

Inset Narratives in the Epic Cycle

Inset narratives—the reminiscences by characters, extended similes, descriptions of artworks and weapons, mythological exempla, editorial comments and so on that add bulk and depth to the Homeric and Hesiodic epics and *Homeric Hymns*—are of course precisely the kind of material that was usually omitted when the poems of the Epic Cycle were distilled down to the few meager sentences that epitomizers have left us. This is also the kind of material for which context is particularly difficult to assess on the rare occasions it is mentioned by ancient authors. Despite these limitations, however, I hope to demonstrate that the fragments and testimonia can yield an informative picture of this type of narration in the Cyclic poems. I shall be using the term “inset narrative” because it seems better suited to the nature of the evidence than more specific terminology such as “para-narratives” or “paradigms” that has been applied to the phenomenon in the surviving epics.¹ Many of the insets for which I shall be adducing evidence can be described as either analepses, “flashbacks” that help to flesh out the characters, their relationships to one another, and their motivations, or as prolepses, “flashforwards” that anticipate later events, such as prophecies and the declarations of gods.² Others will include Cyclic genealogies, catalogues, mythological exempla and *ekphrases*, all of which consist of or embed incidental material.

The focus here is not, however, primarily narratological. Rather, the aim is to demonstrate how the evidence for insets can help to reconstruct the poetics of the lost Cyclic epics, and their relationships to the larger body of ancient Greek epic and myth. In the case of the Homeric and Hesiodic poems, it has been well demonstrated that inset narratives, far from being randomly selected padding, serve practical and dramatic purposes. As Maureen Alden observes of what she calls “para-narratives” in the *Iliad*, “none ... is there by accident, and none is merely ornamental; the elements of each are related to some aspect of the main story.”³ Demodokos’ songs in the *Odyssey*, for example, help to establish the *Odyssey*’s relationship to traditions about events leading up to its own story, offer insights into the hero’s character, and reproduce the themes of conflict, cleverness and love that animate the main narrative.⁴ Other insets are set in a kind of timeless present but perform similar functions. Thus the tale of the

¹ Alden 2000, Appendix A, provides a useful discussion of various terminologies; see also de Jong 1987:81–90, 160.

² De Jong 1987:81.

³ Alden 2000:vii. As she notes (p. 13 n2), the linkage between insets and the main narrative was observed by ancient commentators. See further Austin 1966 and de Jong 1987:161.

⁴ Nagy 1979:13–65.

Hawk and Nightingale in the *Erga kai Hemera* unfolds in the same narrative space as epic similes, and like them asks the audience to relate this world outside of time to the main theme of the narrator's complaint.⁵

I shall then be surveying the extent of our knowledge of inset narratives in the Epic Cycle in order to try to make the case, first, that insets are deployed in the non-Homeric epics with similar frequency, in similar ways, and with similar sensitivity to context that we find in the canonical poems. Second, I shall be arguing that the diversity of these insets reveals a deep engagement with a set of traditions that can properly be described as, if not fully Panhellenic, at least "proto-Panhellenic." Further, I shall be suggesting that certain idiomatic aspects of the usage and construction of insets in the Cyclic poems can be explained in terms of a perspective that differs from, rather than a level of artistry that falls short of, that which characterizes the surviving, canonical epics.

The issue of the authorship of the Cyclic epics is I think largely irrelevant to the issue at hand, because I am convinced by arguments such as those of Jonathan Burgess that these poems are derived from oral traditions that paralleled those of the canonical epics.⁶ Approached this way, the deployment of inset narratives is part of the inherited tradition of storytelling in ancient Greece, and as such was conditioned as much by audience expectations as it was by the predilections of individual poets. Individual poets did no doubt use insets to different degrees and in different ways, but that usage seems best understood as part of a shared system that evolved over a long period of time. In any case, the evidence is too scanty to allow us to distinguish among the various authors associated with the Cyclic poems, or more accurately among the traditions represented by these figures, with regard to their narrative strategies. My goal is rather to describe tendencies revealed by the deployment of these narratives across the Epic Cycle in aggregate.

I proceed from similar assumptions regarding the relative dating of the poems discussed here. The fact that early Greek epics, canonical and non-canonical, took shape within the context of a common oral culture problematizes the very concepts of "source" and "recipient," since the traditions that gave rise to the texts of the epics, as long as they continued to evolve, would have had the opportunity to interact with each other and with non-Homeric traditions.⁷ Thus objective criteria for identifying the origin of any given theme with a particular narrative context have proved elusive. For these reasons I shall neither be asserting that any of the Cyclic passages I discuss are

⁵ See for instance Lonsdale 1989.

⁶ Burgess 2004, 2006:153–154, 164–165.

