

8 Oaths and characterization: two Homeric case studies

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8.1 Achilles

Achilles has long been said by scholars to be an exceptional character in the *Iliad*, particularly in his use of language.¹ This also applies to Achilles' oaths, which show several unique linguistic usages. This section will look at all three of Achilles' oaths in the *Iliad*, and analyse them both in terms of their oath features and of how they relate to Achilles' character more generally within the epic. There are two other scenes in the epic where an oath would be appropriate but Achilles does not use one – an examination of these scenes proves that they also contribute to Achilles' extraordinary characterization.²

The first oath that Achilles swears happens very early in the epic. As the poem opens, a plague has struck the Achaean army, and Achilles calls an assembly of the leaders to find out what has caused Apollo's wrath. He calls upon the seer Calchas to reveal the cause, which is, of course, the fact that Agamemnon has taken Chryseis, the daughter of Apollo's priest Chryses, and refuses to give her back despite Chryses' supplication. Calchas worries that if he reveals Agamemnon as the source of the Achaeans' pain, Agamemnon will be angry, which would place him, as a man of lower status, in considerable danger. So he asks Achilles to protect him:

"O Achilles, dear to Zeus, you order me to explain
the rage of lord Apollo, the far-shooter.
And I will tell you. But you agree, and swear to me,
to willingly defend me, with words and with your hands.
For I think I will anger a man, who greatly rules
over all the Argives, and the Achaeans obey him.
For the king is stronger, when he gets angry with a lesser man –
even if he keeps his anger down in the moment,
but he holds a grudge from then on in his chest
until it comes to fruition. But say if you will save me." (*Il.* 1.74–83)

¹ For discussions of unique aspects of Achilles' language, see Parry 1956; Reeve 1973; Claus 1975; Hogan 1976; Friedrich and Redfield 1978; Scully 1984; Nimis 1986.

² Kitts 2005, 51: "...some of the most striking examples of oath-making premises...occur where oaths are anticipated but absent".

Calchas' oath request is specifically about status. Since he is of lower status than Agamemnon "who greatly rules over all the Argives", he will need another man of higher status to protect him. Achilles, as another *basileus*, is of equal status to Agamemnon in that respect, and should be able to fulfil the oath. At the same time, this suggestion of equal status between them sows the seeds for the strife that follows.

Achilles' response stokes this spark of strife that Calchas starts. He responds directly to Calchas' concern about status, first more generally, but then by naming Agamemnon specifically:

"Take courage and speak, revealing whatever divine will you know;
by Zeus-loved Apollo, to whom you pray, Calchas,
when you disclose divine will to the Danaans:
no one, while I am still living and seeing above ground,
will lay his heavy hands upon you besides the hollow ships,
not even if you speak of Agamemnon,
who now boasts to be the best of the Achaeans by far." (*Il.* 1.85–91)

Achilles' oath moves from the anonymous *ou tis* "no one" of line 88 to naming Agamemnon at line 90, possibly in a rhetorical flourish to reassure Calchas about the lengths he will go to protect him. But here Achilles also risks provoking Agamemnon's anger, through the implication that Agamemnon is the one to blame.³ What's more, Achilles goes on to add the formulaic relative clause "[he] who now boasts to be the best of the Achaeans by far" to describe Agamemnon – "the cumulative addition in which insult lies", as Kirk says.⁴ Achilles' language here is ambiguous, not just because, as Kirk points out, the use of the verb *eukhomai* appears throughout the *Iliad* as either positive or negative (it can denote either "boasting" based on fact or "claiming"),⁵ but also because this is the first instance of this verb in the poem, so there is no precedent for what it might mean here. Even more telling is that Achilles refers to himself twice after this in book 1 as "the best of the Achaeans" (1.244, 1.412) with no such qualification. So within Achilles' oath, this early in the epic, Achilles makes it clear that he has a status-based tension specifically with Agamemnon.

³ See Karavites and Wren 1992, 5. Karavites follows Erbse in seeing Achilles' oath here as a gambit that forces him to save face with Agamemnon later on at the loss of cooperation with the Achaeans.

⁴ Kirk 1985, 62 (on 1.91–2); see also Griffin 1980, 52.

⁵ Kirk 1985 on 1.91.

Achilles' oath here also shows the first instance of his unique oath-language, as he swears by Apollo with the phrase *ou ma gar Apollōna* (1.86). Again, we have to take into account that this is the first oath sworn in the *Iliad*, so it might not appear as unusual to the audience. But throughout the epic, Achilles is the only character to use the *ou ma / nai ma* construction for oaths.⁶ This construction is common in later texts, and is usually employed in dialogue, particularly in comedy and Plato, for emphasis or assertive effect. Achilles' early usage suggests an emphatic way of speaking that might also be more naturalistic, and that certainly stands out from the rest of the oath-formulae in the epic. Achilles' first oath to Calchas here then serves to establish two things, both of which are only revealed as the epic unfolds: Achilles has intense, specific relationships, and he expresses himself through emphatic language.

