

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

POETICS OF UNEASE:  
AFFECT AND LABOR IN ANCIENT GREEK, NEAR EASTERN, AND INDIC POETRY

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*To Lavinia, Fabio, Matilde, and Chloe.*

*Perhaps the dead can be reduced to fixed forms,  
though their surviving records are against it.*

*– Raymond Williams*

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## ABSTRACT

In this dissertation I examine the role played by “unease” in the Homeric epics, the Ancient Near Eastern Gilgamesh texts, and the Indian *Rigveda*. I position unease as an affect that the texts can provoke in their audiences through poetic devices that interrupt the narrative, drawing attention to ideological ambiguities, marginalized voices, and other details that endanger their overarching values. Representations of labor and laborers are the focus of my analyses, since articulations of human work and suffering prompt further questions related to divinity, gender, class, throwing the internal contradictions of ideologies into sharp relief.

The introduction frames my discussion of the “poetics of unease” by detailing the methodology through which I approach affect and ideology. I make use of an archive of literary and scholarly receptions to explore the historical dimensions of how these texts have provoked unease. I term my method a “philology of affect” and argue that it can be applied across cultures and types of affects. In chapter one, I turn to the *Iliad* and its presentation of a materialist conception of labor that undermines its metaphysical system of values. In the second chapter, I explore how the *Odyssey* represents the labor of poets as caught between political and ethical orders. In chapter three, I perform a diachronic analysis of the role played by communal labor across the development of the Gilgamesh texts. In chapter four, I read closely parts of the *Rigveda* in which certain forms of labor controvert the cosmic order, and serve to define the difference between gods and men. In my conclusion, I argue that unease is mobilized by these texts to produce certain kinds of complicit reading subjects, but that it can cause other subjectivities to emerge that are more sensitive to the affective implications of the representations of labor and human suffering in ancient literature.

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# INTRODUCTION

## The Poetics of Unease and a Philology of Affect

In order to define “unease” as an affective product of poetic activity, we can begin with a definition of poetic “ease.” For this I turn to Oren Izenberg, in whose work poetic ease is “define[d] provisionally as a fit of person to world, a relation to experience that is uncrossed, unchecked, undarkened by some more familiar alternative states of mind or conditions of life: skepticism, anxiety, alienation, repression, bad faith.”<sup>1</sup> A subject in a state of poetic ease experiences a natural correspondence of representation to experience. Izenberg also glosses “ease” through the words of Jean Paulhan, as *la confiance que le poète fait naturellement—et nous invite à faire—au monde* [“the confidence that the poet places, naturally—and that he invites us to place—in the world”].<sup>2</sup> Thus, “ease” can be understood as a condition of experience, an affective orientation or alignment between reader and poem, as well as kind of hermeneutic assumption about the work at hand. “Ease” describes a sense of homogeneity and even collaboration in the processes of meaning-making, whereby a text is taken to be transmitting meaning to the reader without reflexively provoking negative affects that would disturb its meaning.

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<sup>1</sup> Izenberg 2011, 1. For the online publication, see: <https://nonsite.org/confiance-au-monde-or-the-poetry-of-ease/>.

<sup>2</sup> Izenberg 2011, 2. Izenberg is citing Paulhan with reference to Wallace Stevens’ citation of the phrase in “A Collect of Philosophy,” in my bibliography as Stevens 1990, 279. The references to Paulhan are not given in Izenberg, nor in any of the scholarship that seems to cite this phrase in connection to Stevens. As far as I can tell, the phrase appears (ascribed to Paulhan) in a letter from Barbara Church to Paulhan (dated 23 August 1951). See the Sorbonne digital archives: [https://obvil.sorbonne-universite.fr/corpus/paulhan/church\\_paulhan](https://obvil.sorbonne-universite.fr/corpus/paulhan/church_paulhan).

Introducing his translation of the *Iliad*, Thomas Hobbes defined a similar kind of “ease” as one of the hallmarks of Homeric epic poetics and its “discretion”—the “facility [i.e., “ease”] of construction” that “consisteth in a natural contexture of the words, so as not to discover the labor but the natural ability of the poet ... usually called good style.”<sup>3</sup> Ease submerges the labor of the poet, the effort of producing a context in which meaning emerges in a secure domain. To Hobbes, this “ease” is a product of the “order of words” and it is quite literally the opposite of “unease.” For, “when [words are] placed unnaturally, the reader will often find unexpected checks, and be forced to go back and hunt for the sense, and suffer such unease, as in a coach a man unexpectedly finds in passing over a furrow.”<sup>4</sup> Thus, “unease” can be provisionally labeled as a product of dis-texture, a fraying of the orderliness of representation and sense, that by virtue of its rough edges can lead the reader into the kinds of negative affective states listed above (skepticism, anxiety, alienation, etc.). Acting as a rubric, “unease” can describe a series of affects that may be provoked by a text when one of its details endangers the values of the whole. Unease causes disorientation, a kind of aporetic pause at the moment of narration that reconfigures the text’s linear progression and requires that we negotiate it differently.<sup>5</sup>

Against the general tendency toward “ease” in Homeric poetry, noted by Hobbes, I demonstrate that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, and also the Ancient Near Eastern Gilgamesh texts and the Indian Vedas, exhibit a “poetics of unease.”<sup>6</sup> My argument is that unease, as an affect,

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<sup>3</sup> Hobbes 1844 [1677], iv. The date of the first edition of Hobbes’ translation of the *Iliad* is likely 1676. 1677 is the date of the second printed edition, on which the cited edition is based. See the “advertisement” in the cited volume (front matter, pages unnumbered).

<sup>4</sup> Hobbes 1844 [1677], iv-v

<sup>5</sup> I borrow the notion of a “pause at the moment of narrating” from Theodor W. Adorno’s discussion of the “horrible” moment of violence in the *Odyssey*’s description of the murder of Melanthius, which I return to in chapter two. See Horkheimer and Adorno 2002 [1944/7], 61.

<sup>6</sup> After I developed the notion of a “poetics of unease,” I discovered the use of the similar (but singular) “poetic of unease” in the work of Steven Matthews, who applied the phrase to the Irish poet Thomas Kinsella’s strained relation to Anglo-American modernism, which stood to him as both a source of experimental inspiration and a reminder of Irish literature’s ties to a colonial past. Matthews does not make a systematic use of the phrase, nor does

disorganizes our experience of ideological representations in these poetic corpora, allowing our attention, momentarily torn away from the onward movement of the poem, to be drawn to marginalized voices and topics that are usually left undiscussed or underdetermined. The unsettling presence of these submerged discourses and counter-ideological constructs has often occasioned forms of hermeneutic resistance. Philology has acted as a strategy of containment, trained on averting unease and its implications. However, I argue that there are important benefits to inhabiting unease as grounds for reexamining these works, even if it leaves us in a state of disrepair with respect to the text's broader narrative. If we learn to appreciate these works as texts that produce affective dispositions, including unease, we will be able to understand the affective realities that they project beyond their imagined world—granting us insight into the kinds of reading subjectivities they have helped form over the long histories as works that stand at the beginning of their respective traditions.

My emphasis on ideology and subjectivity seeks to elicit an aspect of the work texts do that is often overlooked: the formation of affective moods and, by extension, the production of subjects. I understand an ideology to be a process of persuasion, a series of claims that present a social construct as natural fact.<sup>7</sup> In order for the artificial to appear natural, ideologies rely on the establishment of an affective consonance or alignment. They achieve this when we are in a state of ease. In a state of unease, the persuasive work of an ideology becomes transparent, its claims less convincing, even uncomfortable. When an ideology is thus suspended, the reading subject is equipped to reconsider the grounds on which it rests, but also the more general work of ideology itself. This state approximates what scholars after Jacques Derrida have come to define as a

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he define “unease” in formal terms, but his arguments have helped me work on my own definitions. Interested readers can turn to Matthews 1997, 74-103.

<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of definitions of ideology more broadly, see Zizek 2021.

“hauntology.”<sup>8</sup> For the purposes of this dissertation, I take a haunted subject to be one that is uncomfortably aware of always already having been “interpellated” into ideological structures and of the constructed quality of social reality, but who does not see a fruitful way of using this knowledge.<sup>9</sup> Modifying the use of hauntology in these terms makes the paradigm fruitful to the study of literature, since it is defined as disillusionment in the moment of present experience (reading or listening to a text), rather than as a depressive outlook on the future. By revaluing the affordances of unease in these terms, I offer some routes through and out of the depressive hauntological position, tracing how these works have been used and can continue to be used for surprising and contingently emancipatory purposes.

To focus my analyses in the dissertation, I prioritize ideologies pertaining to a broad definition of labor—whether manual labor, affective labor, or even the labor of poets themselves.<sup>10</sup> This thematic choice at times requires that I discuss ideological structures that intersect conceptions of labor, ranging from ideologies of gender to disability, sexuality, and class. I have found that forms of unease tend to cluster around the description of labor because in

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<sup>8</sup> I adopt the notion of “haunting” from Jacques Derrida’s *Spectres de Marx* (1993), in which he forwarded the concepts of a “haunted” present and “hauntology” to describe the experience of becoming aware of the pre-formed quality of ontological and ideological frames of reference. The haunted subject exists in a state of discomfort in this awareness of having always already been co-opted into certain discursive systems, but struggles to ideate a way out of this position. Given the similarity to my more specialized use of “unease,” I use the language of “haunting” in this dissertation—and I return to it again in my methodological discussion, below, in my treatment of affect theory. On the broader history of “hauntology,” see the contributions collected in Sprinker 1999. Tom Lewis’ essay in that volume most clearly underscores the difference between Derrida’s specific ambitions in his book and the broader implications for scholarly thought.