⁷ See discussion in the works cited in n49 below.

derivative of the canonical epics, nor that any represent inert texts on which the canonical epics drew. Rather, I view each poem, canonical and non-canonical, as documenting a tradition that evolved alongside and in awareness of the others.

Most of our evidence for the Cyclic epics comes of course from the poems that focused on the Trojan War. As for the more poorly documented “pre-Trojan War” material, parallels with Hesiod and [Apollodoros] suggest that the Cyclic *Titanomachia* would have had ample opportunities for departures from the main narrative. That at least some of these opportunities were exploited is suggested by reference in the extant fragments to a possible *ekphrasis* (*Titanomachia* 4 Bernabé/8 Davies), if this is indeed the context for the enigmatic verses about “gold-faced fish playing on it,” the “it” perhaps being a shield or ornament.⁸ Less ambiguity surrounds an account of the birth of Cheiron (*Titanomachia* 10 Bernabé/9 Davies), which seems to have taken the form of a flashback to some time before the pivotal battle between the gods and the Titans.⁹

We are on somewhat firmer ground with the Theban poems. The Cyclic *Thebais* seems to have included a flashback or at least an aside describing how Tydeus’ father Oineus after being widowed received his mother Periboia as a war prize (*Thebais* 5 Bernabé/8 Davies), and it is reasonable to infer that the backgrounds of other major characters were similarly explored. I draw attention to the fact that the mention of Tydeus’ ancestry has potential significance for the main narrative of the *Thebais*, since it reveals the combative hero as the very product of war, inasmuch as his father takes his mother as a war-prize.

Elsewhere the *Thebais* told the story of Adrastos’ horse, fathered by Poseidon and passed among heroes before saving the Argive king alone of the Seven who attacked Thebes (*Thebais* 8 Bernabé/6 Davies; cf. 6 Bernabé). As scholars have observed, this fragment recalls such Homeric passages as the brief Catalogue of Horses and descriptions of Aineias’ and Achilles’ horses in the *Iliad*, as well as the theme of a divine gift transferred among mortals such as Agamemnon’s *skeptron*.¹⁰ Thus the genealogy of Adrastos’ horse in the *Thebais* suggests that the Homeric deployment of such insets was neither unique nor even particularly idiomatic.

⁸ On the identification of the fragment as an *ekphrasis* see West 2002:117–118.

⁹ Davies 1989:17 observes parallels with *Precepts of Cheiron* traditions. M. West 2002:117–118 discusses the position of the fragment in the narrative, and (n36) the misidentification of the *Titanomachia* in the fragment here as the *Gigantomachia*.

¹⁰ Catalog of Horses: *Iliad* 2.760–769; Aineias’ horses: 5.239–273; Achilles’: 16.145–154. Davies 1989: 28 on the theme of transference of a divine gift through various mortal hands cites the example of the Iliadic account of Agamemnon’s *skeptron* (*Iliad* 2.100–108); on divine gifts see J. Heath 1992.

The Cyclic *Epigonoï* and *Alkmaionis* likewise featured flashbacks. One recounted Tydeus' exile after killing the sons of Melas for plotting against Oineus (*Alkmaionis* 4 Bernabé/4 Davies), another explained the rule of Penelope's brothers in Akarnania (*Alkmaionis* 5 Bernabé/6 Davies), and another traced the origins of the feud between Atreus and Thyestes (*Alkmaionis* 6 Bernabé/5 Davies). Also probably to be assigned to one of these poems are an account of the Teumesian fox, the neutralization of which Kreon demanded as the price of his joining the second Theban expedition (*Epigonoï* 5 (*dubia*) Bernabé),¹¹ and a reference to a Golden Age of Kronos that may be more than passing (*Alkmaionis* 7 Bernabé/7 Davies).

The fragments of the Cyclic Theban poems, then, limited though they are, offer at least preliminary support for the idea that the flexibility displayed by the Homeric narratives in their introduction of supplementary material as flashbacks, flashforwards, and ekphrases may have been characteristic of early Greek epic in general. This impression is strengthened by the evidence from Proklos' summary and the three dozen or so fragments of the *Kypria*, which make clear that this epic. To begin with, the frequency of flashforwards in the form of prophecies and oracles is such that some scholars discern in the *Kypria* a specifically Cyclic—as opposed to Homeric—preoccupation with this form of information flow.¹² As in the *Iliad*, the fates of Achilles and of Troy are revealed in advance in the *Kypria* to various characters. Peleus, informed that his son will die if he takes part in the war, attempts to hide him on Skyros, but this action is undone by leaders of the Greek forces, who are acting on an oracle that Troy could not be taken without Achilles (*Kypria* 19 Bernabé/16 Davies).¹³ Later the Greeks on their way to Troy are told by Anios at Delos that their success will come only after years of fighting (*Kypria* 29 Bernabé/19 Davies).¹⁴ The Trojans for their part are informed of the peril facing their city by Kassandre, and again by Helenos when Paris goes to unite with Helen (Proklos p. 39.9–11 Bernabé).

