"Recreating the Creation

Reading between the Lines in the Proem of the *Iliad*"

Emily Schurr

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I. In the beginning: the story behind the word

Let us start at the beginning - generally a very good place to start.

1   μῆνιν ἄειδε θεὰ Πηληϊάδεω Ἀχιλῆος

    οὐλομένην, ἣ μυρί' Ἀχαιοῖς ἄλγε' ἔθηκεν·

    πολλὰς δ' ἰφθίμους ψυχὰς Ἄϊδι προΐαψεν

    ἡρώων, αὐτοὺς δὲ ἑλώρια τεῦχε κύνεσσιν

5   οἰωνοῖσί τε πᾶσι· Διὸς δ' ἐτελείετο βουλή·

    ἐξ οὗ δὴ τὰ πρῶτα διαστήτην ἐρίσαντε

    Ἀτρείδης τε ἄναξ ἀνδρῶν καὶ δῖος Ἀχιλλεύς.

Iliad 1.1-7

Sing, goddess, the anger of Achilles, son of Peleus,

destructive as it was, which gave the Achaeans much grief;

and it hurled down to Hades many strong souls

of heroes, and made them spoils for the dogs

and every bird; and the plot of Zeus was being fulfilled;

sing, from that time when, in the beginning, those two parted in discord,

the son of Atreus, lord of men, and brilliant Achilles.

(my translation)

Of course, the beginning of the *Iliad* has already attracted much scholarly attention.[1] The opening words of the proem - 'Sing, goddess, of the anger of Achilles, son of Peleus' - form one of the most famous phrases ever to have been written down in the literary history of the world. The quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon remains one of the most famous plot lines,

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[1] On the standard elements of the proem, see, among others, Bassett 1923, Pagliaro 1963*,* Redfield 1979.

influencing innumerable works of literature, drama, and art.[2] After more than two thousand years of scholarship, countless commentaries, publications and lectures, one might very well ask if there is anything more to be mined from these seven over-studied lines.

It is my intention to argue that there is. Beneath the ostensible subject of the proem, I want to propose a subliminal layer of meaning that is conjured into being by the resonances of its vocabulary.[3] Each of the terms used in the proem, I will attempt to argue, is loaded with multiple references and associations, which, together, create a nexus of associations that underwrites the opening of the *Iliad* with a previously undiscovered, and highly meaningful, subtext. The question is - what is this subtext? What exactly are the underlying resonances of the proem's loaded terms? And what implications does the symbolic world of the poem's opening have for the rest of the epic?

There is another, simpler, question, of course: what are the loaded terms? In a way this has to be answered in reverse, from context to content, as it were - for, as I have already suggested, it is the close collocation of several words with particular and shared resonances that gives them

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[2] For example, Aeschylus' *Oresteia*; Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*; Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres' *Ambassadors Sent by Agamemnon to Urge Achilles to Fight*; Simone Weil's "The *Iliad* or the Poem of Force" (1939); Warner Bros. *Troy*.

[3] As ever, the question of the Homeric 'text', and to what extent we can 'read' into the epic, comes into play here. Persuaded as I am by the arguments of the Parry school, represented by Albert Lord and Gregory Nagy, on the centrality of performance and audience reception to an understanding of oral Homeric epic (Lord 1960.ch.2, Nagy 1996a), I further believe that, building upon the study of the mechanics of Homeric transmission, an analysis of ἔπος on its own terms is crucial to interpreting the poem (Lynn-George 1988.80-101) – as a part of the kind of reception that would have been undertaken by original audiences in performance. In my view, the multivalency of the poem over successive performances (Nagy's 'composition-in-performance' (1996b.17)) provides the key to the very richness of *each single* performance – with the specific choice of words lending them both weight (as being chosen) and resonance (as existing within a wider network of potential choices) (see especially Lord 1960.98-123 on the choices of the oral poet). John Miles Foley's excellent treatment of this subject in *Immanent Art: From Structure to Meaning in Traditional Oral Epic*, makes him a vitally important proponent of this point of view, with what I will call 'resonance' labelled in his terms as the 'immanence' of tradition (see Graziosi & Haubold 2005 on the 'resonance' of Homeric epic diction) [note that this view is not inconsistent with Lord's: "the tradition cannot be said to ignore the epithet, to consider it as mere decoration or even to consider it as mere metrical convenience … I would even prefer to call it the traditionally intuitive meaning." (1960.66)]. I therefore take, as an example of a possible (though by no means certain or defined) version of the poem, West's 1998 edition of the *Iliad*, applying the concept of resonance created through specific word choice in order to receive a/the poem – *as it could have been received* (Rousseau 2001.125) – in all its wealth of detail and textual layering. (For an important insight on the 'multiformity' of the Homeric poems, with special emphasis on the multiplicity of possible Iliadic 'versions' (as a necessary counterweight to West's position), see the Homer Multitext, edited by Casey Dué and Mary Ebbott (http://chs.harvard.edu/chs/homer_multitext).) Instrumental to my point of view is Michael Lynn-George's key concept of 'indeterminacy' (1988.38) and John Miles Foley's 'inherent meaning' (1991.8), as well as Nancy Felson-Rubin's insightful comments on the interpretive potential of statements/texts, as realised in the minds of the thinking audience (Felson-Rubin 1994.Introduction, following Bakhtin 1981; see also Foley 1991.38-45 on the 'implied reader/audience'). Laura Slatkin's analysis of the poet's 'other discourse, one that makes its appearance on the surface of the poem through oblique references, ellipses, or digressions', is also useful here (Slatkin 2011.20).

meaning, within the story that they tell together. Taking a step back, then, it is possible to disconnect the proem from its ostensible content - the description of the anger of Achilles and the resulting quarrel between himself and Agamemnon - and thus to excavate the subliminal story beneath the surface of the text.