<sup>9</sup> Interpellation explains the process of ideological persuasion by recognizing how ideologies form subjects by “hailing” them into pre-formed roles rather than by mere suggestiveness. It thus highlights how persuasion is often a management of affective realities (and not merely a logical, dialectical process as it is in certain Socratic senses). See Althusser 1970. For a critical reappraisal of the fundamental notion of “interpellation,” see Dolan 1993.

<sup>10</sup> This broad definition of “labor” rests on the work of several twentieth century theorists that expanded on more limited understandings of “work” and “labor” as specifically related to industrial production. One work that has informed my approach is Hannah Arendt’s *The Human Condition* (1958), although I do not adopt her distinction between “work” and “labor.” In the study of Classical literatures, the question of labor has recently been posed anew by Edith Hall, who invites classicists not to abandon the consideration of labor in the broadest sense even as part of theoretical turns that privilege an emphasis on the non-human. She concludes her essay by inviting further reflection on “the interpretive potentialities of reading artworks as highly concentrated crystallizations of endless interactions between humans’ work and their natural and manmade environments.” Hall 2018b, 217.

the poems I am examining labor is patently connected to certain forms of struggle and suffering, but also because labor is intricately connected to how value is avowed or disavowed in the process of world-making (in fiction as in real life). The valorization of different kinds of labor is in a sense a premise of ideological claims. For instance, the tensions between notions of heroic or divine labor and more commonplace forms of banausic labor often provoke unease in the texts I study, not least because poetic labor is variously articulated in terms of both. While I have used these concerns regarding labor to organize the dissertation, I do not deny that unease can also be approached from other perspectives, and several of my close readings show the flexibility of the rubric by attending to other ideological aspects in these works before circling back to labor.

Before exploring the theoretical background of my dissertation further, I want to offer here a schematic example. By looking at a brief passage of the *Odyssey*, I model how we can detect and analyze a “poetics of unease” by looking at formal features in the text, interpreting its ideological structures, and also by performing what I call a “philology of affect,” i.e., by registering the affective result of certain passages in the work of other readers, thus avoiding as much as reasonably possible the risk of presentism and subjectivism. I return to a more comprehensive discussion of this method later in this introduction. The distinction between unease as an affect and a poetics of unease, as a strategy for mobilizing discourse toward the production of unease, is an important one, as unease tends to cause aversive responses, but by exploring how a poetics of unease functions I am also arguing that we ought to consider opposite hermeneutic responses—i.e., the possible benefits of inhabiting unease.

In *Odyssey* 20, Odysseus steps outside of his house on Ithaca and asks for a doubled omen (20.100-1). He wants someone within the house to utter a word/sound (φήμη) and, also, for Zeus to show him a sign (τέρας), confirming thus that he ought to slay the suitors and restore his

order over the intervening order or disorder of the *oikos*. He is asking that his ideological claim—that he, above anyone else, be allowed to rule his household—be ratified as natural, manifest in the will of the people and the gods themselves.

“φήμην τίς μοι φάσθω ἐγειρομένων ἀνθρώπων  
ἔνδοθεν, ἔκτοσθεν δὲ Διὸς τέρας ἄλλο φανήτω.”  
ὡς ἔφατ’ εὐχόμενος: τοῦ δ’ ἔκλυε μητίετα Ζεὺς,  
αὐτίκα δ’ ἐβρόντησεν ἀπ’ αἰγλήεντος Ὀλύμπου,  
ὑψόθεν ἐκ νεφέων: γήθησε δὲ δῖος Ὀδυσσεύς.  
φήμην δ’ ἐξ οἴκοιο γυνὴ προέηκεν ἀλετρις  
πλησίον, ἐνθ’ ἄρα οἱ μύλαι ἦατο ποιμένι λαῶν,  
τῆσιν δώδεκα πᾶσαι ἐπερρώοντο γυναῖκες  
ἄλφιτα τεύχουσαι καὶ ἀλείατα, μυελὸν ἀνδρῶν.  
αἱ μὲν ἄρ’ ἄλλαι εὖδον, ἐπεὶ κατὰ πυρὸν ἄλεσσαν,  
ἡ δὲ μί’ οὐπω πάυετ’, ἀφαιροτάτη δ’ ἐτέτυκτο:  
ἡ ῥα μύλην στήσασα ἔπος φάτο, σῆμα ἄνακτι:  
“Ζεῦ πάτερ, ὅς τε θεοῖσι καὶ ἀνθρώποισιν ἀνάσσεις,  
ἡ μεγάλ’ ἐβρόντησας ἀπ’ οὐρανοῦ ἀστερόεντος,  
οὐδέ ποθι νέφος ἐστί: τέρας νύ τεω τόδε φαίνεις.  
κρῆνον νῦν καὶ ἐμοὶ δειλῆ ἔπος, ὅττι κεν εἴπω:  
μνηστῆρες πύματόν τε καὶ ὕστατον ἡματι τῶδε  
ἐν μεγάροις Ὀδυσῆος ἐλοίατο δαῖτ’ ἐρατεινὴν,  
οἱ δὲ μοι καμάτῳ θυμαλγεί: γούνατ’ ἔλυσαν  
ἄλφιτα τευχούσῃ: νῦν ὕστατα δειπνήσειαν.”  
ὡς ἄρ’ ἔφη, χαῖρεν δὲ κληδόνι δῖος Ὀδυσσεὺς  
Ζηνός τε βροντῆ: φάτο γὰρ τίσασθαι ἀλείτας. (20.100-22)

“May someone from within those people awaking indoors  
Utter a word, and, outside, may Zeus also reveal a sign.”  
Thus he spoke his prayer, and Zeus the counsellor heard him,  
Immediately he thundered from gleaming Olympus,  
From up above the clouds, and divine Odysseus rejoiced.  
Out of the nearby house, a woman, a corn grinder, released a sound,  
There were the mills were placed for him, the shepherd of the host.  
There were twelve women at work at the mills,  
Making barley and wheat-meal, the nourishment of men,  
The others were sleeping, since they had thoroughly ground the wheat,  
But she alone had not yet stopped—she was the weakest,  
But she brought her mill to a stop and spoke, a sign for her master.  
“Father Zeus, you who rule over gods and men,  
You have thundered loudly from the starry sky,  
Although there isn’t a cloud anywhere. You are now showing a sign to someone.  
Grant now to wretched me this word that I speak:  
May the suitors take their last and final pleasing feast

In the halls of Odysseus, on this day,  
They who have undone my limbs with soul-crushing labor,  
As I make the barley. May they eat their last meal.  
So she spoke, and divine Odysseus rejoiced at the omen  
And in Zeus' thunder, for it announced revenge against the evildoers.

The slave woman at the heart of this digression is not named and she is not explicitly discussed again. The number of verses expended in her detailed characterization has however attracted my attention to her as a significant figure in the poem. At first, her relevance appears confined to a digression bounded by the poetics of omen divination (cledonomanancy), whereby a speaker asks for an omen, receives some kind of sign, an interpretation is given, and finally a conclusion as to its meaning is asserted. This is a common feature of Homeric poetics and ancient Greek poetics more broadly, and it would have been formally recognizable as a kind of type scene.<sup>11</sup> Thus, one “easy” way of reading such an episode is in essence to ignore the specifics except insofar as they support this broader narratological unit, in which the poem’s eponymous protagonist is shown as he resolves to enact revenge on the suitors, restoring his authority over his own household, and thereby bringing his long journey home to its expected conclusion.

However, we can read the passage in this manner without being naïve to the ideological work being done by the passage as a whole. As Joel Christensen has recently noted, it is possible to take stock of the passage in the terms stated above while also seeing the passage as “a metonym for the narrative’s instrumentalization of marginalized peoples in the service of the hero’s homecoming,” wherein the grinding slave is “a vehicle to provide Odysseus delight in confirming that someone is thinking of him, but she also functions as an additional confirmation of the terrible character of the suitors.”<sup>12</sup> The episode could then also provide the grounds for a

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<sup>11</sup> On Homeric omens and type-scenes, see Stockinger 1959. A more recent discussion, with bibliography, is available in Ready 2014.

<sup>12</sup> Christensen 2020, 153

series of further (historicist) analyses related to the poem's ideological profiles—its views on gender, labor, and class, and the intersections of these categories. Christensen is careful to note that the passage in a sense invites such a reading because it offers “a voyeuristic glimpse into the misery of her life and the pointed revelation that Odysseus's return might make her life better.”<sup>13</sup> The key word here is “voyeuristic.” It indicates that the Homeric epic is granting us an oblique portrait. No slave woman is actually speaking here, but a (likely male and not enslaved) poet or narrator that describes certain views of non-elite activity in a language intelligible to his (likely male and not enslaved) audiences. Hence, we can understand why the “soul-crushing” labor is, for instance, reminiscent of heroic anger of the Iliadic battlefield or of certain kinds of painful speech.<sup>14</sup> A poetic verb like *θυμαλγέει* may or may not have been used in everyday speech to discuss the toils of labor, but either way it belongs to the poetic vocabulary of suffering. To frame her suffering in these terms makes Christensen's second observation nearly automatic: the weak utopianism implicit in the idea that the slave believes Odysseus' restoration of the household will improve her conditions is in a sense absurd—because we know she will remain a slave, and that work will resume the moment the suitors are slaughtered. But the poetics of the passage's ennoblement of her suffering serves to transform her desires into a cypher for Odysseus' own desire to be seen as a kind of savior, even of the people that he owns and has working for him. Thus, Christensen is correct in pointing out that, to an extent, “her suffering is only worth mentioning as far as it contributes to Odysseus' glory.”<sup>15</sup> Up to this point I have provided, with the help of one other reader, a brief portrait of the ideological work done by the

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<sup>13</sup> Christensen 2020, 153

<sup>14</sup> See, for instance, *Iliad* 4.513, Achilles nursing his wrath, or *Odyssey* 8.272, Hephaestus learning of his Aphrodite's betrayal in painful words.