This second aspect of Achilles' character shows itself very clearly in his next oath, which is not uttered in response to a request, but is rather a volunteered, sworn threat.⁷ Once Agamemnon sends men to take Briseis from Achilles, he angrily swears this threat (which will come true):

“But I will say this, and swear a great oath,
by this sceptre, which will never again bear leaf nor branch,
since it has now left behind the cut stump in the mountains,
nor shall it ever bloom again, since the bronze blade stripped
bark and leaf; and now at last the sons of the Achaeans
carry it in their hands when they administer
the justice of Zeus. And this will be my great oath to you:
some day longing for Achilles will come to the sons of the Achaeans,
all of them. Then stricken at heart though you will be, you will be able
to do nothing, when in their numbers before man-slaughtering Hector
they drop and die. And then you will eat out the heart within you
in sorrow, that you did no honour to the best of the Achaeans.”
So spoke the son of Peleus, and threw to the ground the sceptre
that was studded with golden nails, and he sat down. (1.233–46)

⁶ Cf. Achilles' oath at 23.43. See also Griffin 1986, 52; Fletcher 2012, 26. For *ou ma* or *nai ma*, the only other example in Homer outside of Achilles' three uses in the *Iliad* is spoken by Telemachus in an oath at *Odyssey* 20.339. There are no examples of this construction in Hesiod; only two exist in the *Homeric Hymns* (both in the later *Hymn to Hermes*, at 384 and 460). The only other early example (7th c. or earlier) is Sappho fr. 95.9, which is contextually ambiguous. See §5.1, pp. 80–1 n. 18.

⁷ Hanna Roisman (1984, 30) draws attention to the use of *horkos* to signal a one-sided oath, or a volunteered oath, in contrast with *horkia*, which signals a pact between two sides.

Achilles starts here by swearing on Agamemnon's sceptre, which he holds in his hand.⁸ This serves as visual appropriation of Agamemnon's power that Achilles further undermines and subverts when he throws it to the ground to seal his oath.⁹ His first words, the formula ἄλλ' ἔκ τοι ἐρέω "but I will speak this out", is another rare usage that appears only three times in the *Iliad*, each time signifying a threat (cf. 1.204, 2.257). Achilles' use of *nai ma* (234) corresponds to his earlier *ou ma* in his oath to Calchas, and shows again his emphatic use of language. The whole speech is full of vivid language: his description of the sceptre contains two hapaxes (ἀναθηλέω, 1.236; δικασπῶλος, 1.238) and the rare word ἀμύσσω (1.243; cf. 19.284), and his whole speech is made more emphatic through the violent throwing of the sceptre at its close. This oath is also unusual in the fact that it is not only a threat, but, as a threat that is to come true, a prophecy. Achilles is the only Iliadic character to use an oath to either of these ends. In this prophecy-threat, Achilles combines his violent rage reacting to the moment with a wide-ranging perspective on (some of) the consequences of this moment in the future. This is similar to the kind of contrasts that fill Achilles' long speech to the embassy at 9.308ff., where specific complaints about Agamemnon (9.315, 335–7, 338ff.), and even Odysseus (9.312f., 346), contrast with broad gnomic statements about life and death (9.318–22, 337).¹⁰

8 Fletcher (2012, 21) rightly calls this an "unusual oath" for its being sworn by a sceptre. Kitts goes much further, saying: "To swear by a perverted symbol – a dead sceptre – is to undertake a perverted justice, here manifest as the corruption of fairness and good faith among the combined orce of the Achaean armies." at Kitts, (2005, 105). Karavites (1992, 19 n. 2) gives several Roman parallels to this use of the sceptre. The *Iliad* itself provides parallels, with Agamemnon and Hector both swearing to Zeus with their sceptres in hand (see next note). While Achilles does not swear by Zeus here, but by the sceptre, Zeus must be implied here, as the sceptre stands for his justice. Aristotle also mentions monarchs swearing by lifting up the sceptre (*Politics* 1285b14).

9 Cf. 7.406–11, where Agamemnon swears on his sceptre to seal the truce for recovering the dead, and 10.319–31, where Dolon requests a sceptre-sworn oath and Hector complies, to assure Dolon of his prize should he successfully complete his scouting mission. The language in both these cases is very similar. After Agamemnon swears to Idaeus, we are told (7.412): "So speaking, he *lifted up his sceptre* to all the gods ..." Dolon asks Hector (10.321): "But come, *lift up your sceptre* and swear to me ..." And when Hector responds, we are told (10.328) that he "*took the sceptre in his hands* and swore to him".

10 Achilles' deft manoeuvring between specific complaints against Agamemnon and ruminations on his role as a mortal warrior stands in direct contrast to Friedrich & Redfield's claim that "Achilles is characterized by immediacy and easy dominance ... His lively intelligence and imagination display the situation to him in vivid relief; he lacks the patience to look beyond it." (1978: 285)

Achilles' last oath comes in book 23, and has similar elements of emphatic language and prophecy. Still in mourning for Patroclus, Achilles refuses to wash off his battle-filth, and to emphasise his refusal, he swears an oath:

He stubbornly refused them, and swore a great oath:
 “No, by Zeus, who is highest and most excellent of the gods,
 there is no right in letting water come near my head,
 until I have put Patroclus on the pyre, and heaped dirt on his body,
 and cut my hair, since never will a second
 pain like this come to my heart, not while I stand among the living.” (23.42–7)

Once again, Achilles uses *ou ma* to begin his oath; but instead of an agreement, or a threat, his statement here is a promise of future actions, where he says what he himself will (or won't) do, and why. The *what* – refusing to wash – is a promise of future action as a response to the moment: the *why* – because the loss of Patroclus is the worst thing that will ever happen to him – expresses Achilles' perspective on the future. Achilles here once again combines an intense response to the moment with an extended perspective.