Reading into the broader resonances of the words, therefore, we have, at the poem's opening, anger (μῆνις, 1.1). As we will see, μῆνις denotes not just any type of anger, but a specifically divine form of the emotion which manifests itself, in particular, in order to enforce sovereignty against transgression of the cosmic order.[4] This 'righteous and vengeful anger' (as we might translate it) is poeticized by an unnamed goddess (θεὰ, 1.1), and awarded to a male figure, Achilles, whose identity is further defined by an epithet (Πηληϊάδεω, 1.1) which highlights him as a son, and the son - significantly - of his father. It is the goddess, on the other hand, who, on the same line, is instructed to patronize the son's anger with her song: and it should be noted that it is her skills in poetry, her ability to tell stories her own way, which the apostrophe (μῆνιν ἄειδε θεὰ, 1.1) specifically highlights.

At this stage, in the first line alone, we have excavated a significant subtext already. We have a cast of characters - a goddess, a son, and a father - each of whom is endowed with particular characteristics: the goddess, of plot-narration; the son, of divine and righteous anger; the father, of fatherhood and the possession of a son. In fact, in searching for the subliminal layer, there is more than a hint in these three closely united personalities (juxtaposed at the end of line 1) of a family - the mother singing of her son's grief,[5] the son defined by his patronymic and, thus, the father. The hint is made even more resonant by the fact that Achilles' mother was, indeed, a goddess (Thetis) - and that the reluctance to name the singing goddess explicitly allows for this alternative interpretation to rise up in the audience's consciousness.[6]

The subsequent few lines broaden the conceptual horizons of μῆνις, adding darker undertones reminiscent of a chthonic and primeval force. In alliance with Hades, μῆνις is described as a power in its own right, 'throwing down' (Ἄϊδι προΐαψεν, 1.3) its opponents.[7] It is highly destructive (οὐλομένην, 1.2) and gives rise to grief and pain (ἄλγε᾽ ἔθηκεν, 1.2); it works

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[4] Muellner 1996.8, 15.

[5] Indeed, this is a common trope in the *Iliad*; compare Thetis (1.413-18, 18.50-64, 18.428-61), Hecabe (22.79-89), and Andromache (24.725-45). See Easterling 1991.

[6] See pages 12-15 below, and 31n. on the Muses always being addressed by name.

[7] Lang 1983.160 on Zeus throwing his opponents off Olympus as an assertion of power.

with the dogs of the earth and the birds of the sky (κύνεσσιν / οἰωνοῖσί τε πᾶσι, 1.4-5), spanning the universe, as it were, in its demonic rage.

It is not until line 5 that another character is introduced. After an extensive description of the μῆνις of the son - where the goddess' song has been given full rein - we suddenly have an interruption to the long and lyrical portrayal of chthonic rage. Διὸς δ᾽ ἐτελείετο βουλή (1.5), it is announced: 'and the plot of Zeus was being fulfilled'. Zeus? Where does he fit into the cast of characters, the pseudo-family, already introduced? It is no coincidence that this phrase has been the subject of much dispute in the commentaries - for, indeed, it comes out of nowhere, and its referent (Achilles' μῆνις, or the quarrel in the following line?) is difficult to determine.[8] But far from constituting a mere point of grammatical interest, I would argue that the sudden appearance of Zeus' βουλή, after the four and a half lines of the goddess' song on the son's μῆνις, in fact makes a perfect fit in the subtextual puzzle.

In its relation to the subliminal characters, relationships and qualities of the proem's subtext, in fact, the Διὸς βουλή is, I believe, explicitly indeterminate.[9] On the one hand, interrupting the goddess' song and the son's μῆνις so abruptly, the fulfillment of the Διὸς βουλή appears antithetical to the fulfillment of the μῆνις and the goddess' song - mere fleeting incidents within the overall and inevitable execution (ἐτελείετο) of the 'real' plan of Zeus. But on the other hand, the continuous imperfect of ἐτελείετο itself suggests that the goddess and the son are, at the same time, a part of a *process*, incorporated into an overall plot. The indeterminacy of Zeus and his βουλή therefore defines his subtextual role. In relation to the happy family of goddess and son, united in their song-plot and anger, Zeus is both the opponent to their plot (line 5: 'his' plan is being fulfilled, as opposed to theirs) and, *at the same time*, its patron, within a wider plot of his own (line 5: his plan is in the process of being fulfilled, of which theirs is a part). The song and anger of goddess and son is both stopped by and subsumed within Zeus' plan. Zeus is, significantly, and apparently impossibly, *both* outside and inside the goddess-son-father family.

It is another highly contested phrase at the start of line 6 - the final line of the proem before the explicit 'surface' text is introduced in line 7, and the subtext is vanished away by the commencement of the 'real' plot - which begins to give us the clue to how exactly this might happen, or at least enables us to situate these enigmatic characters in a particular time and

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[8] Kirk 1985 ad loc., Lynn-George 1988.38.
[9] Lynn-George 1988.38-44 on the ambiguities of the proem.

landscape. Whilst the referent of ἐξ οὗ δὴ τὰ πρῶτα (1.6) is once again unclear,[10] its lack of specificity again provides the key to its subliminal reading, and, most importantly, the beginnings of a solution to the riddle of the subtext. At the level of the text, with the benefit of line 7, the phrase is usually translated as *'from the time when* <u>first</u> those two parted in discord, / the son of Atreus, lord of men, and brilliant Achilles'. But, standing alone - before the textual meaning comes into play, before it gains a referent for τὰ πρῶτα – it sounds very much like *'from that time* <u>in the beginning</u>'.[11]

This deliberate and highly charged ambivalence thus leads right to the heart of the subtextual puzzle, providing us with an exact location, a context, for the excavation of the text's deepest layers of meaning. The indeterminacy of τὰ πρῶτα, and its links with theogonic creation myth through Hesiod, serve to situate the proem's subtext directly 'in the beginning' – that is, at the beginning of time. This is why there can be no clear referent for ἐξ οὗ, why indeterminacy lies at the centre of its interpretation, and the interpretation of the proem's subliminal landscape: because, in the beginning, there *is* nowhere to start from.

In other words, whilst the text situates itself 'at the start' of the quarrel of Agamemnon and Achilles, the subtext places itself, brilliantly, simply, 'in the beginning'. The beginning of the poem - the fundamentally created thing – is ultimately revealed as drawing inspiration for its subtextual vision from the prototypical beginning: the creation of the universe. And it is a vision which will not only influence the symbolic landscape and complexity of the poem's opening, but which, in uniting cosmos and creation, universe and verse, world and word, will build the foundations for the structural framework of the poem as a whole. In the beginning, for the *Iliad*, there was, indeed, the word.