<sup>15</sup> Christensen 2020, 153

passage on several levels, including a brief account of the manipulation of certain affective coordinates as well.

Nonetheless, the passage also appears to offer semantic vectors that shoot off in other, unexpected directions. It in essence offers us the possibility of not reading on, refusing to reinscribe the slave into the broader narrative. We can sit with the uneasy consequences of the ideological disorientation rather than smooth them out through recourse to the expediencies of the broader narrative. The emphasis on the difficulty of the labor, and the pathos of the specific weakness of this slave, opens up affective spaces for sympathy and for rethinking the premises on which the heroic world is built. Here the poem seems to slip out from beneath the ideological argument that Odysseus' restoration of his own household is necessarily a good thing for everyone involved. The slave woman's language in the passage is coded with references that seem to point to other aspects of the slave women's mistreatment in the *Odyssey*: the "undoing of limbs" is associated both with being worked to death but also to eros and more pointedly to their sexual servitude; the number "twelve" connected to the number of maids that will be executed for their perceived (sexual) disloyalty. More generally, the collocation *καμάτω ... τευχούση* ["through my labor...thought my working..."] echoes Iliadic phrasing used to discuss expropriated labor and the alienation of workers, including Hephaestus.<sup>16</sup> There is therefore room for thinking that this slave woman does not necessarily have a lot to look forward to regardless of her specific master. On another level, her very engagement in the production of *φήμη* within the cledonancy raises questions about the human labor of producing kinds of speech, like poetry, that accord value to other humans—contrasting that ability with the power of divine authentication through signs or through inspired poetry itself. Thus, the passage endangers

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<sup>16</sup> I argue this claim in chapter one, and return to it in chapter four by way of offering a parallel and cognate collocation in the Vedas.

several normative assumptions that are central to Odysseus' restoration of his household and to the poem: the basic structure of the social hierarchy, the divisions of labor (across lines of class and gender). And it challenges the metaphysical program of divine authentication which runs through the *Odyssey* and Greek cultural poetics. Here we see the potential for an ideological reframing that provokes unease because the ideological priorities (or alternatives) are thrown into a state of disrepair. In other terms, the *Odyssey* does not here produce merely two or more ideological positions, its poetics also provokes unease through their copresence.

When unease is understood as an outcome of the Odyssean poetics in this passage, the divergent strategies of reading that it has occasioned are intelligible along a spectrum of attempts to mitigate or otherwise avoid unease. One way to pose this question is to ask, why do readers recoil from the voyeuristic glimpse afforded by the *Odyssey* in order to shore up the poem's broader meanings? Alternatively, why does sorting out the ideological complexity of the text seem to somehow neutralize unease? One impulse is to generalize the ideological tensions of such a passage through recourse to other, similar passages—thereby reading the *Odyssey* as a more complex ideological whole, but a whole nonetheless. This is the strategy adopted by Christensen, but also a vast majority of critics that I discuss across my chapters. Another is to segment the text, even to reject the notion that it might be presenting counter-ideological material, as is the case in Analytic readings of the passage above, that argue it is the product of a late redactor, and thus expel the unease-inducing tensions from the *Odyssey* as these readers understand it.<sup>17</sup> But in both cases, the source of unease remains mostly unexamined. If the slave woman's φήμη exposes the artificiality of the ideological mechanisms of divine authentication

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<sup>17</sup> For a survey of these positions, see Hirvonen 1969. I refer to this paper because it exemplifies the epistemological discomfort of Analysts as described above. Overall, this paper is filled with interesting information, but it also presents an argument with obvious contradictions, as well as elements of misogyny and naivete about slave labor. It is worth reading a review of Hirvonen's broader work alongside it, such as Combella 1969.

upon which a great deal of the imagined heroic world of the Homeric epics rests, essentially admitting that human speech and labor organizes a world that is then clothed in the trappings of the divine, then why must readers work hard to re-establish the viability of that world and to repair their epistemological relation to the text? My argument in the dissertation is that, while these attempts to mitigate the effects of unease have sometimes led to perceptive readings of the poems, they have in other ways missed the point that poems like the *Odyssey* deploy a poetics that produces unease—not as a mere by-product of ideological deliberations, but as a primary aspect of its semantics.

Whether by design or by an accident of poetic effect, the *Odyssey* casts a raking light over the idealistic world of heroes, and brings its material bases momentarily into stark relief. One way to read this is as a depressive portrait of disavowed labor, in which the poem makes explicit the value it accords to certain kinds of contingent labor merely for the purposes of how they enhance the prestige of heroic labor. The coach is shaken but then resumes its course. But another option is to see the passage and the unease it provokes as a challenge or opportunity to avow that labor, in spite of the rest of the text. We can stop the coach, get off, and obliquely think through (and, when needed, against) the poem in an effort to understand what kind of subject it would make of us—the affective orientation to things both within and beyond the poem’s imagined world that it instills. In this case, my argument would be that the *Odyssey* structures our experience in such a way as to actually dissuade us from reading further into the character of the slave woman, unless we purposefully refuse its integration of her speech into the overarching narrative of Odysseus’ omen and his restoration of his household. The stakes of engaging with unease can therefore be outlined on this basis. If unease is an affect that solicits a

range of responses from readers, then it has a real and lasting impact on their reception that far exceeds the contingent success or persuasiveness of the poem's specific ideological messages.

But that which the *Odyssey* offers up as ideological ambivalence or ambiguity is offered in the key of dissuasion. By urging us to see Odysseus as a better master for slaves than the suitors, for instance, it partly neutralizes or resubmerges the forms of labor and suffering that it itself narrates in the description of the grinding slave. The text predisposes its readers, through the unease it provokes, to look away. It thus makes the work of ideological analysis harder and more painful, in ways that make it more difficult to evaluate our own embeddedness in the world as subjects that are formed by the texts that we read. An attention to unease thus expands our ability to understand the kind of work poems do to project affective realities that far outlive their ideological projections of imagined worlds, carrying significant consequences for how we understand the work these poems have done in their *longue durée* as the earliest documents of their respective cultures.

My understanding of poetics and its relation to affect and ideology is grounded in theoretical work from the last decades. Caroline Levine's work on "forms" has helped me understand why certain kinds of ideological analysis and re-analysis should not be separated from considerations of affect, since experience is organized by intersecting "forms" (social and literary) that shape our interpretive attitudes as well as the very texts we read. To her, the world and its texts are "dense" with forms that attempt to impose their orders, and the "collision" of forms (rather than, say, their opposition) produces networks of meaning that need to be explored more holistically than from a merely ideological perspective.<sup>18</sup> At the heart of her argument is the claims that

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<sup>18</sup> Levine 2015, 13

“forms often fail to impose their order when they run up against other forms that disrupt their logic and frustrate their organizing ends, producing aleatory and sometimes contradictory effects” including “unexpected consequences, results that cannot always be traced back to deliberate intentions or dominant ideologies.”<sup>19</sup> The analysis of ideological or even semantic contradiction has for a long time been central to the work of literary critics, who are only more recently turning to what Levine labels the “aleatory” effects of formal collisions. Accordingly, she “puts an emphasis on social *disorganization*, exploring the many ways in which multiple forms of order, sometimes the results of the same powerful ideological formation, may unsettle one another.”<sup>20</sup>

The meaning of ideology in this context can be paraphrased as the work done, whether by a social structure or a literary form, to impose ordered meaning on experience, and then to persuade a subject to accept that the meaning imposed is, by virtue of its orderliness, in some sense natural or obvious. Ideology is understood not as a set of illusory beliefs about the world, but more basically as a process of positing and elaborating on meaning itself. On this model the question of intent is productively bracketed, in favor of what Levine calls “hierarchies,” which goes some way toward explaining how affective experience supervenes on ideological experience. Societies can be analyzed through their taxonomies of value (such as the valorization of different kinds of labor within a given economic system) not unlike texts can be examined for hierarchies of meaning(s). Any one subject’s experience of those hierarchies depends on more than merely their own ideological position with respect to society or their narratological standing with respect to the text—a whole range of possible lived experiences defines their

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<sup>19</sup> Levine 2015, 7-8

<sup>20</sup> Levine 2015, 17. For a similar approach to the “ruptures” and “snags” in narrative texture that can produce unexpected reanalysis in classical texts, see duBois 2006.

predispositions or enculturation that in turn affects how they might experience the poem. Cultural poetics in essence negotiates the variability of possible experiences of a determinate structure, but one that cannot be accounted for exhaustively. The implicit subordination of the slave woman's speech to Odysseus' objectives provides a striking example, since such a subordination can be experienced very differently depending on which poetic cues are activated by any one reader—whether one that is avoiding unease, or one who may even be actively seeking it out. But even the latter kind of reader would be faced with a poetics that valorizes the woman's suffering partly in terms relevant to heroic discourse, as I discussed above, and therefore only partly engage with some of the unease scripted into the text *in potentia*. A total accounting of how a text's poetics (or its forms) organize meaning in this way is likely impossible—but it sufficient to acknowledge that hierarchies of meaning are in place that make certain implications relatively more difficult to unpack than others. This is an extremely difficult question, because it relates directly to how texts may be read against the grain as a kind of emancipatory strategy. Levine warns us to do so with care, since even “competing forms can sometimes produce pain and injustice as troubling as any consolidation of power.”<sup>21</sup> For the purposes of this dissertation, the link between poetics and unease can then be posed as a question: how does the activation of unease in some ways predispose readers to recoil from certain types of interpretive sifting by inviting them to engage in others? Or, how does the text make the work of deconstructing certain ideologies unappealing by offering multiple layers of possible ideological reading and rereading?