Of the three oaths that Achilles swears in the *Iliad*, one he swears as a response to an invited oath of protection, one is a volunteered sworn threat, and another a volunteered sworn assertion of future action: in each he uses either *nai ma* or *ou ma*, suggesting emphasis. Considering oaths more generally, most volunteered oaths attempt to forge trust where there is no basis for trust, or where the swearer has no faith he will be believed – in the *Odyssey*, all but one of the volunteered oaths are to swear that Odysseus is coming (or has come) home. Achilles uses *his* volunteered oaths to enforce expressions of intense emotional responses to specific relationships and losses (first of Briseis, then of Patroclus). If we can find the strong language, the indications of intense personal relationships, and the combination of specific feelings that fit that moment with broader knowledge that make Achilles unique just in these three oaths, than it is just as useful to look at those scenarios where an oath is pointedly missing. Not coincidentally, both of these scenarios are linked to the fate of Hector's corpse, as Hector becomes the focal point for Achilles' intense grief for Patroclus that we saw in his last oath.

The first of these scenes comes in book 22, where Hector makes an unusual oath-request before starting single combat against Achilles, that whoever should win should return the body of the loser to their people:

“But come, let us take the gods (as witnesses) (*theous epidōmetha*), for they are the best witnesses and observers of agreements (*harmoniai*).” (22.254–5)

This is the only use of *epidōmetha* in extant language to call on the gods for the purpose of an oath, and *harmoniai* is also a hapax in the epic, making this oath-proposal entirely unique.¹¹ Achilles' response to this proposal is a brilliant, caustic refusal, just as rife with unique language in its vivid portrayal of Achilles' hate:

"Hector, wretch, do not speak of agreements (*sunēmosunai*) to me.
As there can be no trusted oaths (*horkia pista*) between men and lions,
nor can wolves and sheep share like mind (*homophrona thumon*),
but must always turn evil thoughts against one another,
so you and I cannot be friends, nor can there be
oaths for us two, until one of us falls,
and Ares who fights under the shield's guard gluts himself on his blood." (22.261–7)

Achilles does use the word *horkia* in his rejection, at 262 and 266, but there is also unusual language in his response, as he uses the hapax *sunēmosunai* to refer to Hector's proposal, and the hapax *homophrona* to describe what he and Hector cannot be. Perhaps this range of vocabulary is meant to suggest the absoluteness of Achilles' rejection; there is no agreement of any kind, in any terms, that Hector can propose to Achilles.¹² In this profound hate, Achilles still defines a relationship between the two men, in line 265, where he not only uses *eme kai se* "me and you" to describe himself and Hector, joined with a conjunction, but even a dual at the end of the line (*nōin* "us two"). Their relationship is specifically described through their absence of a relationship – Achilles' hatred for Hector is unique, and cannot be overcome.¹³ This defies our normal expectations of conditions in

¹¹ N.J. Richardson 1992, ad loc.

¹² See D. Cohen 1980. Regarding this scene he says (58–9): "Achilles is not saying that there can be no oaths between men and lions, or himself and Hector, but rather that there can be no obligations, or agreements, no relationship at all except struggle to the death without conditions ... Hector has suggested not oaths, but such a reciprocal binding agreement that would alter their relationship of unconditional hostility. The mutuality and binding character of his proposal are expressed not only in its content, but also by words like *ἐπιδώμεθα* and *ἁρμονιάων*. *ἁρμονιάων* which in Homer usually refers to bonds, cords, or fastenings, conveys this sense particularly forcefully. Achilles' rejection of Hector's proposal in [sic] directed to just this binding, relational aspect, for his words deny the possibility of any connection between them which might oblige him to place constraints upon his conduct." Cohen is wrong in saying "Hector has not suggested oaths"; Hector must be suggesting an oath in his calling the gods to witness, and Achilles' response, with its rejection of oaths, confirms this.

¹³ Kitts is right here in asserting that Achilles' "passion is not to be softened by the conventions which refine and protect social intercourse", but she goes too far in claiming that Achilles' rejection of these oaths here "happen because he rejects the very foundations they are built

war; there is usually a chance for compromise even between the most bitter of enemies, where an oath can be used to establish trust where none exists (see ch. 4). But Achilles does not operate according to generic social rules, and instead responds to the intensity of his specific relationships, from how he expresses his motives to how he uses language with his interlocutors.¹⁴

Achilles' final exchange supports this, as it is a scene where we would expect an oath, but Achilles does not give one. In book 24, Priam, aided by the gods, walks into the hut of Achilles and throws himself at the warrior's knees to ransom the body of Hector. The conversation between the two men has several significant points in reflecting on Achilles' character and the specificity of his relationships, and in many ways, serves as a counterpoint to his interaction with Hector. Priam manages to mollify Achilles with his first speech, appealing to his sense of pity and his relationship with his own father, Peleus:

“But respect the gods, Achilles, and pity me,
remembering your own father, for I am even more pitiful...” (24.503–4)