We are poorly informed about the actual incipit of the *Kypria*, but the flow of Proklos' summary of the poem suggests that the much discussed first fragment, in which Zeus conspires to start the Trojan War, belongs to a flashback (*Kypria* 1 Bernabé/1 Davies; Proklos p. 38.4–5 Bernabé).¹⁵ If it is analeptic, this fragment shows that insets in the *Kypria*, like those in the canonical epics, could present developed

¹¹ Cf. [Apollodoros] *Bibliothēke* 2.4.6, Davies 1989:74.

¹² Davies 1989:40, 47; Scodel 2008:225.

¹³ Burgess 2001:21 discusses the perceived contradiction between Proklos' summary and the fragment.

¹⁴ Davies 1989:47 describes this episode as “a further retardation of his plot by the *Cypria*'s poet.”

¹⁵ Davies 1989:34.

characters like Momos.¹⁶ Other potential flashbacks include the scenes of Zeus' mating with Nemesis to beget Helen and her subsequent birth (*Kypria* 9 Bernabé/7 Davies), and Helen's abduction by Theseus (*Kypria* 13 Bernabé/12 Davies).¹⁷ A verse quotation reveals the first of these episodes to have been richly narrated, finding drama in Nemesis' fear and horror and Zeus' implacability. A further flashback referred to the birth of the Gorgons (*Kypria* 32 Bernabé/26 Davies). Finally, the "catalogue of Trojan allies" with which the poem concluded (Proklos p. 43.68 Bernabé) would, on the analogy of the catalogues in Book 2 of the *Iliad*, have offered opportunities for numerous brief flashbacks in the form of references to genealogies and other regional myths. The *Kypria*'s account of the deaths of Helen's brothers Kastor and Polydeukes appears also to have been introduced tangentially, in order to explain why the two do not join the Greek expedition.¹⁸

Most of the examples discussed thus far in the *Kypria* and the Theban poems are motivated by what might be termed utilitarian concerns. Prophecies, oracles and flashbacks all help to situate and explain the main narrative. I have at the same time tried to stress that these insets do double duty, helping both to explicate the main narrative and also to reinforce its underlying themes, as we have just seen in the case of Nemesis, who both begets the *causa belli* and embodies the helplessness of many of the *Kypria*'s characters.¹⁹

With the larger body of evidence we have for the *Kypria*, we find as well a potentially more sophisticated, which is to say, more elaborate and deeply allusive, deployment of insets of the sort that offers scope for Homeric artistry in such celebrated passages as the Shield of Achilles and Odysseus' tales. Thus an *ekphrasis* in the poem depicted Achilles' spear, cut by Cheiron, polished by Athene, shaped by Hephaistos, and presented to Peleus on the occasion of his wedding to Thetis (*Kypria* 3 Bernabé/3 Davies; cf. *Ilias Parva* 5 Bernabé/5 Davies). The context for this description could either be the wedding, combining a flashback to the weapon's construction with a flashforward to its use by Achilles, or some point where he uses or is presented with it, in which case the account of its origins would be a flashback. In either case, the treatment of this spear in the *Kypria* recalls such Homeric descriptions as that of Odysseus' bow, the story of which maps onto the *Odyssey*'s own story of guest-host

¹⁶ On Momos' character here see Scodel 2008:221–224.

¹⁷ Davies 1989:38 suggests that the fragments referring to Nemesis belong in the context of the Judgment of Paris, since they are marked by *pote* and refer to the Dioskouroi, who remain incidental to Zeus' plan. He also notes in [[[this volume (000–000)]]] that this story can be seen as an instantiation of the "Magic Flight" folktale pattern.

¹⁸ The same explanation appears in the *Iliad* (3.236–242); see further Davies [[[this volume) 000–000.]]]