As these questions show, I am trying to move discussion away from the (still important) description and analysis of ideological coordinates toward the overarching affective structures in

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<sup>21</sup> Levine 2015, 17

which they are couched—the “structures of feeling,” as Raymond Williams labeled them, which loosely govern or set the bounds for the range of possible experiences of a work of art. My position is that the Levine’s “forms” encode historical structures of feeling that can in part be reactivated in (even much later) readers, not as specific meanings but as hierarchies that structure how different meanings may be experienced and then prioritized by readers. This is not to say readers are not free to propose surprising reorientations of meaning, but that the affective and cognitive effort of readers needs to be considered against this formal background. This shift in hermeneutic approach from poetics and ideology to affect, and the incorporation of William’s theoretical apparatus into a mode of philology capable of engaging with texts on this level, poses several challenges that I will now outline by way of introducing the theoretical questions that I raise in greater detail in each chapter, and that I refer to as a “philology of affect.”<sup>22</sup>

The first issue that requires consideration is how to detect and describe affects that are activated by a text. I argued above that unease is provoked textual details within broader complex narratives. But how is unease itself a demonstrable category of experience? The risk of presentism looms large surrounding questions of affect. Just because I feel unease when reading parts of a text does not amount to a claim that the text in question itself produces, activates, or otherwise provokes that uneasy feeling.<sup>23</sup> To check against the implicit bias of presentism, concrete evidence must link the posited “uneasy” details of a text’s poetics—whether in a moment of doublespeak, a metapoetic aside, a fractured simile, or in antanaclastic repetitions of

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<sup>22</sup> After developing this notion, I discovered that such a phrase has been used once before in an interesting and partly analogous context by Laurie Shannon. Writing on Shakespeare, she mentions in passing that “by means of a historical philology of affect, we can see not only the distant freightings of early modern languages of gender and desire but also the rhetorical opportunities those languages afford...” Shannon 2002, 4.

<sup>23</sup> The *locus classicus* for this debate is the theorization of the “affective fallacy” in Wimsatt and Beardsley 1946 and 1954. However, the “affective fallacy” was devised in response to how value was assigned to works of art through subjective impressions, and in that aspect is unrelated to my discussion here. An important re-elaboration of the affective fallacy is Stanley Fish’s “affective stylistics,” which was itself heavily critiqued by Isobel Armstrong in her essay “Textual Harassment” on the ideologies behind close reading. See Fish 1970 and Armstrong 1995.

loaded terms, and so on—to a broader affective state in which the values of the whole come to be disturbed.

In other terms, since the mere identification of a poetics organized around ambiguity or ambivalence does not in and of itself imply the automatic activation of a state of affective unease as I defined it above, how can philology properly identify the experience of unease? A first step is developing an awareness of broader cultural poetics that are likely to carry affective weight. Although philology has received many definitions over the last decades and centuries, the emphasis on notions of relative cultural fluency is ubiquitous.<sup>24</sup> That is to say that a philological approach is not defined merely by acquiring the linguistic competency. A philologist interested in texts as literature will also gain a degree of fluency with respect to poetic tropes (including the use of similes, formulas, type-scenes, narratological devices, etc.) and with socio-cultural constructs of importance to the poetry and its reception (such as notions of justice, political authority, gender roles, and so on).<sup>25</sup> Philologists have long recognized that texts like the Homeric epics in many ways respond to themselves intra-textually and otherwise create spaces for affects to emerge through pointed forms of thematic contrast along these lines.<sup>26</sup> Thus, philology is already partly equipped to deal with affects to at least this extent, in full recognition of the limitation that not all audiences and readers will experience the texts uniformly, and that it is also possible for readers or audiences to experience divergent reactions at a single time.<sup>27</sup> However, since unease may not be felt by some readers with respect to a passage that activates unease in others, a more robust and consistent system (and language) is needed to account for

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<sup>24</sup> Relevant discussions of philology as a discipline can be found in Pollock 2016, Pollock 2014, Gumbrecht 2003, Porter 2000, Cerquiglini 1989, among others.

<sup>25</sup> These kinds of requirements are theorized and described at length in Bollack 2016. For a powerful account of how philology has historically imposed certain arbitrary orders on the consideration of normative values, see Lin 2016.

<sup>26</sup> Analogous approaches to the Homeric poems have a long history. See, for instance, Zeitlin 1996, Slatkin 1991, and Goldhill 1988.

<sup>27</sup> On the nuances of audience diversity with respect to the Homeric poems, the seminal work is Scodel 2009.

how texts make us feel things more generally, in order to then turn to unease more specifically as the primary set of related affects discussed in this dissertation.<sup>28</sup>

In my chapters, I push this already existing philological awareness of affect in a new direction by adopting several existing tools from reception theory, understood both in terms of Hans Robert Jauss and the Constance School (reader response, implied reader/audience, etc.) and in the more familiar sense of “classical receptions.”<sup>29</sup> That is, I perform my close readings by bringing evidence of reception into conversation with the specific passages in question. This includes scholia, ancient and medieval commentaries, relatively older or more recent literary recastings of the poetic material at hand, visual depictions, archaeological data, and even—as adumbrated in the example of the slave woman—scholarly reactions as expressed in academic work. This body of evidence operates for me as a kind of historical archive of affective responses.<sup>30</sup> Where possible, I locate unease historically within this archive before I explore it further through my own work, having thereby built my own sense of a cultural fluency pertinent to unease in each tradition. Because the corpora in question have received varied receptions, in each chapter I constitute the body of relevant evidence, the “archive” of reception, somewhat differently, implicitly posing the question of how different readers respond to and articulate to feelings that can amount to unease.

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<sup>28</sup> On difficulties in forming a language for discussing affect, see the papers collected in Gregg and Seigworth 2010. An emphasis on affect as a component of social and political experience is foundational in the study of at least one major “branch” of affect theory—namely, the one represented by the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, and that forms the backbone of Brian Massumi’s work. See Massumi 2015. An account of the different branches can also be found in the introductory essay in Gregg and Seigworth 2010.

<sup>29</sup> On the history of Reception Theory and the Constance School, see Jauss 1982. This collection includes an essay in which he reflects on how his theories and those of the Constance School changed and grew over the course of his long career (including an account of Jauss’ negotiation of the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer and “hermeneutics”). On the notion of the “implied reader,” see Iser 1974.

<sup>30</sup> This approach was in part suggested to me by Sheldon Pollock’s “philology in three dimensions,” in which he too follows Jauss and others in arguing for reading texts through the intervening and extant moments of reading so as to mitigate the risks of presentism. See Pollock 2014.

Williams' notion of "structures of feeling" then becomes useful as a label that can be applied to the broader landscape described through each archive.<sup>31</sup> In Williams' work, "feeling" loosely prefigured the notion of affect as intrinsically social and historical phenomena, as shareable and communicable components of experience. As Sianne Ngai has noted, Williams' primary objective was not to distinguish analytically between emotions, affects, and feelings, but "to mobilize an entire affective register, *in its entirety*, and *as* a register, in order to enlarge the scope and definition of materialist analysis. This is something quite different from the goal of offering a 'materialist analysis' of affect itself."<sup>32</sup> Williams' expansion of Marxist hermeneutics was not defined by an attempt to identify affects as the results of material processes (something that Marx himself already acknowledged) but with the struggle to understand how affects are themselves constitutive of social worlds within which the more traditional operations of material forces play themselves out, affecting different individuals in sometimes unique ways—but in ways that can still be analyzed concretely and not merely as an irrational (emotional) accompaniment to the more easily codified ideological structures in society.

The idea of a "structure of feeling" is therefore precisely one of a projected total aggregate of both ideological and social structures and the feelings that accompany them, and which cannot therefore be fully explained by an accounting for ideology alone. Williams is explicit in his view of structures of feeling as analytic tools that can help us see beyond the "reduction of the social to fixed forms" that are putatively undisturbed by affect.

The hypothesis [of a structure of feeling] has a special relevance to art and literature, where the true social content is in a significant number of cases of this present and affective kind, which cannot without loss be reduced to belief systems, institutions, or explicit general relationships, though it may include all these as lived and experienced, with or without tension, as it also evidently includes elements of social and material

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<sup>31</sup> The most sustained introduction to the concept is presented in Williams 1977, 128-35. However, the concept was elaborated over a period of thirty years and has a long history before that, as described in Highmore 2017.

<sup>32</sup> See Ngai 2005, 25, 359-60 n. 29.

