem in the narrative is that the priest Chryses' daughter Chryseis has been abducted by the Greeks. Chryses' Solution is to approach Agamemnon as a suppliant and ask for her to be returned in exchange for ransom. When this fails, the priest attempts a second Solution, seeking the help of Apollo. Apollo sends a plague upon the Greeks, which eventually leads to the return of Chryseis to her father. The Problem + the Solution[(1,2)] = the Move (Chryses), labeled with Chryses' name since the Problem and the Solution are his. Adopting Pavel's system, we could schematically represent the Move of Chryses as shown in Figure 1.2.
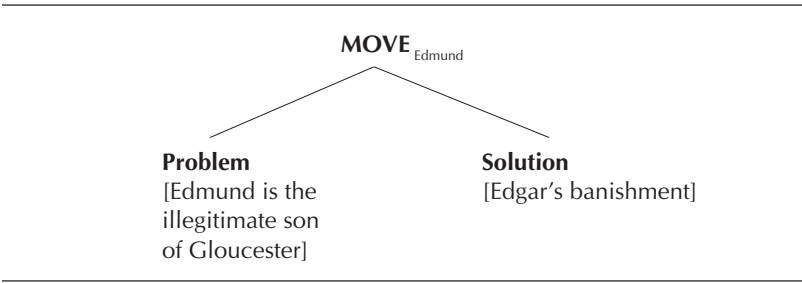
**MOVE** [Edmund]

**Problem**
[Edmund is the
illegitimate son
of Gloucester]

**Solution**
[Edgar's banishment]

Figure 1.1. A Move in *King Lear*

---

5  For a historical survey of plot analysis, see Ronen 1990.
6  Pavel 1985.17–18. Pavel's term "Solution" does not imply success. "Attempted Solution" might therefore be more descriptively accurate. The present discussion will retain Pavel's terminology.

**MOVE** <sub>Chryses</sub>

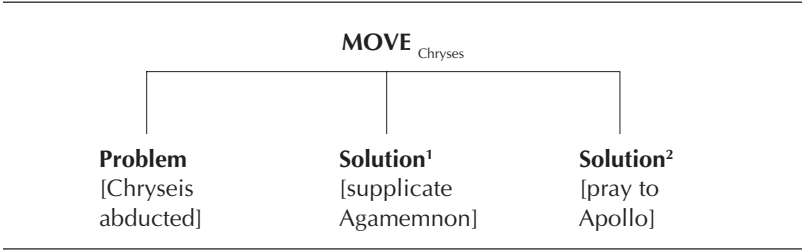| **Problem** | **Solution¹** | **Solution²** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| [Chryseis abducted] | [supplicate Agamemnon] | [pray to Apollo] |

Figure 1.2. Move of Chryses

Pavel observes that sometimes the agents who initiate a Move make use of auxiliary characters or circumstances. For example, when Achilles faces the Problem that Agamemnon has appropriated Briseis, in order to effect the Solution of getting Zeus to punish the Greeks until they restore his honor, Achilles calls upon Thetis to intercede. This kind of intermediate step Pavel terms an Auxiliary (Pavel 1985.18). Not every Move includes Auxiliaries. Thus, a Move may = Problem + (Auxiliary ) + Solution, where the parentheses around the word "Auxiliary" indicate its optional nature. Achilles' Move with its Auxiliary is represented in Figure 1.3.

Moves may be embedded in one another (Pavel 1985.19). In the above example, Achilles' Problem is created by a previous Move, in which Agamemnon, faced with the Problem that he would have to return Chryseis and thus be without a prize, adopted the Solution of taking Achilles' prize as a replacement. Figure 1.4 represents Agamemnon's Move as constituting the Problem in Achilles' Move.

Either a Problem, an Auxiliary, or a Solution may consist of a series (Pavel 1985.20). For example, Chryses attempts two Solutions to the Problem of the abduction of his daughter, (1) appealing to Agamemnon, and (2) praying to Apollo. The schematic representation of an embedded series is illustrated by Figure 1.2 above.
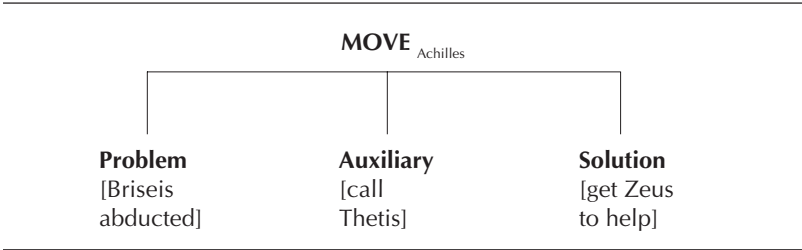
**MOVE** <sub>Achilles</sub>

| **Problem** | **Auxiliary** | **Solution** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| [Briseis abducted] | [call Thetis] | [get Zeus to help] |