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[10] Kirk 1985 ad loc., Pagliaro 1963.11-12, Redfield 1979.96. Aristarchus (cf. schol. ad loc.) read ἐτελείετο as the referent of ἐξ οὗ (with the sense that 'the plan of Zeus was being fulfilled *from the time when* [the quarrel began]'); most modern scholars (Kirk 1985 ad loc., Pulleyn 2000 ad loc. among others), however, take ἄειδε as its referent (to give 'Sing, goddess … *from the time when* [the quarrel began]'). Cf. 4n. for an explanation of my interpretation's emphasis on the ambivalence of the text.

[11] It cannot be by chance that exactly the same phrase occurs in Hesiod's *Theogony* (line 108), in the same position at the transition between proem and the beginning of the narrative. For Hesiod and Homer articulating a 'shared vision of the cosmos' (p36), see Graziosi & Haubold 2005 chs.1&2 esp.29, Slatkin 1987; for an analysis of the *Theogony* as a form of proem to the *Iliad*, see Koller 1956, Muellner 1996 ch.3, Nagy 1982.

II. The Mythology of Narrative

So how does our cast of characters fit into this complex system of cosmos, creation, and poetry? So far, we have established a cosmic platform for the proem's subtext, set at the beginning of time and signposted in the ambiguity of the phrase ἐξ οὗ δὴ τὰ πρῶτα (1.6). The characters themselves have also been outlined, though not assigned their roles: a potential family, consisting of a goddess, possibly a mother, certainly a constructor of (poetic) plots; a son, endowed with divine anger that has associations with the enforcement of cosmic sovereignty in reaction to transgression; a father, whose ability to have a son is his defining feature; and Zeus, whose own plot mysteriously both excludes him from and includes him in the poem-plot of the goddess and the son. We also have the crucial element, not mentioned above, of conflict, ἔρις (ἐρίσαντε, 1.6), between two opposing parties (διαστήτην, 1.6, emphatically in the dual). And it is this principle of ἔρις, in fact, and the central opposition of opposing pairs embodied in the term διαστήτην, which will be the key to interpreting the relationships between the subliminal character cast of the proem.

For Ἔρις also has a fundamental and important part to play in the story of the creation. Not only is Ἔρις born at the moment of creation (Hesiod *Theogony*, line 225), it is also the force which, again and again, governs the actions of the main players in the creation of the cosmos. The beginning of the world is, in fact, forged in a sequence of struggles between the gods for supremacy over the universe - struggles which are marked by their opposition of a fundamentally opposed god-goddess pair.[12] The conflict and opposition of two parties already begins to sound rather similar to the dual διαστήτην ἐρίσαντε of the proem of the *Iliad*. But, before we get ahead of ourselves, let me first outline how the major conflicts, which in many ways define the creation, operate, as a framework for understanding exactly what the *Iliad* is doing with the cosmic model, and the significance of the roles assigned to its opening actors.

The succession myth, as it is commonly called, falls into three stages, each with a repeating pattern of events whose rhythm is only broken in the final stage.[13] The first involves Gaia (earth) and Ouranos (sky), two of the original elements created at the beginning of time (*Theog.* 156-82). It opens with the oppressive masculinity of Ouranos, whose fear of his own progeny induces him to hide them away in the bowels of the earth, leaving Gaia pregnant but

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[12] ἔρις in Hesiod *Theogony* lines 225, 537, 637, 705, 710, 782, 929b (of Zeus-Hera conflict over childbearing).
[13] Arthur 1973.24, Muellner 1996 ch.3.

unable to give birth. Against the overbearing force of her husband, Gaia resorts to trickery, and devises her own plan (δολίην δὲ κακήν τ' ἐφράσσατο τέχνην, *Theog.* 160) to free herself and her children from their father's dominance. Fashioning a sickle from the elements within herself, she hands it to her son Cronos, who, avenging his father's offence, cuts off his genitals. Gaia's children are then born, and Cronos takes over the sovereignty of the cosmos.

We might pause for a moment at this stage, to identify the core elements which we will see recurring within the subsequent two succession struggles. Firstly, and the cause of the struggle in the first place, is male-female conflict (ἔρις) induced by the husband's fear of his wife's ability to give birth to a son, and thus of the possibility of his succession - a fear which is duly confirmed. Secondly, making it possible, we have the wife/mother/goddess' ability to weave cunning plots in deliberate contravention of those of her husband. And thirdly, and most importantly, we have the union of a wife/mother/goddess with her son, whose anger against his father causes him to legitimately avenge his transgression.

The following two stages in the generational struggle look set to observe these three thematic principles closely. At the next level, indeed, the pattern repeats itself almost perfectly (*Theog.* 453-91): Cronos, who knows that he is destined to be overthrown by his own son (just as he had overcome his father), swallows his children as they are born from his wife Rhea in an attempt to prevent it. She, in indignation on the part of her soon-to-be-born son Zeus, devises a μῆτις (cunning plot, *Theog.* 471) which allows her to give birth to a son in secret, who then overthrows and imprisons his father in Tartarus and gains sovereignty over the universe. The predestined pattern of male-female ἔρις and the fear of a son's birth, the wife/mother/goddess' cunning plot, and the rightful anger of the son who, in alliance with the mother, overthrows the father, is thus entirely fulfilled; and one begins to wonder, when Zeus once again takes a wife who is herself actually called Μῆτις, and who becomes pregnant with his child, how it will ever be evaded.

The final stage is, however, the exception to the rule: going against precedent, it effects the ultimate abolition of ἔρις as a mode of operation within the universe, and its replacement with stability, control, and a single rule in place of the conflict of plots. Zeus - who has received the same prophecy from the same source as Cronos (*Theog.* 891-3), and who has, presumably, had the time to figure out that there are certain remarkably familiar features to his predicament - decides to preempt the cunning of his wife, who happens to be the embodiment of female μῆτις.