¹⁹ Scodel 2008:220–222.

relations gone wrong and also foreshadows the hero's triumph over the suitors.²⁰ In like manner, the *Kypria* seems to have made a pointed dramatic connection between the spear's origins at the event that precipitates the Trojan War and its use by the war's greatest hero to thin the ranks of men in furtherance of Zeus' plan to depopulate the earth.²¹

Even more illuminating for the poetics of the *Kypria* is a series of tales told by Nestor to Menelaos that Proklos describes as a *parekbasis*, "digression" (Proklos p. 40.26–9 Bernabé).²² According to Proklos, Nestor's *parekbasis* consists of four stories: first, "how Epopeus corrupted Lykourgos' daughter"—presumably meaning Lykos' daughter Antiope—"and suffered having his city sacked," second, "things concerning Oidipous," third, "the madness of Herakles," and finally, "things concerning Theseus and Ariadne." Even reduced to phrases, it is clear that the theme of the destructive power of love links these tales to each other and to Nestor's audience, Menelaos.²³ The connections are clearest in the stories of seduced princesses that form the core of the myths of Antiope and Ariadne.²⁴ In the case of Nestor's second tale, it may also be observed that Oidipous' sexual transgressions are, though more extreme than those of Paris, similarly destructive to his city. Likewise, Here's manipulation of Herakles presents a harsh complement to Aphrodite's soft manipulation of Paris, again issuing in disaster for the mortal characters.

Nestor's tales, then, serve the local, rhetorical purpose in the *Kypria* of consoling Menelaos with the hope that his rival Paris will suffer the fates of Epopeus, Oidipous and Herakles, and his wife that of Ariadne. This careful deployment of insets in the Cyclic epic mirrors that of Nestor's tales in the canonical epics, in which long speeches to Patroklos and to Telemachos for example situate the Homeric epics with respect to other epic traditions, and at the same time reinforce the themes of the main narratives of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. The old hero's status as the voice of poetic memory in early

²⁰ *Odyssey* 21.13–41; discussion of the parallels between the inset and the main narrative in de Jong 2001:507–508.

²¹ Similar use may have been made of the armor given to Agamemnon by Kinyras of Cyprus, whose unreliability as an ally foreshadows problems the Greek commander will experience repeatedly at Troy, for which see [Apollodoros] *Bibliothèque* 3.14.3; compare *Iliad* 11.20–46 with the reconstruction by M. West 2003:72–73.

²² M. Heath 1989:114–118; Burgess 2001:27.

²³ Scaife 1995:167 describes Nestor's tales here as "tales of love-madness." Scodel 2008:225, by contrast, argues that they are purposefully irrelevant to the main narrative in order to offer wry commentary on his loquaciousness. See further Rengakos 2004:285–286.

²⁴ Davies 1989:43.

Greek epic has been well documented: his advanced years provide a wealth of experiences on which to draw, and have rendered him proverbially loquacious.²⁵

The Homeric and Cyclic Nestors are consistent at least to this extent, but there appears at first glance to be some distinction between the two in their choice of subject matter. The Homeric Nestor relates events that he himself has witnessed or of which he has received direct report, as is the case with his accounts of the Pylia war as related to Patroklos, and of the returns of the Greeks from Troy as told to Telemachos.²⁶ On closer consideration, however, this distinction begins to dissolve. To begin with, the Homeric Nestor claims personal acquaintance with Theseus and Herakles.²⁷ Antiope, on the other hand, is Nestor's own great-grandmother, whose story can thus be considered part of his personal family experience.²⁸ And even if Oidipous is not usually connected with Nestor, his appearance in the *parekbasis* seems still to be motivated by more than illicit sexual behavior. Specifically, it has long been observed that Nestor's tales mirror the catalogue of heroines in *Odyssey* 11, which mentions the main figures from all four of Nestor's tales, Antiope, Oidipous, Herakles and Ariadne—and indeed Odysseus there meets the mothers of Nestor and of Oidipous one after the other.²⁹

This particular inset illustrates something fundamental about the nature of this level of narration in the Epic Cycle generally. Where sufficient evidence exists, the Cyclic poems can be seen to make extensive and careful use of stories that explain, support and parallel the narratives in which they are embedded. I have sought for the sake of illustration to press this evidence here as far as possible, but it seems to me indisputable that, as in the Homeric epics, the choice of which insets to deploy at a particular narrative opening in the *Kypria* are multiply determined, answering at the same time to the rhetorical situation, the themes underling the main narrative, and to the mythology and traits that define characters like Nestor beyond the context of any single narrative, Homeric or otherwise.

Further, the range of mythological references in the *Kypria* appears to have been similarly broad in scope to that of the canonical epics. Nestor's tales alone reference Boiotian, Argive, and Attic-Cretan myths. The reference to Cheiron betrays perhaps Arkadian influence, that to Anios and Skyros Cycladic myths, and so on.

²⁵ Dickson 1995:35.

²⁶ For example Alden 2000:74 "tales from personal experience"; cf. Dickson 1995:35–36. Pylia epic: *Iliad* 11.670–761; *nostoi*: *Odyssey* 3.130–312.

²⁷ Theseus: *Iliad* 1.265; Herakles *Iliad* 11.689–693.