Figure 1.3. Move with Auxiliary

**MOVE** Achilles

| **Problem** | **Auxiliary** | **Solution** |
| [Briseis | [call | [get Zeus |
| abducted] | Thetis] | to help] |

**MOVE** Agamemnon

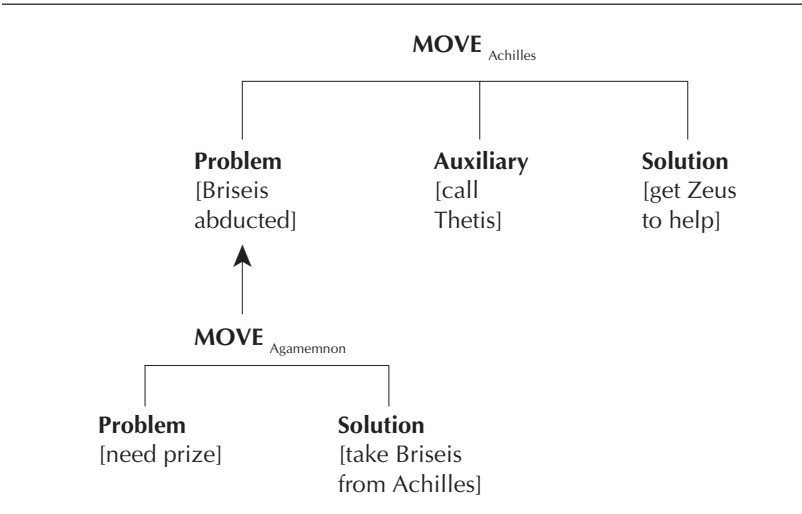| **Problem** | **Solution** |
| [need prize] | [take Briseis |
| | from Achilles] |

Figure 1.4. One Move Embedded in Another

    Pavel's Move diagrams can concisely illustrate the major decisions that advance the plot of the *Iliad*. To avoid clutter, a great number of minor embedded Moves have been omitted from the diagram. For example Solution[1] of Move[2] [Zeus helps Trojans] includes numerous Auxiliary Moves by Zeus (e.g., sending Dream to Agamemnon) that, in terms of the plot, are completely subordinate to the goal of helping the Trojans. Thus they do not need to be explicitly represented at this stage of analysis.

    Figure 1.5 schematizes the advancing plot of the *Iliad* as the relationships of seven hierarchically superior Moves by five major characters: Achilles, Zeus, Hektor, the Achaean army as a group, and the group of pro-Achaean divinities consisting of Hera, Athena, and Poseidon. In Move[1], Achilles is faced by the problem that Briseis has been taken from him. His Solution is to get Zeus on his side.[7] Move[1] (Achilles) then becomes a new