Achilles responds not with words here, but with gesture and emotion, as the narrator tells us that Achilles takes the old man's hand, pushes him gently away, and “the two remembered” (24.509). The use of the dual pronoun *tō* unites the two men in this intimate act of grieving together, as does Achilles' momentary physical gesture of taking Priam's hand, which he does again at 24.515 when he finally responds verbally. As Achilles marvels at Priam's bravery in coming to him like this to beg for Hector's corpse, he says, “Your heart is iron” (24.521). Achilles' compliment for Priam here inverts Hector's disapproval of Achilles at 22.356ff., after Achilles has refused once again to ransom his body: “I look upon you and I know you well, that I wasn't about to persuade you. For the heart in your torso is iron” (22.356–7). After this exchange, Priam begs Achilles not to delay, but to give him back his son, and Achilles, though angry for a moment, obeys, preparing the body himself and putting it in a wagon for Priam to return to Troy. Then the two men spend more time together, as Achilles asks Priam to eat with him. Here Achilles tells the story of Niobe, how even she ate after the murder of her

upon: compassion, self-restraint, and mutual trust” (Kitts 2005, 52). Achilles' rejection here is particular to Hector, as the killer of Patroclus. For proof of how the specificity of Achilles' relationships affects his adhesion to social conventions, a quick glance at how he treats those who work at Agamemnon's bidding, but are not Agamemnon, gives a clear picture: he properly welcomes the heralds at 1.334–48, and the embassy at 9.196ff.

¹⁴ Friedrich and Redfield (1978, 280–1) discuss Achilles' profuse usage of the vocative, with titles and epithets, as a sign of the intensity of his personal relationships.

children, and he uses the dual to describe himself and Priam: “But come, for we two (*nōi*) also, brilliant old man, we should think about food” (24.618–19) After they finish eating, they gaze upon each other, each in turn admiring the other (24.628–33), before speaking again. Achilles makes a bed in the porch for Priam (in case someone should see him in the tent and tell Agamemnon) and finally asks him how many days he will need for Hector’s funeral. Finally we come to the place where we might expect an elaborate oath between enemies as in book 3 (3.267ff) or even the kind of oath that swears a truce for the burial of the corpses, as in book 7 (7.408–13). But Achilles agrees to the eleven-day truce that Priam asks for without ever swearing an oath of assurance; instead he promises to hold up the fighting for as long as Priam needs, and grabs his right wrist to reassure him.

So (Achilles) spoke, and took the right hand of the old man
at the wrist, so that he wouldn’t be afraid in his heart. (24.671–2)

This gesture is odd, to say the least, and is usually associated with marriage:¹⁵ there is no equivalent gesture anywhere in the *Iliad*. If we do take the gesture to represent a sort of marriage, then this bond between Achilles and Priam is the fulfilment of a relationship that was deemed impossible between Hector and Achilles. Immediately before Hector faces Achilles in battle in book 22, he says to himself:

15 Lateiner 1995, 57 says of this gesture: “An eloquent, informal gesture in *Iliad* 24, persuasive to participants and compactly communicative to the audience, is this hand-on-wrist grasp. Thus Hermes and Achilleus both guide Priam, indeed assert their control over Priam’s postures and distance, while reassuring him verbally and non-verbally of friendly attitude.” Lateiner glosses over the real difference between these two points of physical contact: Achilles grabs Priam not to direct him physically, as was the case with Hermes, but to enforce his promise. Davies 1985, 628 also glosses over the hand/wrist difference: “The gesture (of the handshake) was also sometimes used in 5th century vase painting in the context of marriage... It has been suggested that the scene on a volute krater in Boston which appears to show the departure of a warrior, may in fact show Achilles with Deidameia and is a scene with a deliberate double meaning: departure and wedding.” This would make sense in the context of another wrist-grab in Homer, where Odysseus grabs Penelope by the wrist as he leaves her (*Od.* 18.257–8). The only other interesting wrist-grab in the *Iliad* is on the description of Achilles’ shield, where young men and young women dance, holding each other’s wrists at 18.593–4. It’s noteworthy that the same vocabulary of *ēitheos* “young man” and *parthenos* “maiden” is used here as in Hector’s lines at 22.126–8. These two romantic contexts would point to courtship/marriage symbolism. For further discussion of grabbing the wrist as a marriage gesture, see Flory 1978, 71 n. 5. See also M.W. Blundell 1989, 46: “Enmity is ended or friendship sealed and perpetuated by the provision of a wife.” This marriage imagery here evokes the creation of a bond of friendship, but certainly in an unexpected way.

“There is no way now from behind a tree or a rock
to whisper to him, like a girl and a young man,
how a girl and a young man whisper to each other.” (22.126–8)

Hector here wishes that he and Achilles might talk as though courting,¹⁶ Achilles grabs Priam as he would a bride; the former impossibility is reconciled through this latter gesture. So we have a scene that, in its absence of oaths between Achilles and Priam, perfectly redeems Achilles’ refusals to take an oath with Hector in book 22. The specificity of relationships remains constant: Achilles uses the dual to describe both himself and Hector as well as himself and Priam, and both relationships are driven, albeit to different ends, by a grief that overwhelms social norms and undermines our expectations about the uses of oaths.

This examination of Achilles’ oath-scenes shows several unique attributes that contribute to his overall characterization. First, he is alone in his use of *nai ma* or *ou ma* in his oaths. Secondly, Achilles is exceptional in his use of volunteered oaths, using them as threats or as emphatic statements, rather than to establish trust. Next, Achilles sometimes incorporates insight into the future into his oaths, whether it be the broader implications of his alienation from the Achaeans, or an understanding of his own personal future in the wake of losing Patroclus. The scenes where Achilles does not swear an oath with an enemy are just as extraordinary: Achilles is the only character to refuse an oath in this context, while his agreement with Priam completely defies all social expectations. These unique features of Achilles’ uses (and avoidances) of oaths are an important factor of his character construction that flesh out our intuitive feelings about Achilles: he is passionate and direct, and has an extraordinary capacity for emotion in the moment while still seeing the bigger picture. Perhaps most importantly of all, Achilles’ actions are dictated by the intensity of his specific personal relationships, rather than standard social expectations, and this is particularly clear in his oath-scenes.