(physical or natural) experience which may lie beyond, or be uncovered or imperfectly covered by, the elsewhere recognizable systematic elements.<sup>33</sup>

My turn to a philology of affect can then be restated as an attempt to account more systematically for the subtle significance and connotations that surround “linkages, particular emphases and suppressions” in a work of art, and that exist “at the very edge of semantic availability,” but which have left their perceptible trace in the reception history of the works in question.<sup>34</sup>

It is difficult to give such epistemologically varied objects, processes, or relations a single name, and the difficulties experienced across disciplines and theories when trying to designate that detail which sits uncomfortably in its whole speaks to an unease of its own.<sup>35</sup> In assessing the components of a structure of feeling, Williams provided a set of analytic tools that he himself found partly unsatisfying. For instance, he applied the labels “dominant,” “residual,” and “emergent,” to refer to aspects of a work of art that directly engage in effective forms of persuasion (dominant), those that appear to be a hangover of a previous period (residual), and those that are there as a potential for future affective transformations of the status quo (emergent). He then qualifies this claim by admitting that emergent appears “often in the form of modification or disturbance” of the residual, or that the “residual” is distinct from a more static fourth category, “the archaic.”<sup>36</sup>

In this dissertation I collapse these subdivisions and designate those details that endanger the whole and provoke unease as “residue(s).” This choice reflects the kinds of texts I will be

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<sup>33</sup> Williams 1977, 133

<sup>34</sup> Williams 1977, 134

<sup>35</sup> See, for instance, Didi-Huberman 2005, Schor 1987, Barthes 1980. All three scholars write about this problem in terms of both text and images, highlighting the conceptual difficulty, and comment extensively on what might be termed the affective connotations of certain details in works of art and literature—expanding the category of the semantic to include the affective in their own ways.

<sup>36</sup> Williams 1977, 134, 122

discussing and the data available for their study, and Williams' own flexible presentation of this toolkit for thinking about structures of feeling. When I speak of residues in my chapters, I am on one level identifying a textual moment capable of provoking unease and on another pointing to its implications, however these are registered in the reception archive or in a speculatively projected structure of feeling. Williams himself made recourse to the notion of "unease" in describing the work of juxtaposing "received interpretation" and "practical experience," arguing that the resultant tensions often register as "an unease, a stress, a displacement, a latency: the moment of conscious comparison not yet come, often not even coming."<sup>37</sup> To give a more concrete definition to residues then seems to me, in this context, potentially reductive, since it in principle designates an unknown that is not usually accounted for by material historicist analysis. But it is the case in my work that I deal primarily with a distinction between the "dominant" and the "residual," which are opposed to one another in terms of the basic availability (at the moment of reading) of epistemological and ideological structures that will or will not allow for their subsumption into an analytic whole. Thus, each of my close readings will raise the question of how a word, passage, or episode in a larger poetic whole can act as a residue precisely by inviting unexpected forms of relationality and affect.

Having outlined the subject and methodology of this dissertation, I turn now to the stakes, which are to me intimately connected with the possibility for something surprising to occur when residues are afforded their moment of conscious comparison. Ultimately, the question, "why seek out unease?" recurs across each of my readings. But, partly for pedagogical rather than analytic reasons, I want to briefly summarize here a theoretical thread that has helped me focalize on unease as a source of optimism, not merely because a more capacious understanding

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<sup>37</sup> Williams 1977, 130

of textual semantics that encompasses affect within a rigorous philological program can improve our understanding of ancient culture, specifically in terms of expanding the possibilities of comparative poetics in new directions. I adumbrated above the similarity of unease to the “hauntological” position occupied by disillusioned subjects who struggle to make use of their awareness of inhabiting a haunted world, in which the artificiality of social constructs is both apparent and inescapable. But poetic unease offers something more. It allows us to see and feel that there are opportunities to be found in accepting the haunted past as a premise for life, if we allow ourselves to experience new forms of affective relation and learn to let affect unfold unexpectedly around us.<sup>38</sup> Uneasy readers are capable of unexpected turns to hope.

To concretize this difference, I have found it useful to think alongside Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s work on “paranoid” and “reparative” modes of reading, reading her theoretical tools in conversation with Walter Benjamin’s seventh thesis “On the Philosophy of History.” In general, Sedgwick’s work has become seminal in marking both a turn to affect and a more general rejection of older modes of approaching works of art as unified, homogenous wholes, under the Aristotelian (and Platonic) assumption of the work or art as an organic whole, each part of which tends toward a single overarching meaning.<sup>39</sup> Both paranoid and reparative readers are equipped in principle to examine what Benjamin labeled the “horror” provoked by the cultural treasures of the past, cognizant that “there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is not free of barbarism,

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<sup>38</sup> In a similar vein, see Payne 2017, on the power of shame in a “hontological” paradigm.

<sup>39</sup> This approach displays a clear affinity with (and has been discussed in) much contemporaneous theoretical work, by Rita Felski most notably, who challenged the premises of “the hermeneutics of suspicion” and in her elaboration of the concept of “postcritique.” See Felski 2015, 2009. Broader discussions of “postcritique” appear in Anker and Felski 2017. Sedgwick’s work, although more emphatically grounded in queer theory, also has affinities to the work of several feminist theorists that made arguments for revisiting approaches to texts and the practices of close reading—such as Isobel Armstrong and Susan Sontag. Armstrong 2000, 1995, Sontag 1966.

barbarism taints also the manner in which it was transmitted from one owner to another.”<sup>40</sup> But she invites us to consider that there are different ways one can “brush history against the grain,” each with its own hermeneutic consequences. The “paranoid” or “depressive position” in hermeneutics tends to mitigate the reader’s exposure to the possibility of risk or surprise.<sup>41</sup> A concerted (and often competitive) deployment of suspicion attempts to exhaust the text of its possibilities to surprise us with unexpected horrors. One result of these approaches (often accompanying many important insights that can be gleaned in this way) is that paranoia and suspicion ultimately create a maximal and protective distance between the reading subject and the textual artefact—the “dissociation” of which Benjamin spoke. Mastery of texts affords protection from the rougher affective edges of textual experience, such as those that might most explicitly cause feelings of shame or unease.<sup>42</sup>

A reparative reader is instead open to the potentially positive side of surprise, in a way that transforms the hauntological paradigm, inviting us to inhabit the haunted spaces of traditions as a site of new possibility.

To read from a reparative position is to surrender the knowing, anxious paranoid determination that no horror, however apparently unthinkable, shall ever come to the reader as new.<sup>43</sup>

As I understand it, a reparative reading is then one that foregoes certain kinds of protective interpretive maneuvers and “repairs” our attention to texts such that they can not only surprise us, but also provoke us to feel (rather than merely intellectualize) negative affects like shame, fear, and unease. Sedgwick recognized a general affect-avoidance as a problem even within

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<sup>40</sup> Benjamin [1942] 1968, 256

<sup>41</sup> Sedgwick 2003, 128

<sup>42</sup> This is a point explored in detail, with reference to philology and in its own theoretical terms, in Gumbrecht 2003 (already cited above). Gumbrecht’s arguments about the manner in which the philologist interposes his literal body between texts and future readers, as a kind of gesture of force and power, is particularly illuminating.

<sup>43</sup> Sedgwick 2003, 146

Marxist historicization as it was practiced in the academy, which, while it had been profoundly enabling in the identification of social discontents (and had become a practically inescapable methodology even if it sometimes traded under different technical terminologies), has also been at times deeply regressive in the affective detachment of text and reader—separating the act of reading from the act of subject formation (or, worse, masking the latter entirely).<sup>44</sup> On a pedagogical level, this invitation is not an easy one to take up.

The desire of a reparative impulse ... is additive and accretive. Its fear, a realistic one, is that the culture surrounding it is inadequate or inimical to its nurture; it wants to assemble and confer plenitude on an object that will then have resources to offer to an inchoate self.<sup>45</sup>

The “fear” that Sedgwick speaks to here is related to the kind of consequences a reparative reader might face at the level of arriving at certain kind of ethical conclusion for their reading, since institutions of higher learning continue to be inadequate incubators of the deeply felt, personal and emotional impulses to radically alter the status quo. But the fact of the matter is that a reparative reading does not merely add to an object of study enhancing it in an anachronistic sense, as if to make it speak to questions that may only partly be posed by the text but that it is important to tackle because they have broader implications today. This may sometimes be the (very welcome) case. But more generally, a reparative position is destabilizing precisely because it leaves itself open to the risks implicit in a truly polyvocal tradition—as unsettling in the past as it might be today.

This point bears close scrutiny because it has become an emergent academic practice to selectively rescue the classics from themselves—to find a germ of resistance in an ancient text

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<sup>44</sup> There are of course important exceptions to this rule. See, for instance, Smith 1988 and Chambers 1984 for literary-theoretical examples. We would also be right to see the affective turn as a continuation rather than a break from Marxist methodologies, as I hope to have made more than clear above, in my discussion of Williams.

<sup>45</sup> Sedgwick 2003, 149

and to generalize its significance to the whole text. For instance, the critiques of Odysseus in the *Odyssey* have sometimes been read idealistically as a dismantling of heroic ideology rather than as a modulation of heroic ideology that still maintains a stark division between the aristocratic society of Homeric heroes and the lower classes of human beings that also populate the epic.<sup>46</sup> This kind of reading falls prey, in Sedgwick's terms, to the fallacy that "exposure" amounts to a form of emancipation or analogous ethical action. Recognizing the injustice of the past does not properly speaking address that injustice in the past, let alone address it in the forms it may have taken around us today. Further, even if the *Odyssey* contains the germ of an incipient critique of the heroic world, those pockets of resistance are carefully sublated within the broader poem. As the Marxist classicist Moses Finley put it, thinking of much later Roman Imperial authors, the canonical works "were trading on—I should say even mocking—the traditional dream-fantasies of the oppressed."<sup>47</sup>

A reparative position does not equivocate between incipient resistance as depicted in works of art that are not designed to produce hope and hope itself. But the new "horror" experienced by the reparative reader—Finley's ideological trade in dream-fantasies—can still occasion actual hope.