---

7 Cf. the general observation of Brooks 1984.12, that "the organizing line of plot is more often than not some scheme or machination, a concerted plan for the accomplishment of some purpose which goes against the ostensible and dominant legalities of the fictional world, the realization of a blocked and resisted desire." Achilles' plan to win honor from Zeus represents the most obvious example of such a scheme in the *Iliad*; but the plans of Hera, Athena, and Poseidon to help the Achaeans despite Zeus's wishes (see below p. 246), Hektor's plan to ride Zeus's favor to a complete victory over the Achaeans (see below p. 248), and the Plan of Zeus itself are also schemes that meet inevitable resistance.
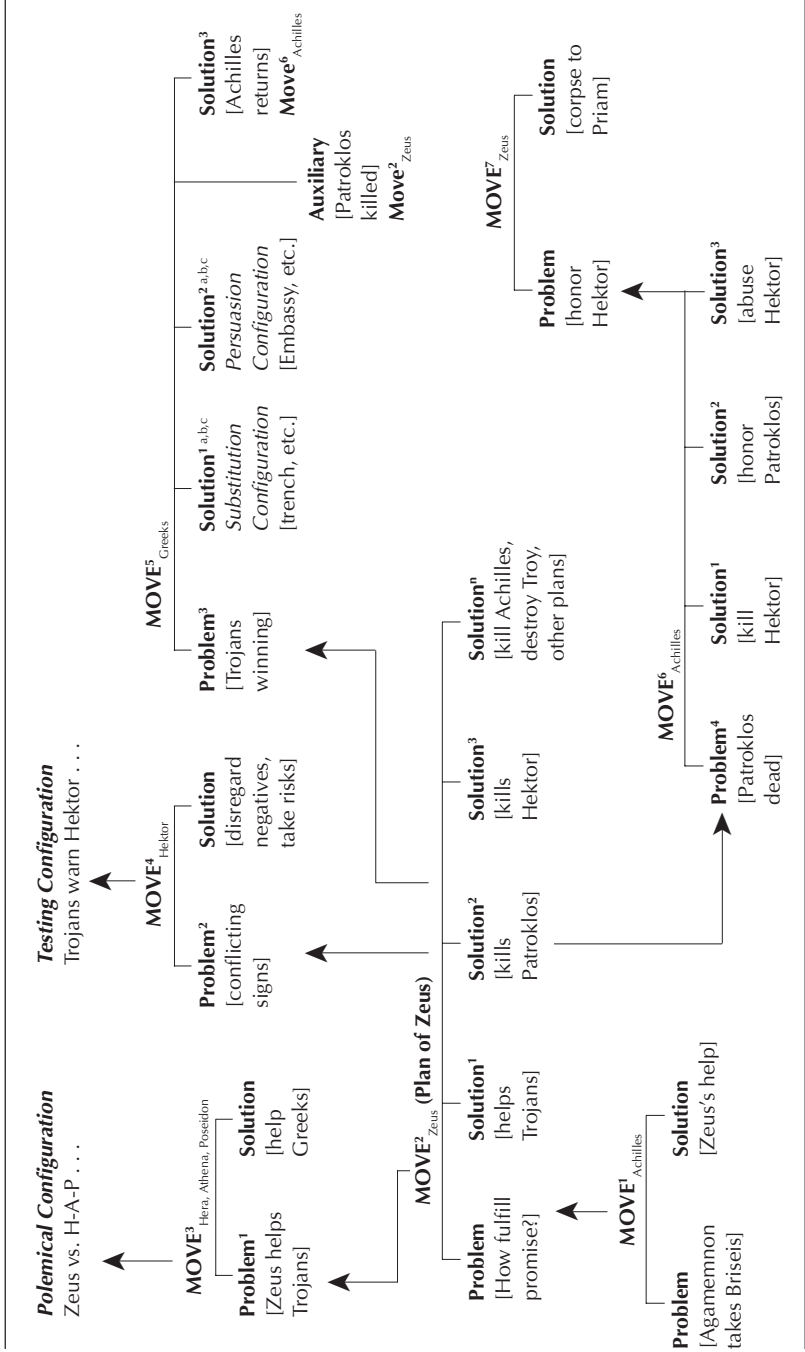
Figure 1.5. Major Moves in the Plot of the *Iliad*

Problem, this one for Zeus, who now must decide how he will fulfill the promise he made to Thetis. His Solution is a developing Plan with proliferating parts: he helps the Trojans in the battle (Solution[1]), but, in doing so, he also brings about the death of Patroklos (Solution[2]). He also plans the death of Hektor (Solution[3]) and many other events; it is not clear where the planning of Zeus stops (Solution[n]).

Move[2] now generates four new problems for four characters. It frustrates Hera, Athena, and Poseidon (counted as one group-character for the purposes of this analysis), who favor the Greeks (Problem[1]). Their Solution is to help the Greeks. Problem[1] + Solution = Move[3] (Hera, Athena, Poseidon). This, in turn, generates a series of Moves, summarily indicated in the diagram (*Polemical Configuration:* Zeus vs. H-A-P . . .), in which Zeus acts to block their intervention, one or more of them act to circumvent him, and so on until Zeus finally prevails. The second Problem it creates is for Hektor, who now mistakenly sees an opportunity to win great glory. His Solution is to attack the Greek ships. Problem[2] + Solution = Move[4] (Hektor). Hektor's attack, in turn, generates a series of Moves, summarily indicated in the diagram (*Testing Configuration:* Trojans warn Hektor . . .), in which Hektor repeatedly ignores warnings from his people, and even from Zeus.

Zeus's Plan creates a third Problem, this one for the Greeks, who, without Achilles, suffer setbacks on the second and third days of fighting. They pursue Solutions of two types, each a series summarily indicated in the diagram: (1) they seek substitutes for Achilles, namely the fortifications they build, the night raid of Diomedes and Odysseus, and Patroklos in Achilles' armor (*Substitution Configuration:* trench, etc.), and (2) they try to persuade Achilles to rejoin them, first by the Embassy, then when Patroklos visits Nestor's encampment, and finally when Patroklos himself pleads with Achilles (*Persuasion Configuration:* Embassy, etc.). The Substitution and Persuasion Configurations each achieve some success, although not nearly enough to ameliorate the Problem. But a Solution unexpectedly arrives from a collateral line of the plot: Move[6] (Achilles) solves the Greeks' Problem when Achilles returns to battle to avenge his friend and, somewhat incidentally, also to save the Greeks (Solution[3]): Problem[3] + Solution[(1,2,3)] = Move[5] (Greeks).[8]

---

8  Note that the rather minor role of the Embassy in this series is not a measurement of its importance in the story but only an indication that its tremendous significance arises from the themes projected in its speeches, not from a powerful role in the shaping of events. Achilles is out of the battle when the Embassy arrives and still out when it leaves, although

Lastly, Zeus's Plan (Move[2]) creates a Problem for Achilles, whose closest comrade has been killed (Problem[4]). His Solution has three parts: killing Hektor (Solution[1]), honoring Patroklos with a splendid funeral (Solution[2]), and abusing Hektor's corpse (Solution[3]). Problem[4] + Solution[(1,2,3)] = Move[6] (Achilles). Finally, Move[6] is a Problem for Zeus, for Achilles' abuse of Hektor's corpse offends most of the Olympians. Zeus's Solution is to compel Achilles to return the corpse to Priam. Problem + Solution = Move[7] (Zeus).