In an unprecedented move, Zeus manages to achieve what his father and grandfather had not - the outwitting of the female, the solution to ἔρις and the appropriation of the powers of birth - by subsuming *both* the mother and the (potential) son *within himself*.[14] Ingeniously, Zeus neither prevents his son's birth nor swallows his newborn children - he does *both*, by swallowing the mother and her unborn child (*Theog.* 886-900).

Zeus, therefore, is a god and father with a difference. Though he operates within the model of ἔρις in the cosmic struggle for succession, and competes with his wife against the threat of her powers to produce a son, he also comes up with an elegant solution which definitively establishes his sovereignty. Yet at the same time, crucially, he overtly acknowledges his wife's gifts by *adopting*, rather than destroying, them. He is, therefore, both actor and director on the cosmic stage; both an antagonist to the mother-son unit and, at the same time, their embodiment.

Which might, at last, begin to explain the complexities of the Iliadic proem's subtext. We have already seen that its plot is set 'in the beginning' of time (ἐξ οὗ δὴ τὰ πρῶτα, 1.6). We have further established that its narrative is based around the conflict (ἐρίσαντε, 1.6) of two parties (the dual διαστήτην, 1.6). As characters, we have a goddess, possibly a mother, and a creator of plots; a son, defined by righteous anger; a father, defined by his son; and Zeus, who is both outside and inside the mother-son family. The parallels to the cosmic succession struggle seem to be simply too strong to miss. Not only have we discovered the setting, therefore, at the moment of creation; we have also uncovered the plot narrative of the subtext. It is, apparently, nothing less than the story of the ultimate conflict (ἐρίσαντε, 1.6) between the opposing parties (διαστήτην, 1.6) of wife/mother/goddess (θεὰ, 1.1) and the husband/father/god, Zeus (Διὸς, 1.5);[15] the mother's opposition to her husband's will (βουλή, 1.5)) with her powers of plot construction (ἄειδε, 1.1)); her patronage of the son's righteous desire for cosmic sovereignty (μῆνιν, 1.1)); and Zeus' final victory in the fulfillment of his overarching plan (ἐτελείετο, 1.5)).

In other words, the entire struggle for succession is played out in a mere six lines of poetry, simply through the ingenious manipulation of the resonances of the words and characters which inform this proto-story. The proem of the *Iliad* restages the divine conflicts at the beginning of the world, subtly conjuring them into existence through the subliminal storytelling of an

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[14] Of course, a girl (Athena) is, in fact, the firstborn child. But there is also a prediction of a son being born after the daughter, who will overthrow his father (*Theog.* 897-8), if Μῆτις is allowed to give birth.

[15] The displacement of Peleus at this point should be noted: it will have a crucial role to play in the problematisation of the subtext in the next section.

interconnected web of words. Yet two questions remain. The first: what exactly are these resonances, and how do they relate to the central terms of the cosmic struggle? What specific or multiple meanings do they carry for the informed audience? The second question goes wider, to explore the fundamental point: *why* the proem of the *Iliad* appropriates the model of the creation and the struggle for succession as its subtext, and the implications that such a subtext might have for the rest of the poem. It is to these two issues which we will now turn.

III. The Dictionary of the Creation: an Analysis of Terms

The dictionary of the proem's subtext starts with the first word of the poem: μῆνις. And it is a word with a significant amount to say for itself. On the most basic level, the descriptive clauses that follow give us some clues to the way it is visualized: that is, almost as a type of chthonic force which deals in the darker shades of destruction (οὐλομένην, 1.2), pain (ἄλγε᾽ ἔθηκεν, 1.2) and the kind of retributive vengeance that involves sending men to their deaths (ψυχὰς Ἄϊδι προΐαψεν / ἡρώων, 1.3-4). In fact, it resonates strongly with the cosmic subtext, being highly reminiscent of the δεινός χόλος of the Κῆρες (*Theog.* 217-222). These spirits of death (compare Ἄϊδι προΐαψεν (*Iliad* 1.3)) and daughters of Night at the beginning of the creation (wife of Erebus/Hades, compare Ἄϊδι (1.3)) were believed to pursue wrongdoers to their end in the Underworld, taking vengeance without pity (νηλεοποίνους (*Theog.* 217)). The agency accorded to the μῆνι of Achilles, as the subject of the verbs of affliction (ἄλγε᾽ ἔθηκεν (*Iliad* 1.2)) and death-dealing (Ἄϊδι προΐαψεν, 1.3) in its own right, implies just such a demonic or personified force. And yet its cosmic implications resonate even further than the Κῆρες alone: as harbinger of ἄλγεα (ἄλγε᾽ ἔθηκεν (*Iliad* 1.2)), Achilles' μῆνις becomes almost a manifestation of Ἔρις (a sister of the Κῆρες, significantly), who, in the creation, is said to have given birth to the Ἄλγεα (*Theog.* 227). Like a Κήρ sending men to their death in vengeance and anger, and the creator of conflict, Ἔρις, Achilles' μῆνις is pictured as a demon personified, offspring of Night and Erebus/Hades and birth-mother of grief and pain. It is a primeval force raging in the chaos of creation.

But one important distinction remains to be made between the μῆνις of Achilles and the Κῆρες, writing another more complex layer into the semantics of μῆνις. For, whilst it is easy to draw comparisons between the vengeful anger of the two forces, they in fact represent very different types of anger, designated in the gap between terms: χόλος for the Κῆρες, as opposed to

Achilles' μῆνις. The contrast is highly significant for fully understanding the contribution of μῆνις to the cosmic subtext: once again, we see the particularity of the *Iliad*'s diction in its choice of specifically resonant vocabulary. Thomas Walsh and Leonard Muellner, in particular, have shown that, whilst χόλος designates a specifically private and bounded anger,[16] μῆνις is more of a 'social force' which operates to 'enforce the sovereign cosmic order', against 'the prohibited transgression of fundamental cosmic rules'.[17]

In other words, it is particularly appropriate (as Muellner goes on to show)[18] to the rightful vengeance of the son and heir to the universe against his transgressive father. This would fit perfectly into our model of the subtextual Achilles enacting the part of the threatening and retributive son against the cosmic father, who would naturally, in this case, be Zeus (1.5); it would also perfectly provide an explanation for the apparent opposition between Achilles' μῆνις and the Διὸς βουλή in the complicated syntax of the opening sentence.[19] The underlying subtext of μῆνις would thus draw on the succession struggle and the operation of righteous and vengeful anger within the son-father conflict, to inform the term with the added textures of revenge, transgression, and disputed authority which are the central occupations of the main text - the quarrel of Agamemnon and Achilles - itself.