¹⁶ The use of *oarizemenai* here, used elsewhere only in the narrator’s description of Hector and Andromache’s encounter at 6.516, suggests that Hector views his relationship with Achilles in a courtship context. Achilles avoids such language, but does fantasize under the threat of the river at 21.279–80 that he wishes Hector would have killed him, and equates himself to Hector (“I wish that Hector would have killed me, he who is the best man who was brought up here; then a good man would have struck, and a good man would have been slain”).

8.2 Odysseus

Odysseus serves as a counter-point to Achilles in our consideration of oaths and characterization in Homer, spanning as he does both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. While it always tricky to take the two epics together, it is helpful in thinking about character consistency across tradition, and how characters from one story remain “themselves” in another. But as we will see in our examination of the *Odyssey*, the main problem in considering the characterization of Odysseus is whether he is ever “himself” at all.

Odysseus only has one oath in the *Iliad*, and as we saw with Achilles, it is a volunteered oath that emphasises something said, here, with intense emotion: Odysseus uses a self-curse to cement a threat. Responding to Thersites’ complaints about Agamemnon, Odysseus rebukes him, before launching into this self-cursing threat:

“...But I will speak out to you and it will be something that will happen –
if I happen upon you again, being as foolish as you are now,
then no longer will the head of Odysseus be above his shoulders,
and no longer would I be called the father of Telemachus,
if I don’t, grabbing hold of you, strip off your own clothes,
your cloak and your tunic, that wrap around your shameful bits,
and send you away, crying out, to the fast ships,
having struck you with shameful strikes out of the assembly.”
So he spoke, and struck his back and his two shoulders
with the sceptre. (2.257–64)

This oath serves a similar function to the example of Achilles’ throwing down the sceptre at the end of book 1, where a curse-oath emphasizes a threat. Here, too, almost in parody, Odysseus seals his curse with the sceptre, bringing it down hard on the back of Thersites, a physical gesture of violent authority that reinforces his strong words. This is the only oath that Odysseus actually swears in the *Iliad*,¹⁷ and it has a clear parallel with a similar self-curse that Odysseus swears in the *Odyssey*.

Odysseus’ self-curse in the *Odyssey* comes when he is disguised as the Cretan, as he is from shortly after his arrival in Ithaca in book 13 until his staggered revelations throughout the epic’s final books. Here, before Telemachus has been introduced, but after Odysseus has recognized him, the Cretan tells Telemachus

¹⁷ Odysseus is, of course, instrumental in bringing about the oath of truce between Achilles and Agamemnon, but does not swear himself. See *Il.* 9.180, 9.274–6, 19.141, 19.155–95.

about what he would do should Odysseus or Telemachus return to Ithaca as he quizzes him for more information about the suitors:

“If I were so young, with this in my heart,
or if the son of blameless Odysseus, or even the man himself
might come from wandering, then there’d still be a share of hope.
And then right away, may a strange man cut my head from me,
if I wouldn’t become an evil to all the suitors,
when I came into the great hall of Laertes’ son Odysseus.” (16.99–104)

This self-curse “may a strange man cut my head from me / if I wouldn’t become an evil to all the suitors” is certainly similar to the head-removing self-curse that the *Iliad*’s Odysseus swears to Thersites, with its focus on Odysseus’ *karē* (*Il.* 2.259; *Od.* 16.102), and might even be related, since that oath focused explicitly on Odysseus self-identifying as Telemachus’ father (*Il.* 2.260), and here he is talking, in disguise, to Telemachus. But in the *Iliad*, that *karē* clearly is Odysseus’. As the Oath Database notes,¹⁸ the self-curse of *Od.* 16.102, perhaps even more than the rest of the oaths that Odysseus swears in disguise in the *Odyssey*, confuses the identity of the speaker. Whether the Cretan or Odysseus is speaking at this point in the oath becomes obscure in the transition between the third person singular *elthoi* “(he) might come” (referring to either Telemachus or Odysseus) in line 101 and the nominative first person participle *elthōn* “coming” in 104, as the self-curse becomes, much like Achilles’ sworn threat at *Iliad* 1.233–46, a prophecy of the carnage Odysseus himself will wreak in his own halls in book 22. This oath does cleverly force Telemachus into revealing who he is to Odysseus (16.113–20), and it is only a short time after this that Athene tells Odysseus to reveal himself to his son (16.167ff.): here this volunteered oath creates a connection that allows their conspiracy against the suitors to begin (16.169f.).

Of Odysseus’ remaining volunteered oaths in the *Odyssey*, in every instance the Cretan swears that Odysseus is coming home, to create trust in this fact where there is none in the experience of his interlocutors; Eumaeus, Penelope, and Philoetius.¹⁹ Mixing in this sworn truth with a multitude of lies about himself, Odysseus as the Cretan in these books (he is, after all, *polutropos* “many-wayed”, 1.1, and is the grandson of Autolycus, “who surpassed men in stealing and with the oath; the god Hermes himself had given these to him”, 19.395–8) is character-

¹⁸ See the Nottingham Oath Database, “Remarks” on #555.