It is clear from the diagram that of the seven major Moves in the plot of the *Iliad*, Move[2] (Zeus) generates the densest node of consequences: four of the major Moves, involving four different character domains, all develop from Move[2] (Zeus). The one thing that Achilles, Hektor, the Greeks, and the Hera-Athena-Poseidon group have in common is that each must deal with a Problem created by Zeus. Nor does any one of them ever create a Problem for the others: when Hektor kills Patroklos, he is merely an Auxiliary to Zeus's plan. It is Zeus's decision that creates the Problem to which Achilles must respond.

In this regard Zeus—not Achilles—is the most influential character in the *Iliad*, the hub around which the whole plot turns. This fact has not been generally appreciated by critics, perhaps because the conflicts between Zeus and Achilles, and between Zeus and Hektor, never involve any face-to-face confrontations between the antagonists or any expressions of animosity on either side. On the surface of the text, conflict between Zeus and the mortal heroes approaches visibility in only a few passages; one thinks, perhaps, of 16.233–52, where Achilles prays for Zeus to help Patroklos, but Zeus silently grants only part of his wish. In contrast, conflicts such as those between Achilles and Agamemnon, Achilles and Hektor, or Hektor and Poulydamas furnish some of the epic's most dramatic scenes and penetrating speeches; but in terms of the plot, they function as Auxiliaries, facilitating but not directly motivating the events that attempt Solutions to the story's major Problems. The major conflicts between the mortal heroes and Zeus undergo displacement as the heroes Achilles and Hektor attempt to solve their Problems in conflict with one another rather than in conflict with their real antagonist, Zeus. Pavel would term the dramatic emphasis upon

---

he is perhaps slightly more sympathetic to the plight of his comrades than before. Here the analysis of structures of progression reaches its limit and other approaches are needed; see my remarks on p. 238.

these scenes of conflict between mortals a "counter-plot emphasis" (Pavel 1985.37–38).

## POLEMICAL CONFIGURATIONS
## IN THE STRUCTURE OF PROGRESSION

The basic plot-structure of the *Iliad* combines one dominant chain of Moves, that in which Achilles and Zeus alternate in creating Problems for one another, with three lesser chains or "subplots."[9] The chain of Moves in which Zeus opposes Hera-Poseidon-Athena furnishes a fairly straightforward example of what Pavel terms a "polemical configuration," i.e., a chain of Moves divided between two characters or groups in which every Move is an answer to the Problem created by the previous Move (Pavel 1985.29–30). The polemical configuration opposing Zeus to Hera-Athena-Poseidon comprises about eleven Moves. (Since, in the schema above, the Move in which Hera-Athena-Poseidon oppose Zeus has been labeled Move[3] (Hera-Athena-Poseidon), in the following analysis its subordinate Moves will be labeled Move[3a, b, c . . . k]. The configuration of Moves can be understood easily without a diagram, so none is provided.) In Move[3a] (Zeus), Zeus, faced with the Problem of how to fulfill his promise to Thetis, gets the Greeks and Trojans to meet on the battlefield (the action of Book 2). This poses a Problem for the pro-Achaean Olympians, since the Greeks must fight without their best warrior, Achilles. Thus, when hostilities actually begin (end of Book 4) after the detour of Paris's combat with Menelaos, Athena addresses this Problem by inspiring Diomedes, with the result that the first day of battle goes well for the Achaeans: Move[3b] (Athena) = Problem [Achaeans must fight without Achilles] + Solution [Athena enables Diomedes to take Achilles' place]. After a one-day suspension in the fighting, Zeus again attempts to act on the Problem of fulfilling his promise to Thetis (Move[3c]). He warns the Olympians not to interfere in the battle (Solution[1]: 8.5–27), which Athena understands as meaning trouble for the Achaeans (8.31–37); but initially the battle is a deadlock, and after weighing the fates on the scales, Zeus intervenes to help the Trojans (Solution[2]: 8.66–77). This gives rise to Move[3d] when Hera perceives the Trojan success as a Problem and attempts two Solutions. First, she unsuccessfully incites Poseidon to help the Greeks in open opposition to his older brother Zeus (Solution[1]: 8.198–207); when Poseidon demurs, Hera

---

9  Bassett 1922 analyzes the "three threads" of the plot of the *Iliad* somewhat differently.

inspires Agamemnon to pray to Zeus himself, and Zeus responds to the prayer favorably and moderates the Greek rout (Solution[2]: 8.245–52). But Zeus still wants to put the Greeks in distress, and, accordingly, he again inspires the Trojans (Move[3e]). This gives rise to Move[3f], in which Hera and Athena together prepare to help the Greeks (8.350–96). But before they can accomplish anything, Zeus responds preemptively to this new Problem by sending Iris to stop them (Move[3g]: 8.397–408). Next, Athena works around Zeus's prohibition by helping Odysseus and Diomedes in their night expedition (Move[3h]: 10.272–579).