²⁸ *Odyssey* 11.281–297; see Heubeck and Hoekstra 1989:92 ad 11.235–259 for an account of the genealogy and its relationship to genealogical poetry generally.

²⁹ Sammons 2010:55–56, 91, citing further discussion in Oehler 1925:31–34, Heubeck 1954: 89–90. Mothers of Oidipous and Nestor: *Odyssey* 11.271–282.

Further, as Malcolm Davies argues elsewhere in this volume, the *Kypria* seems to embed numerous widespread folktale motifs, among which he cites the plan of Zeus to depopulate the earth and its well-attested parallels in Mesopotamian and Indic traditions.³⁰ Such eclectic references suggest that not only composer-performers of the *Kypria* and poems like it, but also their audiences, were well acquainted with stories, some seemingly rather arcane, that originated far beyond their home cities or even regions.

The phase of the war after the *Iliad* that is narrated in the Cyclic *Aithiopsis*, *Ilias Parva* and *Iliou Persis* presented numerous opportunities for the fulfillment of prophecies and oracles connected with the end of the conflict. Thus in the *Aithiopsis*, Thetis foretells the consequences if Achilles kills the Trojan ally Memnon (Proklos p. 68.12–13 Bernabé), a theme that recalls prophecies regarding the deaths of Hektor, Achilles and others in the *Iliad*, and the *Aithiopsis* will likely have emphasized other such prophecies in its buildup to the climactic scene of Achilles' death. His funeral games in turn seem to have been the context for an inset relating the story of the Elean hero Phorbas, who challenged the gods at boxing and was killed by Apollo (*Aithiopsis* 4 Bernabé),³¹ and I draw attention to the fact that this story reinforces the theme of the gulf between mortals and immortals that gives depth to Achilles' own character in the *Aithiopsis* and elsewhere.

In the *Ilias Parva*, the retrieval of Philoktetes from Lemnos (Proklos p. 74.6–7 Bernabé) and the summoning of Neoptolemos from Skyros (*Ilias Parva* 24 Bernabé (*incerti operis*)/4 Davies) trace back to events narrated in the *Kypria* that will almost certainly have been referenced in the form of flashbacks. Similarly, the liberation of Theseus' mother Aithre by the hero's sons, a scene that appeared in the *Ilias Parva* as well the *Iliou Persis*, would have called for a flashback that explained how, before the war started, the old woman had been taken to be a servant of Helen when the latter was reclaimed from Theseus (*Ilias Parva* 20 Bernabé/23 Davies; *Iliou Persis* 6 Bernabé/4 Davies; cf. Proklos p. 89.21–22 Bernabé). Also in the *Ilias Parva*, a flashback to the story of Ganymedes seems to have been introduced in connection with the Trojan ally Eurypylos, whose mother Astyoche was bribed by Priam into sending him to Troy by means of the golden vine that had been given by Zeus to Priam's father Laomedon in exchange for Ganymedes (*Ilias Parva* 29 Bernabé/6 Davies).³²

³⁰ Davies [[(this volume) 000–000.]]

³¹ See Davies 1989:74. For Achilles' funeral games, see M. West 2003:117n23 and Burgess 2001:81. West, Bernabé and most other editors follow Allen 1913:190 in attributing this fragment to the *Aithiopsis*.

³² See *Odyssey* 11.520–522 for an account of Eurypylos' death that alludes to his mother's perfidy.

Like the death of Achilles, the fall of Troy was foretold in numerous ways, though we only have direct evidence for one of these in the *Iliou Persis*, the Cyclic poem that focuses on the city's destruction. Here a well-known prophecy connects the fate of Troy with that of the Palladion, the image of Athene that this poem seems to have traced back to the wedding of Dardanos and Chryse before the founding of Troy (*Iliou Persis* 1 Bernabé/1 Davies).³³ This origin-story, if it does in fact accurately reflect the *Iliou Persis*, could have generated pathos and irony by recapitulating the history of the city, and Athene's close relationship with it, at precisely the moment the goddess is engineering its final destruction. Similar dramatic effects could have been generated elsewhere in this poem's account of the complementary skills of the healers Machaon and Podaleirios, which derive from their non-Homeric father Poseidon (*Iliou Persis* 4 Bernabé/1 Davies): while the latter is able to diagnose the madness of Telamonian Aias, the divine connection renders the more abject their failure to cure the hero. The *Iliou Persis* also included a flashforward that connected the crime of Oileian Aias during the sack of Troy to his death during his return voyage to Greece (Proklos p. 89.15–18 Bernabé).³⁴

I again draw attention to the strong impression that these insets both helped to dramatize the events in the main narratives and at the same time generated deeper thematic connections to the larger story. From a broad perspective, each of these stories dramatizes the gulf between mortals and immortals that is so important to the Homeric epics.³⁵ Thus, though divinely taught, the Greek physicians can do nothing to ameliorate the divinely inspired madness of Aias; the hybris and downfall of the boxer Phorbos stands as a warning to all who would challenge the gods, such as Oileian Aias; and the exchange of Ganymedes for the trinket that will lead to Eurypylos' death reifies the themes of the destructive female, embodied especially in Helen, and of the danger inherent in divine gifts, another obvious example being Achilles' armor.