But even this is not the whole story. The subtext can be mined even deeper within the endlessly rich associations of the cosmic model. The fact is, there is another inherent aspect to μῆνις which cannot be ignored, and which gives a final, crucial, twist to its interplay with the creational subtext. For μῆνις is exclusively attributed to divine beings - *with the exception*, and this is the point, of Achilles.[20] And yet not only is Achilles not a god, but this fact is explicitly pointed out in the first line of the poem through his juxtaposition to and definition by the patronymic of his patently mortal father, Peleus (Πηληϊάδεω, 1.1). In other words, the theogonic subtext of μῆνις induces Achilles to lay claim to the tradition of the cosmic threat of succession, whilst his inherent mortality, latent in the patronymic Πηληϊάδεω, prohibits its fulfilment. Achilles' death, and his ultimate failure to transcend his humanity, is already predicted in his illegitimate claim to μῆνις.

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[16] Walsh 2005 Part II.

[17] Muellner 1996.8, 15.

[18] Muellner ch. 1 *passim*.

[19] Lynn-George 1988.38, Murnaghan 1997.23.

[20] LSJ s.v. μῆνις. See also Watkins 1977.690.

At the same time, however, the fact that he could even pretend to make that claim raises a very real threat: that, had things been different, had Zeus not been the father who was able to break the pattern of succession, Achilles might, in fact, have constituted the very figure of the threatening cosmic son which his μῆνις both promises and denies him to be. In a famous myth pregnant with significance for the *Iliad*, Zeus had originally been a suitor for the hand of Achilles' mother Thetis. When a prophecy predicted that her son by a god would overthrow his father in a repetition of the struggle for a succesion, however, Zeus beat a quick retreat, and the unfortunate goddess was palmed off on a safe mortal alternative, Peleus.[21] The point is, Achilles *could have been* the son whose μῆνις could have threatened and deposed his father, Zeus.[22]

And yet he is neither divine, nor the cosmic threat to Zeus' sovereignty. The patronymic pushes him firmly back into his place at the end of the line, rejecting the audacity of μῆνις at the start. From the very beginning of the poem, the cosmic subtext subtly informs us of the complexities of Achilles' situation. Ultimately, Achilles' claims to μῆνις will have to bow before the superior βουλή of Zeus.[23] He does not, in the end, have the right to challenge Zeus' sovereignty, nor does he have the ability to resist death. By the rules of the genetics of his mortal father and the order of the cosmos, Achilles will have to give up his μῆνις, and he will have to fight and die.

The whole plot of the poem is thus encapsulated within the multiple layers and resonances of this single term, and the succession threat it poses and rescinds. Achilles will have to relinquish his anger and accept mortality, because his mortal patronymic condemns him to fail in the struggle for succession against Zeus. Resistance with the divine mother (Thetis' plea/threat to Zeus on Achilles' part, 1.503-16),[24] on the cosmic model, eventually, and inevitably, gives way to the acceptance of mortal paternity (Priam and Peleus, 24.485-506).[25] In the end, the invincible Achilles is not strong enough to defeat the infallibility of birth, nor to fight the power of the narrative prototype. The struggle for succession is the first, and most important, battle of the *Iliad* - and it is one which Achilles is destined to lose.

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[21] Pindar *Isthmian* 8.27-55. Muellner 1996.95-6, Slatkin 1991.70-75.

[22] Hesiod *Theogony* 897-8 αὐτὰρ ἔπειτ' ἄρα παῖδα θεῶν βασιλῆα καὶ ἀνδρῶν / ἤμελλεν τέξεσθαι, ὑπέρβιον ἦτορ ἔχοντα, describing Zeus' fear of a son to succeed him and his motivation for swallowing Μῆτις. See Nagy 1979.ch.20.

[23] *Iliad* 8.474 ὄρθαι παρὰ ναῦφι ποδώκεα Πηλεΐωνα / (477) … ὣς γὰρ θέσφατόν ἐστι.

[24] Note that she addresses him, ironically, as Ζεῦ πάτερ (*Iliad* 1.503).

[25] Graziosi & Haubold 2000.57.

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So far, then, the role of the threatening and μῆνις-driven universal son has been established and neutralized. The cosmic subtext has been shown to work subtly with the internal nuances of the proem's vocabulary to produce vibrations which resonate with and inform the entire poem. But what of the remaining characters and their key terms and attributes? What can we discover about the *Iliad* at large from an exploration of their deeper resonances and meanings?

We have seen how the μῆνις of the pseudo-son operates; now for the βουλή of the victorious father. And indeed, the exploration of the undertones and associations of this loaded term proves no less productive. βουλή in fact recurs again and again in early epics as the signal attribute of Zeus; not simply in random association, however, but in particular contexts where the imposition of his will figures as a guarantor of cosmic stability against ἔρις.[26] In other words, βουλή is the mode of operation by which Zeus both gains and maintains control over the universe. Hesiod's *Theogony*, which charts Zeus' transition from challenging son to father of the cosmos, explicitly narrates the process of the formation of Zeus' βουλή: from the prophecy made to Cronos of the son who will displace him Διὸς μεγάλου διὰ βουλάς ('because of great Zeus' plotting', *Theog.* 465), to the incitement of the great battle for supremacy ἡμετέρας διὰ βουλὰς ('because of my plotting', *Theog.* 653), to the final installation of proper order and βουλή on Olympus ('council', *Theog.* 802). Zeus' βουλή is thus seen to crystallize from a competition between two wills (ἐρίζετο βουλάς, *Theog.* 534) into the hallmark of his rule and inevitable control. It is the pledge of the security of Olympian supremacy.