    As Zeus begins the third day of battle, Hera and Athena do not assist the Achaeans, blaming Zeus's plan to glorify the Trojans (11.75–79); but Zeus does not act to help the Trojans until Agamemnon has chased them back to the city. Zeus then sends Iris to Hektor (Move[3i]: 11.185–94); this is, perhaps, best seen not as a polemical response to Athena but as a renewed effort in the embedded series of Moves aimed at fulfilling the promise to Thetis. But when, after enabling Hektor to burst through the Greek wall, Zeus turns his eyes from the battle, Poseidon takes the opportunity to help the Achaeans (Move[3j], Solution[1]: 13.1–15.219). Hera's beguiling of Zeus (14.153–360), which aims to keep Zeus's attention distracted and thus facilitate Poseidon's interference (Solution[1]) can be regarded as a second Solution (Solution[2]) to the same Problem. The final Move of the series (Move[3k]) occurs when Zeus awakens from his post-coital nap and realizes that Poseidon has been helping the Greeks; his Solution has three parts: threatening Hera (Solution[1]: 15.13–77), sending Iris to summon Poseidon from the battlefield (Solution[2]: 15.149–219), and sending Apollo to urge Hektor on (Solution[3]: 15.220–61). After this, Zeus's plan to help Achilles meets no further opposition.

    The chain of Moves in which Zeus and Achilles take turns in creating Problems for one another may likewise be described as a polemical configuration in which Achilles requests Zeus's help (Move[1]), Zeus grants the request, but in a manner that devastates Achilles, i.e., the death of Patroklos (Move[2]), Achilles responds by killing Hektor and then abusing his corpse (Move[6]), and Zeus responds to this final Problem by compelling Achilles to accept ransom for the body so that it can be buried properly (Move[7]).

    This polemical configuration displays considerably more subtlety than that opposing Zeus to Hera-Athena-Poseidon. For one thing, the structure's polemical shape is masked by the long intervals that separate the Problems from the Solutions that then create new Problems in turn: Achilles

asks Zeus to help the Trojans in Book 1, Zeus makes Patroklos die in Book 16; Achilles then does not kill Hektor until Book 22, and he is still abusing his corpse at the beginning of Book 24, when Zeus decides to stop him. The displacement of Achilles' opposition against Zeus onto Hektor (see above p. 245) also contributes to the same masking effect.

But more importantly, the exchange between Achilles and Zeus advances the epic thematically as the nature of the Problems that fuel it change: in Move[6] the Problem created for Achilles by the death of Patroklos (roughly, a man's responsibility for the life of a comrade) is not the same as that created in Move[1] by the abduction of Briseis (a king's responsibility for the property of his comrades). In turn, Achilles' terrible vengeance against Hektor then creates in Move[7] a Problem for Zeus (whether a pious mortal should be preserved from absolute disgrace after death) that is thematically unlike that implied in Move[2] by Thetis's request (whether to compensate a mortal before death because he is related to a goddess to whom Zeus owes a favor). The basic tit-for-tat polemical structure supports a profound shift in the thematic content of the story.

<div align="center">

### A "TESTING CONFIGURATION":
### ZEUS'S CONFLICT WITH HEKTOR

</div>

Like his conflict with Achilles, Zeus's conflict with Hektor hinges upon gaps in communication, except that, while the Achilles-plot unfolds through Zeus's problematic response to Achilles' straightforward request, the Hektor-plot unfolds through Hektor's straightforward response to Zeus's problematic signs. Zeus has several overlapping plans for the Trojans. He plans to give the Trojans short-term success to fulfill his promise to Thetis, but he also plans to destroy the city eventually (cf. Clay 1999), and he has planned the death of Hektor by the middle of the third day of battle (15.68) if not before. Zeus spurs Hektor's battle-fury with encouragement in the form of signs (e.g., 8.170–83) and success; but he also sends warnings, as when Iris explicitly informs Hektor that he will have success only until he reaches the ships of the Achaeans and the sun goes down (11.185–209); or when Zeus (one may presume) sends the omen of the eagle and the serpent that Poulydamas interprets as a warning against attacking the ships (12.211–29); and when Ajax boasts to Hektor that the end of his success is near, and the boast is followed by a portent from Zeus (13.809–32) (cf. Schadewaldt 1966.106–07). In each case, Hektor fails to heed the warning (Schadewaldt 1966.105–09; Reinhardt 1961.179–80, 273; Schein 1984.183; Taplin