In other words, the evidence for the Cyclic poems that narrated the end of the Trojan War suggests that these epics, like the *Kypria* and the Theban epics, made use of the full range of analeptic, proleptic and descriptive devices that are to be found in the canonical epics. Also worthy of mention in this context is the figure of Sinon (*Iliou Persis* Proklos p. 88.10 Bernabé), the Greek who helps convince the Trojans to accept the wooden horse, and who will presumably have given voice to an inset narrative in the

³³ The fragment describes the Palladion as a dowry and gift of Athene, and includes a 6-verse quotation of a Samothracian oracle of Great Gods that Dardanos' future city would abide as long as the Palladion remained inviolate. Some scholars, e.g. Davies 1989:78–79, suspect late Aeneas-tradition being fathered on the Cyclic epic here by Dionysos or his pro-Roman sources; cf. M. West 2003:151n53.

³⁴ For this scene as a flashforward, see Davies 1989:76.

³⁵ Edwards 1987:138–142.

form of a lying tale like the one he tells in the *Aeneid* (2.57–199). Such a performance that would confirm the willingness of the Cyclic traditions to embrace the narrative ambiguity generated by such unreliable Homeric narrators as Odysseus in the *Odyssey* and Zeus and *Iliad*, as well as Demeter, Aphrodite, Hermes and others in the *Homeric Hymns*.

Two Cyclic epics round out the story of the Trojan War with accounts of Greek heroes who survive the conflict. Especially noteworthy here is the inclusion in the first of these, the *Nostoi*, of a *nekyia* or visit to the Underworld.³⁶ The *nekyia* sequences in *Odyssey* 11 and 24 demonstrate that encounters with ghosts all but demand inset narratives, and such seems to have been the context in the *Nostoi* for stories or genealogies of the heroines Klymene (*Nostoi* 1 Bernabé/ 1 Davies; 5 Bernabé/4 Davies), Maira (6 Bernabé/5 Davies), Tyro, Alkmene and Mykene (9 Bernabé),³⁷ and Eriphyle (8 Bernabé/7 Davies). It is probably also in this context that the epic referred to Medea's rejuvenation of Aison (7 Bernabé/6 Davies),³⁸ and possibly also to Zeus killing Asklepios (9 West).

Malcolm Davies has pointed to difficulties in assigning the reference to Tantalos in the *Nostoi* (4 Bernabé/9 Davies) to its *nekyia*,³⁹ but it in any case documents another inset in a Cyclic epic taking the form of a mythological exemplum. The story may perhaps have been elicited by accounts of other characters that elicit divine anger in the main narrative, in particular Aigisthos and Oileian Aias. I note in passing that the demise of the latter of these figures in the *Nostoi* will have included a flashback to the behavior during the destruction of Troy that motivates Athene's hostility toward him (Proklos pp. 94.12–95.1 Bernabé).

The characters in the *Nostoi's nekyia* for the most part overlap with those Odysseus sees in the *Odyssey*.⁴⁰ Thus the Cyclic epic can be seen to participate in a game of allusion that embraces a similarly broad geographic scope, including Thebes, Pylos and Mantinea, and Mycenae, a range of references that clearly extends beyond the Troizenian and Corinthian traditions suggested by the biographical tradition of the

³⁶ Based on the testimony of Pausanias (10.28.7 = *Nostoi* 3 Bernabé/3 Davies) and others, but not Proklos; Burgess 2001:142–143 discusses various theories about Proklos' omission here.

³⁷ For this fragment see Davies 1989:74.

³⁸ According to Pausanias (1.2.1), the *Nostoi* also referred to the Amazon Antiope in connection with Theseus and Herakles, though scholars tend to view the attribution as spurious, e.g. Bernabé 1987:99.

³⁹ Davies 1989:85–86; Burgess 2001:142–143.

⁴⁰ See also *Odyssey* 2.120, a scholion on which is the source of the fragment referring to Tyro, Alkmene and Mykene.

Nostoi's ostensible authors. Proklos' silence on the *nekyia* makes it difficult to situate within the narrative of the *Nostoi*, and therefore difficult to contextualize these insets,⁴¹ but it may at least be observed that their tales of love gone wrong and of divine deception and anger will have been as potentially relevant to the story of Agamemnon and Klytaimnestre, on which the last sequence in the *Nostoi* focused, as they are to Odysseus' story in the *Odyssey*.