So far, so very fitting. The possibility of Zeus' βουλή enacting both one of a pair of competing partners in ἔρις, as well as the certain superiority of the victor, corresponds neatly with our analysis of the ambiguity inherent in Διὸς δ' ἐτελείετο βουλή (1.5) and the dual ἐρίσαντε (1.6). But there is another important resonance to βουλή in early epic; and one in which Zeus is, once again, strongly implicated. It is often the case that, at an epic's opening, it is the Διὸς βουλή which sets events in motion: not only in the *Iliad*, but at the start of the *Cypria*, too (*fr.* 1.7 Allen), as well as the opening of Demodocus' first song in the *Odyssey* (*Odyssey* 8.82).[27] Διὸς βουλή, as the motivating force of every action and every plot that takes place in the world under its stable rule, therefore, by a graceful synthesis, becomes entirely synonymous in early

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[26] *Cypria fr.* 1.7 Allen, Hesiod fr. 204 MW. See Nagy 1979.130, 218-20.

[27] Nagy 2009.335-343 has convincingly shown that Demodocus' first song represents a form of older epic, narrated within the *Odyssey*. It can therefore legitimately lay claim to βουλή.

epic with narrative plot.[28] In other words, Zeus' plot (βουλή) controls the narrative of the universe and, consequently, of the poems that describe it. At the same time, the evolution of Zeus' 'will/plot/council' in Hesiod's *Theogony* proves that βουλή is quite capable of writing its own narrative, from conflict to stability; we will see later that this proto-narrative of βουλή, as well as the simple equation of Zeus' βουλή with the plot of the poem, has a vital significance for the narrative of the *Iliad* as a whole.

For now, however, the important point is that the struggle between the pseudo-son and the father, the μῆνις and the βουλή, which was figured above as a purely thematic conflict between mortality and immortality, is now seen to have *narratological* implications. The victory of Zeus' βουλή over the μῆνις of Achilles represents not only the enforcement of Olympian rule and the reality of death; it is also the outcome of a struggle for control over the plot of the *Iliad*. Though Διὸς βουλή - being βουλή - was predestined to win the conflict over narrative (just as Zeus would always win against Achilles in the struggle for cosmic sovereignty), μῆνις, and the song of the goddess which poeticizes it, come to represent by contrast an alternative plot which presents a considerable threat to the Zeus-driven narrative.[29] The proto-narrative of βουλή, the storyline which is both challenged by other storylines and, at the same time, sets itself up as the only supreme narrative, thus scripts the *Iliad*'s plot. In an ingenious reframing of the theogonic myth and its modes of expression, the proem transforms the proto-story of the creation and the establishment of βουλή - the archetypal plot - into a story of its own. The conflict between the song of the goddess and the βουλή of Zeus is a struggle, ultimately, not for control of the cosmos - but for the narrative of the *Iliad*.

* * *

And so we move to the final character in our story, and the final piece in the puzzle that is the proem. This character, however, is more ambiguous than the tightly defined Zeus and his βουλή. The interesting and inescapable quality of the goddess at the opening of the *Iliad* is that she is not mentioned by name. It is often taken as read that the unnamed referent of θεά is one of the Muses, given that an invocation to the Muse is a standard way to open an epic poem.[30] This is,

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[28] Murnaghan 1997.25, Nagy 1979.82.

[29] Here I side with Heiden 2008.33-4, Lynn-George 1988.38, and Murnaghan 1997.23-4 on the original disjunction between μῆνις and βουλή. For the counter-opinion, see Nagy 1979.188.

[30] Minton 1960; compare the opening of the *Odyssey*, ἄνδρα μοι ἔννεπε, Μοῦσα (*Od*. 1.1), where Μοῦσα is explictly signalled.

certainly, the explicit interpretation, and the one closest to the surface of the poem: an informed epic audience would have been well aware of the convention of invocation, and could quite easily have substituted in 'Muse' for 'goddess'. But the fact that the potentiality for an alternative interpretation is left open - that the Muse is not specifically signalled, despite the fact that every other invocation in the *Iliad* addresses them directly[31] - must, to some extent, suggest that resonances with different, equally apposite, goddesses may also be felt. Just as with the deliberate ambiguity of the rest of the proem, the anonymity of θεά conspicuously allows for multiple readings – even as it incorporates and promotes the 'explicit' reading (the Muse).

But the generic term goes beyond evoking resonances with goddesses other than the Muse: it also serves to specifically highlight two of the most important qualities inherent in the noun. The first is femininity (which is given emphasis in the feminine form θεά over gender-unspecific θεός); the second, divinity. Most crucial of all, however, is the power of song awarded to the goddess in the verb ἄειδε (1.1); and with it, guardianship of the plot-theme of μῆνις.

Now, singing goddesses, once we start looking beyond the Muse, are often extremely dangerous. The female song commonly figures in the Homeric poems as a symbol of the woman's threatening powers of creation (that is, birth), and their ability to endanger the narrative of the male.[32] Two key and well-known examples from the *Odyssey* are the Sirens, who sing sailors to their deaths with their honey-sweet voices (*Odyssey* 12.165-200), and Circe, whose enchanting voice draws Odysseus' crew into her palace and, ultimately, under her spell (*Od*. 10.220-3).[33] The fact that Circe is also weaving at the same time as singing (we might compare Calypso, *Od*. 5.61-2) adds another layer to this nexus of associations around the singing goddess. Indeed, the two are often associated in Homer: as manifestations of female creativity, yes, but also, crucially, as evidence of the feminine ability to weave cunning plots (μῆτιν ὑφαίνειν - a metaphor which is still used in English).[34] In other words, the song of a woman - not to mention a personality whose femininity is specifically highlighted (θεά) - cannot but raise these subliminal

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[31] Elsewhere addressed as Μοῦσα(ι): *Iliad* 1.604; 2.484, 491, 594, 598, 761; 11.218; 14.508; 16.112.

[32] On the threat of female song, see Bergren 1983, Doherty 1995.

[33] On the sirens, see Pucci 1998; on Circe and weaving goddesses, especially Μῆτις, see Detienne & Vernant 1978.45ff., 182; Otto 1954.56.