1992.159–60). The series of warnings had already begun on the first day of battle, when Andromache begged him to take a defensive position on the city wall (6.431–39). On the third day of battle, Hektor is repeatedly warned by Poulydamas,[10] whose advice Hektor accepts when it calls for cautious advance (12.61–81, 13.723–53) (Redfield 1975.144), but not when it calls for declining to attack the Achaean ships altogether, even though this advice is prompted by the portent.[11] Later, when Apollo and Zeus help Hektor in the battle, he again takes courage from their assistance (15.253–70). But he is unmoved when Patroklos, with his final breath, prophesies his imminent death at the hands of Achilles (16.843–61) (Schadewaldt 1966.107), and when Poulydamas warns the Trojans to retreat within the city walls now that Achilles has returned to the battle, Hektor once again rejects his advice, even though he had been told by Iris that his success would last only until he reached the Achaean ships and the sun had set, both of which have by now occurred (18.254–309) (Taplin 1992.158–60). Hektor's refusal to heed Poulydamas's advice costs many Trojan lives. Finally, as he awaits the attack of Achilles, Hektor disregards his father and mother as they plead with him to take refuge within the city wall (22.37–130). Thus the Hektor-plot advances as a series of Auxiliaries in which Hektor is repeatedly tested to see whether he can hear and accept unfavorable signs, from Zeus and his surrogates, as well as favorable signs. This could be termed a Testing Configuration.

## ERRANCY IN THE STRUCTURE OF PROGRESSION

The main conflict of the plot of the *Iliad* opposes Achilles and Zeus. Yet as we have noted, this conflict barely touches the surface of the narrative; indeed, Zeus refers to his fulfillment of Achilles' "hope" (ἐέλδωρ, 15.74), the narrator refers to Zeus's intention of "completely fulfilling the prayer of Thetis" (15.598–99), and, finally, Thetis reminds Achilles that Zeus has brought to pass what Achilles had prayed for (18.74–77), all as if Achilles' wishes and Zeus's accomplishments were simply identical. Nothing could be more ironic. Not only does a huge gap open between the

---

10  On Poulydamas as warner, see Schadewaldt 1966.104, Reinhardt 1961.272–77, Redfield 1975.143–47.

11  Redfield 1975.145. Taplin 1992.157 defends Hektor's rejection of Poulydamas's counsel. On the eagle-snake portent and its multiple meanings in relation to the multiple plans of Zeus, see Schadewaldt 1966.105 and, especially, Clay 1999.

request of Thetis and Zeus's fulfillment: this very gap generates the events of the *Iliad*. When Agamemnon takes Briseis away, Achilles' response establishes what the hero must imagine to be a simple scenario. His goal is to make the Greeks suffer until they restore his honor; his means, to engage the participation of the supreme god. With Zeus behind his plan, there would seem to be no obstacle to its swift fulfillment (cf. Lattimore 1951.30, Morrison 1992.36–43). The example of Apollo's response to Chryses suggests that a virtually instantaneous solution could be expected.[12] If it had occurred, there would be no *Iliad*; but it did not, and the *Iliad* is the story of what happened instead. Thus, at the core of its plot lies the folktale motif of the "backfiring wish": a mortal speaks words that magically determine the future, but the meaning of those words and the future they create is not that which he intended or desired (cf. Nagler 1974.134 n. 6, Murnaghan 1997.27).

This misfiring of Achilles' plan, as well as the hero's displaced conflict with Zeus and the shifting stakes that propel it, impart to the plot structure a characteristic that might be called "errancy." The words of Achilles' request, apparently clear in meaning and sure of fulfillment, expand and drift unpredictably as Zeus improvises his plan and the divine antagonists of Troy strive to obstruct it.[13] From the moment when Thetis hears Achilles' prayer and must inform him that Zeus is vacationing among the Ethiopians and cannot even be contacted for twelve days, until the death of Patroklos at the end of Book 16, the *Iliad* traces the meandering path between Achilles' request and its surprisingly remote fulfillment. Moreover, Zeus's plan has also come to include a continuation—the death of Patroklos—that obscures the point at which fulfillment has been achieved. After wandering about before reaching its explicit goal, the narrative eventually overshoots it, producing an outcome that Achilles had never envisioned and ending his plan before he has received the honor he had sought (cf. Murnaghan 1997.23).