¹⁹ These oaths come in a series of “lying” speeches by Odysseus that have received considerable scholarly attention. See Stanford 1950; Trahman 1952; Haft 1984; Emlyn-Jones 1986; S. Richardson 1996.

istic in how he uses language and disguise to his advantage. Every time, Odysseus protects his own identity while ascertaining through his interlocutors' responses whether they might be allied with him against the suitors.

Despite each of his interlocutors' loyalty to Odysseus, and their general acceptance of the Cretan and their hospitality towards him, none of them accepts these oaths about Odysseus' homecoming as true. This signals a shift from a tie between oaths and characterization – is a *man* trustworthy? – to one between oaths and narrative – is a *story* trustworthy? These scenes all make it clear that the value of an oath in the *Odyssey* is no longer as firmly tied to determining character or relationships between characters, but instead falls on judging the truth of things said.²⁰

Odysseus as the Cretan volunteers the first of these three oaths about Odysseus' homecoming to the swineherd Eumaeus in book 14.²¹ Eumaeus provokes the oath, by saying, before he even names Odysseus as his lord, that vagabonds come telling lies about him (14.122–32), and won't persuade anyone: "Old man, there is not any man who could come here bringing news of him, that would persuade his wife and beloved son" (14.122–3). So the Cretan swears an oath,²² to emphasise that he is telling the truth about Odysseus' homecoming:

20 Roisman (1984, 74) almost suggests this in her assessment of *apistos* in the *Odyssey*, saying that "its derogatory meaning changes from 'untrustworthy' to 'unbelievable', 'beyond one's experience', and she gives the example of Eumaeus' refusal to believe that Odysseus will return at 14.121–32.

21 For an elegant reading of the whole conversation between Eumaeus and Odysseus, see Minchin 1999.

22 This oath is definitely sworn – it is a volunteered oath of emphasis, not unlike Achilles' oaths at *Il.* 1.233–46 and *Il.* 23.42–7, and does not require an Invitation (as defined by the schema of Arend 1933). The Execution is the oath itself, which starts with the call to witness (ἴστω νῦν Ζεὺς..., 14.158). For a treatment of this oath as an oath, see Minchin 1999. This stands against Callaway's claim (followed by Fletcher 2012, 28) that here "there is no Execution or Conclusion, since Eumaeus refuses the oath ... As I have defined an oath scene the oath is not completed if it is not accepted: Odysseus has merely offered an oath. The use of the future sense (μυθήσομαι) is another indication of the offering, and is seen in the other two scenes as well. Finally, Eumaeus does not accept the offer, and thus has refused to participate in the religious act of the oath, an act which involves two parties" (Callaway 1998, 162–3). This is nonsense. An oath can most certainly be sworn by one person in order to emphasize the truth of a sworn statement, or to swear to future action or inaction by the individual, as we have seen in the oaths of Achilles in this chapter. Moreover, the use of μυθήσομαι here is not unusual in how it signals a coming oath, and draws attention to a statement that is about to be made: see not only the other oaths of Odysseus at *Od.* 19.269 and 23.265, but also preparations for statements made immediately after at *Od.* 9.16, 11.507, and 19.245. This use of μυθήσομαι parallels that of ἐπέω in oaths at *Il.* 1.76, 1.233, and *Od.* 20.229; and ἐπέω in emphasising the truth of a statement that is about to be made, particularly in

"Dear friend, since you completely deny it and won't still say that this man will come,
 but your heart is always untrusting;
 So I will not just tell you, but with an oath,
 that Odysseus will return..."
 "...now let Zeus, first of the gods, and the guest-friendship table,
 and the hearth of blameless Odysseus, where I've come (be witness).
 Truly all these things will come to pass as I say.
 Some time within the year Odysseus will be here,
 at the waning of one month and the beginning of another,
 he'll return home, and pay back whoever
 here dishonours his wife and his shining son." (14.149–52, 158–64)

The Cretan claims that Eumaeus is untrusting (*apistos*, 14.150), but rather than a general characteristic, he says this specifically in response to the herdsman's disbelief in Odysseus' homecoming. The oath that the Cretan swears responds to this, and, through swearing, attempts to make the story of Odysseus' homecoming *pistos*, trustworthy. Eumaeus gently refuses to accept Odysseus' volunteered oath here, saying "let's leave (*easomen*) this oath" (14.171), but the herdsman shows no offence – despite this perceived lie, Eumaeus continues on as though he believes everything else about the Cretan, and that the stranger remains worthy of his hospitality.²³ Of course the irony is that Odysseus is telling the truth about this one thing, and this only: everything else he says, his entire persona and how he presents himself, is a falsehood.²⁴

After this oath is "left aside" by Eumaeus, Odysseus, deft as he is, uses two other oaths to back himself on the point of Odysseus' homecoming. First, the

the formulae ἐρέω ἔπος οὐδ' ἐπικεύσω (*Il.* 5.816) / μυθήσομαι οὐδ' ἐπικεύσω (*Il.* 19.269, 23.265), as well as the other familiar formulae of emphatic "telling" like ἀλλ' ἔκ τοι ἐρέω, τὸ δὲ καὶ τελέεσθαι ὄϊω / ἀλλ' ἔκ τοι ἐρέω, τὸ δὲ καὶ τετελεσμένον ἔσται (*Il.* 1.204, 2.257, *Od.* 2.187, 17.229, 18.82), etc. However, while we can say that this is an oath sworn, Harsh is absolutely right to question a certain aspect of this oath: "...the oath which he [Odysseus in disguise] has sworn concerning the return of Odysseus is a strange oath (14.145–164). How can a man with no sign from Heaven swear what another man at a distance and under no obligation to him will do?" (Harsh 1950, 8). The Cretan swears here for the actions of Odysseus, and this has no direct parallel: Hector at *Il.* 7.76–91 and Achilles at *Il.* 1.233–46 both swear to the actions of others related to their own actions: this seems to suggest a further conflation of "Odysseus" and "the Cretan" through his speeches.