To a reparatively positioned reader, it can seem realistic and necessary to experience surprise. Because there can be terrible surprises, however, there can also be good ones. Hope, often a fracturing, even a traumatic thing to experience, is among the energies by which the reparatively positioned reader tries to organize the fragments and part-objects she encounters or creates. Because the reader has room to realize that the future may be different from the present, it is also possible for her to entertain such profoundly painful, profoundly relieving, ethically crucial possibilities as that the past, in turn, could have happened differently from the way it actually did.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> I discuss this further in chapter one.

<sup>47</sup> Finley 1975, 183

<sup>48</sup> Sedgwick 2003, 146

In these terms, Sedgwick's invitation to assume a reparative position speaks most directly to the problem of ancient literature, turning in the last instance from fraught forms of hope to the question of how the past may disclose to us a series of unfulfilled alternatives within frameworks that can otherwise seem totalizing and closed-off. The classics and the canon can then be read more acutely as imaginative experiments that leave room for interstitial residues whilst they juggle their supposedly unitary ideological themes. They themselves at times adopt reparative positions with respect to their tradition, as well as paranoid ones.

“Hope” may seem like a strange thing to turn to in concluding my description of a philology of affect.<sup>49</sup> Sedgwick stakes her discussion in terms of understanding why it is that texts that are often so inimical to everyday readers in their ideological attitudes have achieved a lasting success as negotiators of their traditions.

What we can best learn from such [reparative] practices are, perhaps, the many ways selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture—even of a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them.<sup>50</sup>

Assuming a reparative position of our own allows us to address a whole range of prejudices in the study of ancient literature, and to work through the imbalanced representation of the past produced by the structure of the extant evidence, which represents the voices of the oppressed only in documents written to serve the oppressors. I do not deny that minority interests are marginalized. But I argue throughout this dissertation that unease can open us to the surprising fact that non-elite conceptualizations of labor and suffering surface repeatedly and pointedly in these texts, and that is possible to engage with them as more than fossilized remains of a mostly forgotten past: these residues can continue to tell important stories, and they can continue to have important affective consequences.

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<sup>49</sup> The term has gained prominence in recent criticism. For an account, see Castiglia 2017.

<sup>50</sup> Sedgwick 2003, 150-1

That the Homeric epics, the Near Eastern Gilgamesh texts, and the Indian Vedas can form a strong basis for investigating the ranging questions raised above is due to their own status as cultural objects with a comparable structural profile. They are all the products of long periods of composition by different hands, almost certainly across large geographical and political divides, resulting in textual wholes that *de facto* speak to the practices, ambitions, and fantasies of diverse peoples. There is no one Homeric, Mesopotamian, or Vedic world (or even one set of ideologies) through which to contextualize their representations of conflicts and tensions surrounding political organization, moral codes, or religious principles. And those conflicts and tensions are stratigraphically contained within the corpora in ways that frustrate straightforward historicist analysis, due to complex processes of recensions, emendation, and rewriting over time. These corpora are, in this sense, a historical materialist's nightmare. At the same time, this profile makes them particularly amenable to thinking about them in terms of their structures of feeling, given the kind of affective dissonances that they can provoke both text-internally and in terms of their varied receptions.

My comparative treatment of these texts across four chapters is designed to bring out a series of similarities and differences in their respective poetics of unease. As mentioned, the representation and valorization of labor forms a privileged category of analysis and informs the choice of examples drawn from each text. While a narrow thematic focus serves certain practical purposes, and unease is by no means limited to representations of labor, I chose this approach because the representation of labor becomes concertedly metapoetic in all of the works—and there are reasons to suspect this may help us understand early privileged corpora as kind of genre. I return to this in my conclusion, but by way of adumbrating this point, we need but

consider two things. Overall, these texts present a stark division between heroic or divine labor (like performing deeds impossible to humans, making objects that humans cannot make, etc.) and other, relatively more mundane types of labor (making bread, weaving, building walls, cleaning up a room, etc.). But this divide is intersected by a metapoetic attention to the role of poets and textual agents, and also to the role of readers and audiences, as kinds of laborers. Intersected, because the work of producing poetry and authoritative utterances more broadly is characterized metaphorically as both a more-than-human kinds of labor, necessitating divine inspiration, for instance, and as an instance of more quotidian labor, such as weaving or construction. There are in contrast certain kinds of labor (for instance, the labor of sexual servitude) that appear in the poems seemingly only in excess of these overarching debates. By unpacking these relations and the way they contribute to the text's poetics of unease, I pose the question is whether these texts are all examples of a literary activity that, in deliberating over its own status and value, affectively created enduring blueprints for social realities that it otherwise rarely discusses in explicit terms: a series of emotional charters for a world in which the alienation of certain forms of labors forms the premise of society.

The dissertation is organized around four chapters, respectively covering material from the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, the Gilgamesh texts, and the Vedas. The ordering of the chapter follows the likely order of their familiarity to literary scholars who may not specialize in the study of ancient literature. The Homeric poems occupy a central position of their own in Western scholarship and education, and a rudimentary familiarity with the epics should suffice for readers to follow my arguments. In the third and fourth chapter I make a more concerted effort to introduce the corpora in question. For instance, I review that the so-called *Epic of Gilgamesh* is in fact the result of a long series of recensions of different texts from different periods (and in

different languages). My assumption is that some readers may have read a translation of *Gilgamesh*, since it appears on many university syllabuses, but I am careful to contextualize the textual evidence alongside my close readings. The fourth chapter presents a more obvious problem, since familiarity with Sanskrit literature (and of the Vedic period in particular) cannot be assumed. I therefore make a special effort there to explain the context of Vedic literature both in terms of how it was read (and used) in the past, and how it continues to occupy a position of prestige in the Indian tradition that comes with a series of its own complications.

At the same time that the dissertation moves from the relatively more familiar texts to the less familiar, I also move between fields in unusual ways that bear explanation. The study of the Homeric epics is hardly limited to Classics departments, and the sheer quantity of literary criticism on the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* dramatically eclipses the scholarship on my other texts. In the study of Ancient Near East (often labeled, anachronistically, Assyriology) there is a very small emphasis placed on the study of literature as literature, although the bibliography on *Gilgamesh* is the most extensive within that subfield and there have been promising developments in the direction, for instance, of “cuneiform narratology.” There has also been some work on *Gilgamesh* that falls outside of the field of Assyriology, by scholars working in reception studies and comparative literature. The study of the Vedas is characterized by a vast network of highly specialized scholarship from fields like linguistics, religious studies, comparative mythology, and—of course—Indology and South Asian Studies. Within this network, a very small portion of the scholarship tackles questions of poetics and literature. The dissertation tries to open up bidirectional channels between existing conversations in each field that I think could benefit from thinking through analogous problems in other corpora. As it does so, it constitutes, through

a necessarily limited set of cases, a new direction for comparative poetics more broadly—specifically in terms of ancient or pre-modern literatures.

Methodologically, this entails displacing the perceived uniqueness of the respective corpora in fruitful ways. As I move from chapter to chapter, I bring with me lessons drawn from the study of the Homeric corpus that are more readily explained in terms of the vast Homeric scholarship than in terms of the scholarship in the other respective fields. But the opposite is also true. There are lessons that I learned in studying Ancient Near Eastern and Vedic poetry that changed my approach to the Homeric poems in dramatic ways. For instance, the surviving record of recension behind the formation of an “epic” of Gilgamesh has pushed me to reconsider the way I think of the history of the Homeric poems. These philological lessons are rarely immediately transitive; toolkits need constant reformulation across contexts. But the ordering of chapters serves to make the comparative benefit of this project as clear as possible. It is from these angles that the comparative thrust of my project puts into question disciplinary boundaries and the consequences of recognized disciplines’ neglect of properly methodological interdisciplinarity.

The first chapter, “Iliadic Materialisms,” begins by turning to how the *Iliad*’s narrator appears to question his own role in the tradition with an identifiable unease in the invocation of Muses at *Iliad* 2.484-93. I then move onto a discussion of the genealogy of Agamemnon’s scepter at *Iliad* 2.100-9, and finally to a discussion of the Thersites episode later in the same book. The chapter heavily emphasizes the specific use of poetic devices to produce unease, posing the implicit question of how an affective discomfort can be separated from the kinds of affective responses produced by ambiguity or polysemy. I use these examples to think through how meanings are offered in a hierarchized order.

In the second chapter, “Odyssean Murmurings,” I build on the readings of the previous chapter by briefly close reading the singer at Agamemnon’s court who is abandoned on a deserted island in *Odyssey* 3. Then I move on to two readings that are instead more dispersed; the Sirens episode that is told over four reprises in *Odyssey* 1; and, the representations of the slave women of Odysseus in the second half of the *Odyssey*, culminating in their execution in book 22. These readings allow me to pose several questions related to unease and its relation to larger narratological structuring devices.

In my third chapter, “Submerged Labor in Gilgamesh,” I work backward from the opening portions of the Akkadian epic (in two major recensions) to a Sumerian Gilgamesh poem called “The Death of Gilgamesh” by modern scholars. Although the episodes of this poem do not survive into the epic, I show that its affective and ideological treatment of the value of labor does. As such, the reading in this chapter establishes the possibility of tracing unease across longer histories of composition and re-composition, as texts receive themselves. This offers several further ways for thinking about the Homeric and Vedic texts, for which the possibility of such a diachronic analysis is not available.

My fourth chapter, “Vedic Disrepair,” opens with an investigation into the afterlives of the myth of the divine twins Yama and Yamī in texts that range from just after the *Rigveda* all the way to the twentieth century. Having opened up the complex structures of feeling surrounding these figures I delve into a close reading of hymn X.10 of the *Rigveda*. In the second half of the chapter, I turn to the divine artisans the Ṛbhus, whose myths are told across the *Rigveda* in (mostly) very small units. By exploring a text like the *Rigveda* (which comprises of 1028 individual hymns) in this dissertation, I show how a philology of affect can be applied across genres and to corpora with radically different structures to those of traditional epics.