Nevertheless, when Thetis tries to console her son by reminding him that Zeus has granted what he asked for, and Achilles replies that his

---

12  Rabel 1997.50–54 argues that Achilles gets the idea for his plea to Zeus from Apollo's response to Chryses' prayer.

13  Cf. Lynn-George 1989.269 ("the narrative becomes a story in which direct linear progression is interrupted in a complicated space of reversals and deferred action, returns, counter-movements and collisions"); also 37–41 on the Plan(s) of Zeus, Morrison 1992 on misdirection, Murnaghan 1997.23–28. Brooks's analysis of the narrative middle as "the 'dilatory space' of postponement and error" is fundamental; see Brooks 1984.90–108.

wish has become meaningless since Patroklos has been killed, the plot of Achilles to win honor is still the main plot of the *Iliad*, if only in the sense that, through the beginning of Book 18, the *Iliad* advances as the story of how Achilles' plot misfired. But, at this very point, the events of the epic spin even further off their original course as Achilles develops a new goal, that of avenging Patroklos by killing Hektor and many other Trojans. Achilles' indifference to Agamemnon's formal reconciliation in Book 19 marks not the resolution of Achilles' plan to win honor but its irrelevance to a story that has now taken off in a new and previously only vaguely foreseen direction.

But just as the apparently nearby goal of defeat for the Greeks and concomitant honor for Achilles could be approached only by a crooked path of delay, the new goal of vengeance against Hektor, apparently easy for the mighty Achilles to achieve swiftly, immediately withdraws from the hero's grasp as he must impatiently tolerate the preparation of new armor by Hephaestus, Agamemnon's speech and offerings of reconciliation, the refreshments of the Achaean troops, and the disorganized interference of divinities on the battlefield.[14] The greatest of Greek heroes can only kill his opponent after 2,000 more lines of narration, and even then he does it through the surprising ruse of Athena. But when this goal has been reached, it, too, turns out not to be a fulfillment after all, as the death of Hektor does not satisfy Achilles' anger and he continues—without effect or completion—to abuse the Trojan's corpse.

Achilles' killing of Hektor had been foretold by Zeus (15.68, 17.198–208) and Patroklos (16.852–55), and thus cannot be a total surprise to audiences when it becomes part of the plot. (Although not everything foretold in the *Iliad* is narrated there: Zeus also foretells the fall of Troy [15.70–71], and Hektor foretells the death of Achilles [22.358–60].) But when, after killing Hektor and interminably abusing his corpse, Achilles remains unsatisfied, the plot seems to have lost its direction altogether.[15] The story has arrived at a unique moment: for the first time since Chryses supplicated Agamemnon it does not advance toward the fulfillment of an explicit goal. When the story regains direction, the new goal is one that no previous foretelling of events has predicted: the ransoming of Hektor's corpse (cf. Morrison 1992.83–93). To be sure, Priam has mentioned that he

---

14 Cf. Morrison 1992.43–48; on this and other long delays in the plot of the *Iliad*, also see Heiden 2000.46–48.

15 Cf. Lynn-George 1989.230 on the situation at the beginning of Book 24.

would attempt to ransom Hektor's corpse (22.415–22), but since he has no means of bringing this about, and makes no effort to do so (not even praying for divine assistance), his longing does nothing to direct or advance the story. It is Apollo's spontaneous inclination to save the dead Hektor from abuse, and his sense that Achilles' conduct has transgressed the bounds of decency and must be checked, that now furnishes the goal that advances the story toward its conclusion. Thus, for the last time, the plot of the *Iliad* strays from the goals that had previously guided its advance.

## SOME THEMATIC IMPLICATIONS

The novelty and power of this final twist highlight thematic developments that extend the analysis beyond the progression of events in the usual sense. While, purely as an event, the ransoming of Hektor's body carries the story line far from the goal that advances the plot of the *Iliad* through most of its course (winning honor for Achilles from the Achaeans), thematically the story's conclusion returns to the very point at which it began: a powerless, elderly man supplicates a powerful young warrior for the return of his child, and, with the help of the gods, achieves his wish.[16] After the middle of Book 1, when Chryseis is returned to him, the priest Chryses never reappears in the story nor receives so much as a single mention. In terms of the plot, his supplication of Agamemnon and its immediate aftermath serve as an Auxiliary, merely providing the occasion for the outbreak of conflict between Agamemnon and Achilles and the latter's eventual withdrawal and prayer to Zeus. When viewed from the vantage point of, say, Book 18, the old priest's supplication seems to be important as nothing more than a preparatory event in a story whose real subject is the misfired plot of the semidivine hero Achilles. But Homer has a surprise in store: when the *Iliad* concludes, it turns out that the story of the misfired plot of Achilles, now left completely behind, has, after all, been preparation for the majestic narration of an old man's successful supplication. The wandering course of the plot has not merely changed but reversed its thematic direction, transforming the audience's perspective on what the story has been "about" all along.