23 S. Richardson 1996, 396.

24 It is important to note that Odysseus has only sworn here that "Some time within the year Odysseus will be here, at the waning of one month and the beginning of another, he'll return home, and pay back whoever here dishonours his wife and his shining son" and *not* to any other element of his story. So this cannot be considered a "sneaky", deceptive oath, as Odysseus does not swear as who he really is", as in Köhnken 2009, 56 n. 38.

Cretan says that the Thesprotian Pheidon swore to him that he was about to put Odysseus on a ship home (14.331–3) – a reported oath that is also a lie, but that, through reporting an oath from a man of higher status, might go further in convincing Eumaeus.²⁵ Eumaeus again rejects the idea: “But these things are out of order, I think, and you will not persuade me, speaking about Odysseus.”²⁶ And he goes on, “and why should you, being such a man, lie falsely?” (14.363–4) So while Eumaeus implicitly trusts the Cretan, “being such a man”,²⁷ he continues to disbelieve his statement that Odysseus will come home, even when it is offered on oath.

So the Cretan finally volunteers another oath, one that is not actually sworn, saying to Eumaeus:

“The heart in your chest is indeed untrusting,
since I even swearing on it, I cannot bring you round, nor can I persuade you.
So come now, let us make an agreement. And from here on out
the gods will be witnesses to us both, those who hold Olympos.
If your lord returns into this house,
you will dress me in clothes, a tunic and a cloak, and send me
to go to Doulichion, to where it is dear in my heart.
But if your lord doesn’t come as I say,
set your slaves on me, and throw me down from a great rock,
so that another beggar will avoid cheating you.” (14.391–400)

The Cretan tries to bargain with a proposed oath-exchange, and here the oath is never taken.²⁸ The Cretan goes so far as to suggest that Eumaeus throw him from a great rock if he is lying, but if he is telling the truth, that he should receive some clothes. Again Eumaeus denies him, saying that he could hardly be mindful of Zeus and hospitality if he started throwing his guests off large rocks – so Eumaeus implicitly calls the Cretan a liar again, but, again, does not reject him otherwise: the heart in Eumaeus might be untrusting (*apistos*, 14.391, cf. 14.150), but it is only so regarding the story that Odysseus is coming home.

²⁵ Minchin 1999, 343.

²⁶ Emlyn-Jones (1986, 10) n. 6 suggests that the *τὰ γ’ οὐ κατὰ κόσμον* at 14.363 refers not only to the falsity of Odysseus’ homecoming, but also a problem with “its artistic arrangement”.

²⁷ With respect to what sort of man the Cretan is meant to be here, Walcot 2009, 146 suggests Odysseus’ goal with his speech (and oath) to Eumaeus is not to convince of the truth, but instead to imprint on the herdsman just what kind of beggar he is, not a professional beggar, but instead, someone fallen on hard times.

²⁸ Cf. Hector’s proposed oath exchanges at *Iliad* 22.254–67 and 7.76–86.

The Cretan's next volunteered oath is also about Odysseus' homecoming, this time sworn to Penelope.²⁹ Unlike with Eumaeus, the Cretan here does not volunteer any information about Odysseus' homecoming in his first speech. But, as he fabricates his background story once again,³⁰ with variations, he does say that he saw Odysseus once in his homeland of Crete. Even mentioning Odysseus is enough to rouse suspicion in Penelope, who then tests the Cretan, asking for proof that he really did entertain Odysseus (19.215).³¹ The Cretan gives her the details of Odysseus' cloak, to which Penelope immediately responds positively, declaring to the Cretan: "Stranger, before you had my pity, but now you will be a friend to me, respected in my palace-rooms." (19.253–4) Penelope has a first recognition (σῆματ' ἀναγνούςῃ, 19.250) here that foreshadows the *sēmata* we will see again in her next "trial" of Odysseus in book 23 (19.250=23.206).³²

Once the Cretan passes the test by describing Odysseus and his clothes, and Penelope says as much, he goes on to volunteer the news that Odysseus is coming home, weaving in the story of the cattle and the Phaiakians (19.273–82), the first true stories that he's recounted from his own adventures. He then moves to the reported oath: "So Pheidon, the king of the Thesprotians, told me, and he swore it before me, pouring a libation in his house, that the ship was drawn down, and the crew were ready to take Odysseus back to his beloved country." (19.287–90; cf. 14.131) And from this reported oath, he reiterates with an oath of his own:

"...I will give you an oath on this.
Now let Zeus first, highest and most excellent of the gods,
and the hearth of blameless Odysseus, which I have arrived at, be witness:
Truly all these things will be accomplished as I say.
Some time within the year Odysseus will be here,
at the waning of one month and the beginning of another." (19.300–7; cf. 14.158–61)

This oath is very much like the one we saw him offer Eumaeus at 14.158ff. Unlike Eumaeus, Penelope does not directly dismiss the oath, or say that the Cretan is lying. Instead she responds by expressing her wish that Odysseus would be coming home,³³ but then says that she knows he will not. In this way, it feels as

²⁹ For further discussion on Odysseus' exchange with Penelope in book 19, see Harsh 1950; Walcot 2009, 150–1; Vlahos 2011, 37–45; Loudén 2011; Reece 2011.