[34] On weaving and female μῆτις, see Detienne & Vernant 1978.45ff., Pantelia 1993.494, Snyder 1980.194. For female weaving as an alternative source of power and poetry, see Bergren 1983, Nagy 1979.18. For the metaphor μῆτιν ὑφαίνειν or similar, see *Iliad* 3.212, 6.286, 7.324, 9.93, 18.637.

anxieties over the two most fearful aspects of the female: her powers of creation, and her duplicity.

If we think back to the proem, it becomes clear how the resonances between a goddess, and her abilities to create/give birth and to weave/plot, play into the subtext. The archetype of the child-bearing plotting mother in opposition to Zeus is, of course, Μῆτις and the wife/mother/goddess of the creation model. The openendedness of θεά, combined with the threat of motherhood and guile, work perfectly to underline the cosmic allusions of the proem by recalling Μῆτις as the mother-figure, completing the triad of associations with the succession struggle cast. But it is not simply about creating connections between text and subtext - it is also necessary to explore the implications of the subliminal undertones for the poem itself, and the characterization of its own cast. And in fact there is another goddess, and, moreover, a player in the plot of the *Iliad*, the mother to Achilles, the son-figure of the proem, no less, who could equally well fit the template of the anonymous Μῆτις-like θεά; who also threatens the father-god Zeus with her potential to give birth to overweening sons, and who weaves cunning plots in contravention of his βουλή.

It is, in fact, Thetis who makes the most obvious candidate for the goddess-figure of the proem's subtext. Not only is she the actual birth mother of the proem's son-figure, and the almost-wife of Zeus, but she also bears a significant resemblance to Μῆτις herself. Indeed, the similarities between the two goddesses are so striking as to be hardly coincidental, especially regarding their shared and significant threat to Zeus through their prophesied sons, and their capacity to chain and control him with their plots.[35] Both are goddesses of the sea. Both are shape-shifters - indeed, both utilize their duplicitous ability to change their appearance in order to attempt to outwit their husbands (Μῆτις in competition with Zeus before he swallows her; Thetis to escape rape by Peleus).[36] Both are actual or potential wives of Zeus, and both, most importantly, are prophesied to give birth to a son who will overcome him.

And this is the crucial point of convergence; where myth, subtext, and the narrative of the *Iliad* finally come together. At the beginning of the *Iliad*, it is Thetis' support of her son Achilles' μῆνις[37] (1.350-430, 493-530) which sends her to deliberately contravene Zeus' will, and leads to

[35] Detienne & Vernant 1978.45ff., 116; Lang 1983.158 on binding. For the similarity between Thetis and Μῆτις, see Detienne & Vernant 1978 ch.5, Cook 1914.III.1.745.
[36] Ovid *Metamorphoses*, 11.219-74.
[37] On the implicit wrath of Thetis, see Slatkin 1991.ch.3.

the *Iliad*'s curious divergence of narrative plotlines:[38] the near-defeat of the Greeks (books 1-18), followed by the total defeat of the Trojans (books 19-24). This is in despite of the 'main' plot of the Διὸς βουλή, which, quite clearly, specifies *only* Trojan defeat and the deaths of Achilles and Hector (8.470-7, 15.59-77).[39] In other words, Thetis' patronage of the cosmic anger of her son challenges, and almost defeats, the βουλή of Zeus the father. The alternative narrative of the mother and son, which demands the destruction of the Greeks and Achilles' safety (1.508-10), directly conflicts with the plot direction (Διὸς βουλή, cf. ὣς γαρ θέσφατόν ('god-spoken') ἐστι, 8.477) that requires Achilles' death and Trojan defeat.

Thetis, then, is a Μῆτις indeed, but she is translated through the subtext of the proem onto the narratological plane. Her primary role as supporter of her son's μῆνις (or the alternative plot), and its challenge to the supremacy of βουλή (or the main plot), writes her into the creation story as a *poetic*, rather than a cosmic, competitor. (Indeed, song in lamentation is one of her main occupations in the *Iliad*).[40] In the end, of course, the Διὸς βουλή wins out, and Thetis' plan, and her son, are swallowed up in Zeus' narrative plot, just as Μῆτις and her child were subsumed in Zeus' belly. And yet the mapping of the plotline of the struggle for succession onto the *Iliad* itself, strikingly highlights and explains the conflicting movements of its narrative progression: as a mother-son conflict against the father, the alternative narrative against the authoritative plot.[41]

At the same time, there is a real pathos here, a very direct perspective on Thetis afforded by the role of singing θεά. For, although she can adopt the role of the desperately protective mother, the weaver and binder (in her unchaining of Zeus, 1.396-406), and the author of the alternative plot, her song is, ultimately, powerless - as she herself acknowledges (ἐγὼ μετὰ πᾶσιν ἀτιμοτάτη θεός εἰμι (1.516)). She was never admitted to be the threat to Zeus that she would like to be; she was never allowed to be his wife, or to give birth to a son who could uphold a legitimate μῆνις plot against him. In the end, despite all her similarities to Μῆτις, she does not have the cosmic precedent to fulfil her son's μῆνις and bring their plot to term. Her powers of creation were stymied in her marriage to Peleus (Πηληϊάδεω, 1.1). She has no claim to the gifts of femininity,

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[38] Heiden 2008.33-4, 68.

[39] It is important to note that, at the end of the outline of his βουλή at 15.59-77, Zeus specifically makes it clear that he is only enacting the anti-Greek plot on the part of θεὰ Θέτις (note, θεὰ) and her son (15.72-7).

[40] Slatkin 1991 ch.1. See 4n. above.

[41] Heiden 2008 ch.6.

and the singing, child-bearing, plot-forming θεά of the opening line becomes a male-dominated θεός in her own impotent voice (ἐγὼ … θεός εἰμι, 1.516). The only song she is left with, in the end, is the most powerless of them all: lament, and the poetics of what could have been.

The *Iliad* opens, then, by invoking the creative powers of the goddess and the μῆνις of the son, endowing them with power in the language of their cosmic parallels; but they turn out to be mere shadows of their *alter egos*, unable to uphold the challenge to Zeus, unable to turn the narrative to their advantage. The inevitable powerlessness of the singing goddess against Διὸς βουλή warns us - as the proem does itself - that, in the end, Διὸς βουλή will be fulfilled (Διὸς δ' ἐτελείετο βουλή, 1.5). The plot of Zeus and the *Iliad* will run its full course, unmoved by the attempts of the counterfeit mother-goddess and her son to overthrow it. Zeus will always reign supreme; and mortals, however ambitious, will always die. This is the way of the world. So the precedent of the struggle for succession dictates; so the story goes. Every creation has an ending, after all.