My conclusion summarizes the manner in which unease and labor coincide across chapters. I end by exploring the theoretical implications of a “poetics of unease” and a “philology of affect,” for the purposes of rethinking the texts studied here and also looking ahead to further work that could be done on this topic.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Iliadic Materialisms

As if responding to an impertinent question shouted out from the audience by a philistine materialist, the poet of the *Iliad* interrupts his narration to clarify the transcendental poetic ontology of his work.

ἔσπετε νῦν μοι Μοῦσαι Ὀλύμπια δώματ' ἔχουσαι—  
ὕμεῖς γὰρ θεαὶ ἐστε πάρεστε τε ἴστε τε πάντα,  
ἡμεῖς δὲ κλέος οἶον ἀκούομεν οὐδέ τι ἴδμεν—  
οἳ τινες ἡγεμόνες Δαναῶν καὶ κοίρανοι ἦσαν·  
πληθὺν δ' οὐκ ἂν ἐγὼ μυθήσομαι οὐδ' ὀνομήνω,  
οὐδ' εἴ μοι δέκα μὲν γλῶσσαι, δέκα δὲ στόματ' εἶεν,  
φωνὴ δ' ἄρρηκτος, χάλκεον δέ μοι ἦτορ ἐνεῖη,  
εἰ μὴ Ὀλυμπιάδες Μοῦσαι Διὸς αἰγιόχοιο  
θυγατέρες μνησαίαθ' ὅσοι ὑπὸ Ἴλιον ἦλθον·  
ἀρχοὺς αὖ νηῶν ἐρέω νῆάς τε προπάσας. (2.484-93)

Speak to me now, Olympus-dwelling Muses,  
For you are goddesses, are present by me, and know all things,  
But we hear only fame/hearsay and know nothing.  
Who were the leaders of the Danaeans and their lords?  
I would not be able to recount the masses, nor name them,  
Not even if I had ten tongues or if I had ten mouths,  
An untiring voice, or if a bronze heart were in me,  
Unless the Olympian Muses, daughters of aegis-bearing Zeus,  
Called to my mind all those who came beneath Ilion.  
But I will tell of the ships' captains, and all the ships.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The *Iliad* is cited from Monro and Allen 1920, but I have also consulted West's edition. All translations of Greek are my own. The earlier narrative portion of Book 2 will be explored throughout this chapter. This specific passage is preceded by a long series of similes that seeks to capture the scale of the forces assembled by comparing them to groups of animals (2.455-83), creating a context for the poet to explore the difficulties in describing and representation traditional material, like the many stories that populate the heroic mythology of the Trojan War.

The poet imagines a prosthetic body that just might allow him to give an accounting of the masses, but then disavows the project, even with the help that this prosthetic body might offer. No kind of body, even an enhanced one, can relate the mythic past without the Muses' divine assistance. The proffered imagined body is immediately subtracted. The poet therefore seems to be constituting these figures as a kind of residue, perhaps as artifacts of a competing vision of poetic ontology, or merely as an imagined alternative to the one it espouses, a straw man that valorizes the poet's privileged epistemological position.

Why would the *Iliad* raise an alternative to its poetic ontology in such detailed terms? Whether or not the *Iliad*'s poets were the first to propose these figures, their haunting vivacity is confirmed by the fact that this passage became a source of a cliché in later authors, some of whom were explicitly imitating Homer and then others who were imitating each other.<sup>2</sup> As time went by, it became less and less relevant that *Iliad* presents these figures as a statement on the inability of the body to perform certain tasks, and, for instance, they even came to be seen as descriptors of poetry's specific ability to speak the ineffable.<sup>3</sup> Enervated by the persistence with which the metaphors were being employed as clichés, the satirist Persius even had one of his imaginary interlocutors transform the metaphor of the multiplied voice into one of reception.

“quorsum haec? aut quantas robusti carminis offas  
ingeris, ut par sit centeno gutture niti?” (5.5-6)

Where are you going with this? What great lumps of robust song  
Are you swallowing, that strain against a hundred gullets?<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> A compelling survey that emphasizes the ambivalent directionality of citations within the later Roman tradition is provided in Hinds 1998, 35-45.

<sup>3</sup> For instance, it has been noted that the metaphors from the *Iliad*'s invocation slowly came to be seen as general marker of the “ineffability” or necessary incompleteness of catalogic passages in poems, see Cariou 2014.

<sup>4</sup> For broader context and discussion, see Hinds 1998, 41, and Bartsch 2015, 27.

The residue here marks not the multiplied voices of the poet, but that of a reader or audience member gorging themselves on epic.

The *Iliad* did not claim that the multiplication of speech organs should be seen as an accurate metaphor for its poetic ontology. However, the history of the figures' reception unambiguously points to the way in which the poetics through which they are presented makes them particularly amenable to reanalysis. The fact is that they are there, in granular detail. Even if they are only to be rejected—their presence cannot be controverted. They haunt the *Iliad*'s assertion of its poetic ontology just as much as they seem to haunt the later tradition. By “poetic ontology” I mean the poets' explicit or implicit mode understanding themselves and the value of what they do in relation to broader ideological systems of tradition. In the case of the Homeric poems, the poetic ontology of divinely inspired song is primary, but the contrasting ontology of the poet's individual and human labor, difficult and often performed in the service of others, also exists in the poem. My argument is that the latter, “materialist” ontology haunts the former, “metaphysical” one by undermining its ideological persuasiveness, and at moments provoking unease at its implications.<sup>5</sup>

If we take the invocation as an intervention into an active debate over poetic ontology, we can come to see how the structures of feeling around the metaphors can produce complex and unexpected results. After all, the *Iliad* seems to propose an alternative to its own poetic ontology, even if just to reject it, and therefore allows its audiences to speculate alongside its speaker. The fact it then forecloses the logical possibility that these metaphors might account for its poetic processes does not mean that the metaphors lose their appeal, although it marks the invitation as one offered in a key of dissuasion. But one result of the *Iliad*'s argument is that it has—at a

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<sup>5</sup> On conceptions of “materialism” and the problem of labor in the study of classics, see Hall 2018b.

critical moment—seemingly exposed that its poetic ontology is in fact an ideology, on the verge of presenting in the catalogues “the triumph of Panhellenic poetry ... synthesizing thereby a massive mythic history embracing the whole Greek people.”<sup>6</sup> The grounding for such an ontology is uncomfortably seen as an unverifiable appeal to the transcendental and the divine.

That this self-exposure should take place in the context of a discussion of κλέος only raises the stakes.<sup>7</sup> The fundamentally ideological and labile value of κλέος [both “hearsay” and “fame”] is precisely what the epic seeks to adjudicate, hence the poet’s request to the Muses’ epistemological advantage on mortals and his claim that, without them, he cannot properly represent the mythical world in appropriate complexity for his audiences. In the contrafactual aside, the poet denies that it is possible to name the countless πληθύς [“mass” of common soldiers], rather than just its ἡγεμόνες [“leaders”], even with an enhanced body. On one level, it is clear that naming the πληθύς is something of a non-starter, since such a listing would be tedious and actually poses a risk to the narrative form of the poem.<sup>8</sup> Accordingly, the poet settles on a different plan—ἀρχοὺς αὖ νηῶν ἐρέω νῆάς τε προπάσας [“but I will tell of the ships’ captains, and all the ships”]. Announcing this new rubric in clearly adversative terms, through the use of αὖ [“but...”], the poet is leaving the contrafactual behind—and launches into the stunning geopolitical project mentioned above.<sup>9</sup> But since the rubric is a new one (neither that of πληθύς nor that of ἡγεμόνες) it is not explicit whether a mechanical body, or even a more ordinary mortal body, might suffice to produce such a listing even without divine intervention. By changing the rubric subtly, and leaving the logic of the transition inexplicit, the poet has been

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<sup>6</sup> Ford 1992, 69-70.

<sup>7</sup> On the invocation and its negotiation of κλέος see (among others) Scodel 2009, Ford 1992. I discuss this issue further, below.

<sup>8</sup> Sammons 2010, 155

<sup>9</sup> On the adverb αὖ, which can here be read in its adversative sense of “anew, afresh,” or even of “but, on the contrary,” see Klein 1988, 257.

read as creating an ambiguous space in which he shows off his individual skill and labor, but not in a way that unambiguously rules out that he is being assisted by the Muses.<sup>10</sup>

The passage is therefore a good example of the *Iliad*'s poetics of unease because it uses poetic figures to present a series of details that threaten the apparent values of the whole. The poetics of the passage asks us to think of epic poetry not as the result of a singular, ultimately divine source, but rather as the concerted effort of human beings, before disavowing that thought. But the structure of feeling surrounding the passage is one that allows for an affective connection to either argument, and at different moments a reader may be drawn to different conclusions. The way in which a traditional basis for an ideology is established makes the critical difference. Acknowledging these tensions, Andrew Ford remarked on the "uneasiness that accompanies Homeric invocations in their metaphors."<sup>11</sup> The "uneasiness" stems from two opposing conceptualizations of tradition, in one instance as an "unwieldy" but inert aggregate of stories that the "selective" poet must negotiate. But the other understanding of tradition, as an active haunting of the present, is not far off: the poem "must dispense with most of tradition as peripheral, even though *the tradition may not easily yield* to such omissions."<sup>12</sup> Here tradition has a kind of agency of its own, not unlike that given to the Muses in the poet's abrogation of his own agency in the invocation. Again, the poet disturbs tradition, causing it to react: "invocations show that the greater whole [tradition] that cannot be contained in the individual wholes [poems] *may threaten to encroach* on them."<sup>13</sup> This language of an unyielding and threatening tradition evinces a clear affective dynamic. Tradition cannot literally be an agentive force, but it can very

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<sup>10</sup> For a reading that explores the tensions in the passage as it leads to the establishment of the catalogue's rubric, see Sammons 2010.