³⁰ The narrator confirms these lies, and the skill used in telling them, at 19.203: "Saying many false things, he made them seem like truths."

³¹ Cf. Penelope's "trying" Odysseus at 23.181.

³² See Vlahos, 2011; Loudén, 2011; Reece, 2011;

³³ The oath sworn here by Odysseus is similar to that sworn by Theoclymenus to Penelope at 17.155–9, and her response is also similar. Harsh notices these parallels as well as the formulaic ὦ

though the trustworthiness of the story – that Odysseus is coming home – has gained ground.

The next iteration of the homecoming oath comes in book 20, in an even shorter exchange, this time between Odysseus as the Cretan and Philoetius the ox-herd. Philoetius comments first on Odysseus' appearance, saying that he looks "like a king or a lord..." (20.194) "And then, standing close to Odysseus, he took him by the right hand and addressed him in winged words..." (20.197–8) Philoetius not only imagines a resemblance between Odysseus and the Cretan,³⁴ but he also immediately establishes a trust relationship with him by taking his right hand. Philoetius continues to address the Cretan, and comes to the subject of Odysseus. Where Eumaeus said that Odysseus must be dead (14.133–47), and Penelope said that Odysseus would not come home but implied the possibility of his still being alive (19.357–60), now Philoetius says: "As I think of it, tears come to my eyes, with remembering Odysseus, since I believe that he has rags like this, wandering among men, if he is still alive and sees the light of the sun" (20.204–7). This is where the Cretan responds enthusiastically to the oxherd, and swears his oath of Odysseus' homecoming:

"Oxherd, since you seem to be a man who is not evil or senseless,
and I myself recognise that wisdom arrive in your thoughts,
for this reason I will tell you this, and swear a great oath on it.
Now let Zeus first, highest and most excellent of the gods,
and the hearth of blameless Odysseus, which I have arrived at (be witness).
Odysseus will come back while you are still in his house,
and you will see him with your own eyes, and if you want to,
the killings of the suitors, who are rulers here." (20.227–34)

Here the Cretan makes slight alterations to his oath. Now the time has grown shorter: Odysseus won't come home within the year (14.162f., 19.306f.), but while Philoetius is in the house, and he is invited to witness not just the oath, but the death of the suitors that the oath foretells. Philoetius' response almost confuses the identity of the Cretan and Odysseus, as he says: "I wish that the son of Cronus would make that so, stranger, and then you would know what strength these hands have." (20.236–7) Philoetius does not directly agree with the Cretan's

γύναι αἰδοίη Λαερτιάδew Ὀδυσῆος (19.583): "When Odysseus does not use this formula, he here addresses Penelope with ὦ γύναι, the words with which he addresses his wife before leaving for Troy (18.259) and the regular address to a wife. He never addresses her, as the suitors do, by her "maiden" name. All this may well suggest to Penelope that the speaker is Odysseus." (1950, 11–12)

34 Cf. Penelope at 19.358f.

oath of Odysseus' homecoming, but unlike Eumaeus and Penelope, he does not say that it will not be so. Even Eumaeus seems to be won over by this oath, as he responds to the exchange by joining in the prayer that Odysseus will come home ("so in the same way as this did Eumaeus pray to all the gods", 20.238). These responses to the oath here are significant, because they almost exactly mirror their responses that cause Odysseus to reveal himself to them in book 21 (20.235=21.199; 20.237–9=21.202–4). The sworn story of Odysseus' homecoming is more plausible as the plot moves forward, and Philoetius' and Eumaeus' responses to that story are what allow Odysseus to trust them to help him against the suitors.³⁵

The story of Odysseus' homecoming becomes more believable as the plot drives forward to its realization. This is a story that gains its own momentum, independent of the characters' trustworthiness. In this way a pattern emerges, but a pattern completely different from that which we saw in the *Iliad*. Here, there is never any doubt whether Odysseus as the Cretan is a trustworthy man, only whether he is telling a trustworthy story. The trustworthiness of that story then changes according to its place and function in the larger narrative. This paradox between the trustworthiness of the man and that of the story becomes more complicated when we consider oaths in the characterization not of the Cretan, but of Odysseus.

With the exception of the oath sworn with the suitors' families at the end of the *Odyssey* (24.546), Odysseus' oaths and self-curses in both epics are all volunteered. As with Achilles, these volunteered oaths often lend emphasis to something said. The majority of these oaths in the *Odyssey* assert that Odysseus is coming home, and this story must be sworn to those who have no reason to trust in it. While Odysseus is in disguise and lies about who he is as he gives all of these homecoming oaths,³⁶ Odysseus never swears to anything false, nor does he use these oaths in a directly manipulative way. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* both characterize Odysseus as a liar, but we can also say, with confidence, what Stanford has said: "Homer's Odysseus never either in *Iliad* or *Odyssey* bears false witness against a φίλος."³⁷

35 Callaway, 1998, 166: "So we have moved from total disbelief to active hope that Odysseus will return."

36 For the designation of these oaths as "tricky" and the association of Odysseus' use of oaths here and his relationship with Autolycus (and Hermes') uses of tricky oaths, see n. 24; cf. Callaway 1993, 19.

37 Stanford (1950, 48).