IV. The World and the Word

And so, having reached the end of our exploration of the language of the proem's subtext, it is time to take a step back and take a wider view of the proem as a whole. We have seen how the opening lines of the *Iliad* subtly, by means of a web of subliminal associations between loaded terms, orchestrates a subtext to the ostensible subject of the proem. We have also seen, through detailed analysis of the individual words involved, that this subtext draws on the model of the creation, and, in particular, the struggle for succession. Yet one might well ask *why* the proem of the *Iliad* should make use of a subtext at all. What is the use of subliminal associations and hidden meanings, when they could be incorporated into the surface of the text? And, even if it does serve a purpose, how does the interaction between subtext and text inform and enrich our understanding of the proem, and, consequently, of the *Iliad* itself?

On the most basic level, the additional layer of complexity adds to and informs the symbolic landscape of the opening. By incorporating allusions to a frame of reference outside the apparent sphere of the proem, the proem's subtext can already begin to create a wider perspective, and to lay claim to more global concerns than the localized quarrel between a king and a soldier. Its language becomes richer and more complex by the addition of multiple layers of reference, the images it conjures more elaborate. Most of all, the choice of a subtext which

describes the prototypical beginning gives the proem a marked quality, emphasizing its importance as a beginning by the subtle resonance between the start of the creation and the start of the poem. By not specifically highlighting its identity as an introductory space, the creational subtext can provide added weight to the poem's beginning without being overly explicit.

Moving from language to character, we have seen in detail how informative the cast of the struggle for succession prove as models for the characters of the proem. By orchestrating the central personalities of the goddess, Achilles and Zeus into the subliminal roles of creative mother, retributive son and transgressive father, the resultant parallels and contrasts provide vital information on their characters, condition, and, furthermore, their means of operation within the narrative. The incorporation of the markedly narratological βουλή of Zeus into the creational subtext - a subtext within a subtext, so to speak - enables the overlay of the cosmic model to be read, not only as informing characterization, but also, crucially, as setting up a narrative framework for the rest of the poem. The narrative of the struggle for succession becomes the prototype for a plotline which moves from the conflict between two plots (the goddess and her angry son, going against that of the father-god), to the final implementation of one plot - achieved by the swallowing of the first within itself. The actions of Zeus as supporting, first Achilles and Thetis (15.72-7), then the Greeks (15.59-71), are thus explained; the movement of the Iliadic narrative from a plot antithetical to βουλή, to the plot of βουλή itself, is explained within the cosmic proto-story of the fundamental duality (as both competitor and victor) of Zeus and his βουλή.

But this is not the final word on the subtext of the proem. The ultimate answer to the place of the creation within the fabric of the poem takes us into the heart of the *Iliad*'s very identity; into the way in which the poem visualizes itself and its place in the world. The synthesis of the two beginnings which the subtext enacts - the creation of the world, and the creation of the poem - does not only serve to mark the status of the poem's opening: it draws a direct parallel between the sequence of the *Iliad* and that of the universe. In other words, the *Iliad* is designated as a microcosmos in poetry, through the uniting act of creation. Indeed, κόσμος – the term we have been using throughout to designate the universe – can, in fact, equally apply to poetry, and, more generally, to 'the order of things'.[42] This final resonance, then, is the key to understanding the fundamental relation of the creation to the *Iliad*: not simply as a symbolic landscape of

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[42] Austin 1983.ch.3, Segal 1994.99 on song and order/κόσμος.

alternative images; not simply as a fresh perspective on its characters; not simply as a framework for its narrative of conflict and plot-imposition; but as a statement of the order of the world, in which they both share. There could be no other model than the creation, because this is the order of κόσμος; it is merely the way things are.

And in fact the *Iliad* itself provides us with an outstanding example of its self-identification as a microcosmos of the creation and the world. In *Iliad* 18, the ecphrasis on the forging of the Shield of Achilles relates what can only be described as one of the most beautiful encapsulations of an 'epitome of the world'[43] in poetry. The creation of the universe - from the heavens (sun, moon, stars (18.483-9)), to the city (marriages, lawcourts, wars (18.490-540)), to the country (ploughing, reaping, harvesting, shepherding (18.541-89)), to the creative activities of dance and song (18.590-606), and, finally, to the river Oceanus which encircles the world (18.607-8) - is carefully replicated in the artwork of the shield. But it is not the actual object that is the focus of the description. Rather, it is the exposition of the poem's ability to narrate the shield's creation (ποίει 18.482, ἔτευξ' 483, ποίησε 490 and so on), and, with it, the microcosm it represents, appropriating it as a part of its own fabric. The act of creation is therefore implicated in poetry, as the medium of its description, turning the shield into a metaphor for the poetic craft (which the strategically placed bard (18.604-5) makes explicit).[44] The parallel is thus overtly made, through the example of Achilles' shield, between the creation of the world and the creation of the poem; the pattern of events in the world creation, spoken in poetry, aligns the two along the same plane, the same sequence, the same order.

The connection between the subtext of the creation and the overt 'text' of the *Iliad* is, then, much closer than it was originally supposed. The subliminal resonances of the proem are simply part of a shared language, the common vocabulary of the order of the world. The synthesis of beginnings is merely one manifestation of a deeply established connection between the world and the word in the *Iliad*. In the end, it is not a relationship between model and actuality, framework and fact; it is the far more intimate affinity felt between two intertwined creations, products of the same cosmic order governing the same eternal stage set, cast, and plot. For the *Iliad*, all the world is, indeed, a stage; and there is only one play to see.

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[43] Taplin 1980.11.

[44] Zenodotus believed these lines to be an interpolation and omitted them. When viewed in the context of the above interpretation, however, I would argue that the presence of the bard becomes an important sign for the equivalence between artistic and poetic creation.

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