The story of Klytaimnestre herself, along with other problematic Greek spouses, is implied by a reference to the non-Homeric character Nauplios, who may have helped to motivate the *Nostoi*, inasmuch as his anger at the Greeks over the death of his son Palamedes, an event narrated in the *Kypria*, leads him to turn the wives of the Greek heroes against their husbands while they are at Troy.⁴² If the story of the vengeful Nauplios was in fact current at the time the *Nostoi* was taking shape, mention of him could not have failed to induce a flashback, at least in the minds of its audiences, but likely in the form of an inset narrative, to the death of Palamedes and its consequences for the returning Greeks.

The last of the Cyclic epics in the Trojan War sequence, the *Telegonia*, apparently began with the burial of the Suitors, so it again seems reasonable to infer one or more flashbacks to their slaughter. Proklos' summary is of particular interest here for its inclusion of two *ekphrases*. One of these describes the spear used by the eponymous hero Telegonos to kill his father Odysseus. Like the account of Achilles' spear in the *Kypria*, this weapon's origin story traces it back to the gods—in this case Hephaistos, who again finishes it, this time by fashioning its tip from a stingray that was killed by the seamonster Phorkys (*Telegonia* 4 Bernabé).⁴³ Also like Achilles' spear, this *ekphrasis* appears to establish significant connections with the main narrative. For a clever meditation on the transgression of boundaries emerges from the relationship between this inset and the main narrative: the stingray loses its life because it intrudes on Phorkys' territory; conversely, it will take the life of Odysseus when Telegonos intrudes on his territory.

⁴¹ Burgess 2001:142–143; M. West 2003:18 suggests, based on the analogy of the second *nekyia* in the *Odyssey* (24.1–202), that this *nekyia* was occasioned by the arrival of the souls of Agamemnon and his men in Hades.

⁴² [Apollodoros] *Epitome* 6.7.8–11. Davies 1989:83 (and cf. 50) on the contrary argues that there is no reason to believe that the story of Nauplios' revenge featured in the Cyclic epics.

⁴³ Phorkys is associated with Lake Tritonis in north Africa (e.g., Pausanias 2.21.5) and could hence be connected to the possible Cyrenaean origins of the *Telegonia*, on which see Davies 1989:90, M. West 2003:19. Thus this epic would seem, like the canonical epics, to blend regional and Panhellenic traditions.

The final passage to be discussed here is the most extensive *ekphrasis* for which we have evidence in the Epic Cycle. Early on in its narrative the *Telegonia* included a description of a bowl given to Odysseus by his guest-friend Polyxenos in Elis, on which are depicted “things about Trophonios and Agamedes and Augeas” (p. 102.4–6 Bernabé, *Telegonia* 2 Bernabé). Again, the choice of images is not random. To begin with, Augeas creates a direct link between the *ekphrasis* and the main narrative, since he is the grandfather of Polyxenos in the *Iliad* and elsewhere.⁴⁴ Augeas engages the brothers Trophonios and Agamedes, master builders who also lay the foundations of Apollo’s temple at Delphi (*Homeric Hymn to Apollo* 295–297), to build his treasury. In later mythographers, though there is no reason to believe the tale is itself late, the story plays out like that of Rhampsinitos and the thief in Herodotos: the brothers create a secret entry into the treasury, through which they begin to plunder Augeas’ fortune, and he in turn employs the renowned craftsman Daidalos to construct a trap that ensnares Agamedes. Trophonios then decapitates his brother to prevent him from revealing their identities, but the horror of this act causes the earth to swallow him in the sacred grove of Lebadaia in Boiotia, at which spot he then serves as an oracle.⁴⁵

In assessing the thematic convergences between this tale and the main narrative of the *Telegonia*, I begin by noting that Augeas corresponds positively to Odysseus, in that both heroes successfully respond to threats to their resources by young men, so that Agamedes and Trophonios serve as an analogy to the suitors of Penelope. Christos Tsagalis has argued persuasively that this parallel functions at an intertextual level to communicate to Odysseus that Polyxenos wishes him well in the wake of a justified *Mnesterophonia*.⁴⁶

A further thematic convergence between the *ekphrasis* and the Odysseus of the *Telegonia* concerns oracles. Although Proklos’ summary does not specifically mention the oracle of Trophonios, its foundation is the capstone to the story of the plundering of Augeas’ treasury. Moreover, the oracle resonates with non-Homeric, but apparently

⁴⁴ Polyxenos of Elis, grandson of Auge(i)as: *Iliad* 2.622–624; cf. [Apollodoros] *Bibliothēke* 2.4.6.