A similar thematic tension binds the immense length of the *Iliad*—

---

16  Book 24 reprises many themes introduced in Book 1; for a recent discussion, see Heiden 2000.34–35 and the works there cited.

for Homer and his audiences it must have been by far the longest poem they had ever heard or imagined hearing—and its overt main subject, the story of the mortal identified as having the shortest life.[17] Achilles, in accepting a very brief life on condition that immortal glory outlive him,[18] has, in effect, devalued the experience of life in time, with the pleasures, pains, disappointments, surprises, and responsibilities that are its essence.[19] For him, glory is life's payoff—the "point" of its story—and he wants (or thinks he wants) to get right to it without delay. But the errant plot and expansive duration of the *Iliad* in themselves afford a critical perspective on Achilles' choice. The experience of listening to the *Iliad* puts its audience through a "virtual reality" version of the lifetime that Achilles has chosen to trade away. Its prodigious length encompasses the broad range of life cycle events in their emotional fullness—from the marriage of Hektor and Andromache and the birth of their child through the desolate senectitude of Peleus and Priam. In particular, it is the pain of loss that the *Iliad* represents and evokes with ever-increasing intensity.[20] This pain is itself a commentary upon Achilles' decision to trade his life—so dear to his absent father—for glory. For Achilles, it was a terribly regrettable decision.

Yet the *Iliad*, for all the painful emotions it evokes, for all the frustration of its never-getting-to-the-point, ultimately provides its audiences with a grandly worthwhile experience of pleasure and edification. In this way it does not merely state, but demonstrates, that a lifetime is more than the interval between birth and glory: it is the medium of mortal enjoyment and value.[21]

*The Ohio State University*

---

17 Nominally the shortest; Thetis calls her son "most swift fated" (ὠκυμορώτατος, 1.505) when she beseeches Zeus on Achilles' behalf.

18 Implied by Achilles' account of his choice of fates, 9.412–13.

19 This discussion draws upon Peter Brooks's account—which draws, in turn, upon Freud—of life itself as a narrative that seeks to reach conclusion but also to defer it. Here Brooks finds the basis for the structuring of plot as goal and detour, and the need for temporal extension in stories. See Brooks 1984.90–112.

20 On the theme of loss in the *Iliad*, see Lynn-George 1989.37, 256, and elsewhere.

21 I am grateful for helpful suggestions from Professor Malcolm Willcock, the anonymous referee of *Arethusa*, and members of the Program on the Ancient World at Princeton University, where I read a version of this paper in March 2001.

# BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bassett, S. E. 1922. "The Three Threads of the Plot of the *Iliad*," *TAPA* 53.52–62.

Brooks, P. 1984. *Reading for the Plot*. New York.

Clay, J. S. 1999. "The Whip and Will of Zeus," *Literary Imagination* 1.40–60.

Gerrig, R. 1993. *Experiencing Narrative Worlds: On the Psychological Activities of Reading*. New Haven.

Heiden, B. 2000. "Major Systems of Thematic Resonance in the *Iliad*," *SO* 75.34–55.

Labov, W. 1972. *Language in the Inner City*. Philadelphia.

Latacz, J. 2000. "Zur Struktur der *Ilias*," in Latacz, ed., *Homers Ilias: Gesamtkommentar. Prolegomena.* Munich.

Lattimore, R. (trans.) 1951. *The* Iliad *of Homer.* Chicago.

Lowe, N. J. 2000. *The Classical Plot and the Invention of Western Narrative*. Cambridge.

Lynn-George, M. 1989. *Epos: Word, Narrative, and the* Iliad. Atlantic Highlands, N.J.

Morrison, J. 1992. *Homeric Misdirection*. Ann Arbor.

Murnaghan, S. 1997. "Equal Honor and Future Glory: The Plan of Zeus in the *Iliad*," in D. H. Roberts, F. M. Dunn, and D. Fowler, eds., *Classical Closure: Reading the End in Greek and Latin Literature*. Princeton. 23–42.

Nagler, M. 1974. *Spontaneity and Tradition*. Berkeley.

Owen, E. T. 1947. *The Story of the* Iliad. London.

Pavel, T. 1985. *The Poetics of Plot.* Minneapolis.

Prince, G. 1987. *A Dictionary of Narratology*. Lincoln, Neb.

Rabel, R. 1997. *Plot and Point of View in the* Iliad. Ann Arbor.

Redfield, J. 1975. *Nature and Culture in the* Iliad. Chicago.

Reinhardt, K. 1961. *Die* Ilias *und ihr Dichter*. Göttingen.

Ronen, R. 1990. "Paradigm Shift in Plot Models: An Outline of the History of Narratology," *Poetics Today* 11.817–42.

Schadewaldt, W. 1966[3]. *Iliasstudien*. Darmstadt.

Schein, S. 1984. *The Mortal Hero*. Berkeley.

Taplin, O. 1992. *Homeric Soundings.* Oxford.