⁴⁵ Rhampsinitos and the thief: Herodotos 2.12; comparison of the tales in Davies 1989:89–90, who finds little connection with the main narrative, and Tsagalis 2008:79–80, whose analysis informs the one presented here. Elsewhere the owner of the treasury, or of a second treasury, is Hyieus, king of Hyria in Euboeia (Charax *Hellenika* 5 (6) Jacoby = Scholion to Aristophanes *Clouds* 508). For Trophonios’ oracle see Pausanias 8.10.2; 9.11.1, 37.4–7, 39.4–8; 10.5.13; Bonnechere 2003 discusses aspects of the historical cult. The connection between the oracle and the *ekphrasis* in the *Telegonia* was already made by Meyer 1895:262–264. Elsewhere Augeas has a daughter named Agamede who is a Kirke-type witch (*Iliad* 11.738; Strabo 8.3.5); see Tsagalis 2008:84.

⁴⁶ Tsagalis 2008:80.

well-known, aspects of Odysseus' story in which he consults an oracle after killing the Suitors, or in which he himself issues oracles after his death.⁴⁷ In this context, the gift from Polyxenos may also, when decoded in another way, foreshadow, or at least allude to, traditions in which Odysseus seeks divine guidance after regaining control of Ithake, and in which he himself is transformed into an oracular hero, like Trophonios after having engaged in what can be described as a fratricidal act.

What I hope has emerged from this survey of confirmed and possible insets in the Epic Cycle is, first, an appreciation for just how ubiquitous this form of narration is in the non-Homeric poems. Despite the limitations of the evidence, all of the Cyclic epics, from the *Titanomachia* to the *Telegonia*, appear to have made extensive use of flashbacks, flashforwards, ekphrases, genealogies, mythological exempla, and other inset narratives. Second, I have suggested that the Cyclic poems deploy insets in much the same ways as the canonical epics, and with equal care to connect them with the main narrative on multiple levels. Wherever sufficient context is available, the case can be made that the insets we find in the Cycle served not only the utilitarian functions of establishing the backstory or creating dramatic tension, but also provided a kind of intertextual commentary on the action of the main narratives. This perspective offers I think a corrective to the view of the Cyclic poems as lacking in narrative sophistication,⁴⁸ and suggests that the artistry that has won such admiration in the canonical epics was, at least in part, characteristic of the ancient Greek epic tradition at large.

The narrative sophistication of ancient Greek epics generally arises in large part from their creative use of allusion.⁴⁹ In the case of the Cyclic poems, we find not only to each other and to the canonical Homeric and Hesiodic traditions, but to a range of myths notable for its detail and geographic breadth. Here I suggest that, while the poems of the Cycle, as Gregory Nagy has argued, represent a relatively less Panhellenic perspective when compared with the canonical Homeric and Hesiodic epics,⁵⁰ they appear nevertheless to be something more than purely local phenomena. Indeed, this much is suggested by the very fact of their survival into the Hellenistic and Roman periods. I have elsewhere proposed the term "proto-Panhellenic" to refer to such traditions that, while they may have failed to attain true Panhellenic status, still appear to have been designed to appeal to audiences with a more than local understanding of

⁴⁷ Tales of Odysseus consulting and serving as an oracle were sufficiently well known to feature in, *inter alia*, two lost plays by Sophokles; see Marks 2008:93–94, 103–104 with bibliography, to which may be added Phillips 1953:61–65 and S. West 1984:137–140.

⁴⁸ E.g. Griffin 1977:52.

⁴⁹ For allusion within the oral context of see Burgess 2006, especially 162–166, and on mythological exempla Nagy 1979:42–43 and 1996:113–116.

⁵⁰ Nagy 1979:5–9, 1990:52–115.

ancient Greek myths,⁵¹ and this term is I think appropriate to all of the Cyclic epics, even those like the *Telegonia* that were so closely identified with a specific geographical location, here Cyrene.⁵²

Inset narratives in the Epic Cycle, then, offer a window into the compositional techniques of ancient Greek poets, and into the expectations and experiences of their audiences. Whatever the perceived shortcomings of the Cyclic poems, they cannot I think be faulted for simplistic narrative structure, haphazard assembly, or for an overly parochial perspective. Careful consideration of how these poems interwove various narrative strands suggests rather that they were as much a part of, and were as deeply engaged with, the various local, regional and Panhellenic epic traditions of ancient Greece as were the canonical epics. We would therefore do well to remember that, while the Cyclic epics were eventually lost, they continued to be read and enjoyed, and to exert an influence, throughout antiquity.

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⁵¹ Marks 2008:11–12.

⁵² Burgess 2001:161.

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