<sup>11</sup> Ford 1992, 79, 76. Ford here compares the encounter with tradition in terms of an encounter with the Kantian "mathematical" sublime.

<sup>12</sup> Ford 1992, 71 (my emphasis)

<sup>13</sup> Ford 1992, 71 (my emphasis)

well be felt as one by the poet and audience alike. That “tradition” can be said to do the labor that poets in fact perform shows us how it rests on a basic notion of alienation that can in turn be contested.

Another way of reading the invocation, then, is as a presentation of two competing views of tradition. The first represented by the Muses, can be labeled as its metaphysical poetic ontology. The second, represented by the prosthetic devices, as its materialist one. The imbalance between the two, asserted in the necessity of the Muses’ divine assistance and the insufficiency of the prosthetic enhancements, is part of the broader poem’s persuasive claims about its hegemonic status as a representation of tradition. But the *Iliad*’s poetics of unease allows the other to partly coexist, although in more muted forms, and to occasionally offer us a route into reading of the *Iliad* in a way that threatens its traditional standing, in moments when it reveals itself to be inventing as much as it is representing.

In this chapter, I perform three close readings through my philology of affect that draw out the implications of *Iliad*’s two poetic modes when they appear together in the same passage. In each, I show how the materialist view of tradition haunts the metaphysical view, also by offering a route into unexpected reflections on the ideologies that the epic more broadly espouses—whether these are poetic ideologies or political ones. The first passage I turn to is the invocation itself, already partly discussed above. In my close reading of the prosthetic metaphors, I emphasize the manner in which the *Iliad* draws our attention to the material processes of poetic labor and labor more broadly, offering insight into how labor was sometimes conceptualized in terms analogous to those of suffering. The second passage is the description of Agamemnon’s scepter, which I read as a poetic digression that thematizes the establishment of tradition as providing, at once, an

alluring form of continuity and a disarmingly discontinuous political process—and, as it oscillates between these poles, it carefully submerges the labor necessary in the production of the object that it claims to describe. The third passage I read is the Thersites episode, through which I discuss how the *Iliad* appears to be haunted by the non-Iliadic epic tradition in a way that draws our attention to class and power differentials that are more generally undiscussed in the epic, granting us insight into a grievance about dispossession and labor that challenges the premises of the heroic economy.

Overall, these passages were chosen because the foundational assumptions of elite culture and its reliance on expropriated labor are briefly thrown into question in them, in different ways, starting from the *Iliad*'s own poetic project as a vehicle for such a culture. It is important to limit the scope of my reading into the poetics of unease to such shorter portions of the poem because it is ultimately a poetics that admits to a certain kind of failure. Another *Iliad* might have existed had the poem navigated its unease with tradition differently, but it did not. And arguments about a small number of passages do not ultimately change the overall profile of the *Iliad* as a “cultural treasure,” (Benjamin’s term) but they add to it in unexpected ways.<sup>14</sup>

That recourse to tradition (as inert past) and innovation can coexist in the *Iliad* is not in and of itself a new claim.<sup>15</sup> I therefore contextualize my approach and its debts and departures from previous Homeric scholarship in a preliminary section, which emphasizes scholarship that has approached the *Iliad* from a materialist or Marxist perspective. My objective in that section is to emphasize the importance of avoiding totalizing readings (drawing too large conclusions from the contingent presence of a materialist poetic ontology in the *Iliad*) while also pointing to several places in Homeric scholarship where affect and ideology have been treated together,

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<sup>14</sup> See my introduction for a discussion of Benjamin’s use of the term “cultural treasure.”

<sup>15</sup> This claim is articulated, for instance, in Barker and Christensen 2020, Nagy 2010, Russo 1968.

forming a baseline for my specific approach to the chosen passages. I also use this section to describe in greater detail how the *Iliad* reads itself as a traditional source, such that its poetics of unease assumes an often-surprising metapoetic or reflexive tenor that carries the kinds of ethical implications discussed in my chapters to the surface of the poem.

As final introductory note, I want to signal that I focus only on *Iliad 2* in this chapter for a few reasons. Primarily, because it is a heavily metapoetic book throughout, and can even be taken as a manifesto of Iliadic poetics.<sup>16</sup> But I also wanted to limit my first exploration of the poetics of unease in the dissertation to show how it can cluster around very different forms of poetic expression in a limited space in ways that play off each other. In my next chapter, on the *Odyssey*, I take more a broadly encompassing approach to that epic, selecting passages from across its narrative.

### 1. A Materialist Invitation into Iliadic Unease

Residues exist in the *Iliad* because it is a poem concerned with conceptualizing the tradition from which it draws. Jonas Grethlein devised the term “epic plupast,” to map out the stratigraphy of the fuzzy self-conceptualization of tradition within the epic, which is articulated differently by its narrator and characters.<sup>17</sup> The *Iliad*’s attention to the plupast, which I understand as “more-than-past” and also “plural past,” tends to explode the *Iliad*’s own privileged ideological binaries, such as oppositions between characters (none perhaps more salient than the contrast between

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<sup>16</sup> *Iliad 2* is deeply concerned with all sorts of discourses and their respective legitimacy, beginning with (divine) dreams, the power of rumor (ῥῆσσα), royal commands (including Agamemnon’s testing of the troops, known as the *diapeira* [from διάπειρα “test”]), catalogues, genealogies, assembly speeches, and more.

<sup>17</sup> Grethlein 2012, 15. Similar notions about epic memory are explored in Nelson 2018, Minchin 2001, and Kullmann 1999.

Achilles and Hector), binaries that motivate individuals (such as the overarching question of whether or not to live a brief heroic life instead of a long peaceful life without glory), and subtler tensions that structure the poem's expositive style (including the binary opposition between the thronging mass of the armies in contrast to the starkly divergent personality of selected heroes when seen up close).<sup>18</sup> The presence of these dialectics defines the *Iliad* as a poem engaged in deliberating over differences among elite perspectives with reference to tradition, but it is not very often that the epic reflects on the very foundations of elite culture—for instance, taking the life of non-elite figures into account, or exploring the assumptions behind oligarchic and monarchic rule.<sup>19</sup>

The oscillations between binaries within a relatively established ideological framework are not the same the extra-dialectical residues that appear in the poem much more unexpectedly. These are the kinds of residues that can come to haunt it later. The Homeric scholarship on which I draw most in this chapter (and the next) is scholarship that has instead turned precisely to the frustrating and often irresolvable tensions in more localized portions of the epics—such as the “uneasiness” identified by Ford in the metaphysical conception of the tradition as a quasi-sentient being, discussed above.

The works of Pietro Pucci and Peter Rose orient readers towards what I term residues along these lines. Pucci advances a compelling line of inquiry centered on the *Iliad*'s embarrassing tendency to “expose itself” to its readers, making transparent its uneasy ideological machinations and its anxieties about tradition. His emphasis on the *Iliad*'s “structure of

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<sup>18</sup> Redfield 1975, Griffin 1980, Woloch 2003

<sup>19</sup> To be clear, much of the *Iliad* is explicitly about how to be a good leader of one's men. I do not mean to suggest that different models of strong-man leadership are not contrasted in the epic, but that the very idea of such forms of political organization is much more rarely thrown into question. On this, see Rose 1997, 184-5. Discussed further below.

supplementarity,” like my own definitions of residues and unease, relies on poststructuralist notions of the potentially disruptive elements in the poem as a script for imagining a world.<sup>20</sup> For Pucci, the *Iliad*’s “textual reflexivity” highlights that “the first duty of a critical reading is to uncover [the text’s] awareness [of its own construction] and its claims.”<sup>21</sup> Training our attention to “the desultory discontinuities of the text, the occasional opacities in the reading that it offers of itself,” he outlines how the negotiation of tradition within the text produces an uncomfortable atmosphere at certain crucial moments in the text’s exposition of heroic mores.<sup>22</sup> For example, the poem appears to challenge the ambiguity of *kleos* as both “report” and “rumor” through Sarpedon’s speech over his own mortality in *Iliad* 12, which “unveils this suspicion [of *kleos*’s lability] only in order to assert, with greater assurance, the truth of the kings’ *kleos*.”<sup>23</sup> Although the poem ultimately recoups a stable and affirming view of *kleos*,

to attach doubt and suspicion to [the] heroic portrait [of a king] is a sore business for epic poetry. Since this poetry is the source of the kings’ *kleos*, the text exhibits itself and its own fabrications.<sup>24</sup>

Such a residue is “sore business” for the poem, “the text of the *Iliad* is perverse, for it reverses, amusingly, its normal function.”<sup>25</sup> In the case of Sarpedon’s speech, the *Iliad* develops a disarming intimacy between text and reader: “the sublime pathos makes more emotional for the reader the textual incapacity to demonstrate fully the truth of the portrait [and of the *kleos*] for which he is determined to die.”<sup>26</sup> For a moment, Sarpedon imagines an impossible world without need for *kleos* (or tradition) to be negotiated, in which he and Glaukos are ἀγήρω τ’ ἀθανάτω τε [“ageless and immortal”] (12.320). But Sarpedon recognizes that this is a vain dream in the

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<sup>20</sup> Pucci 1997, 65ff. Derrida is among Pucci’s interlocutors in the definition of “supplementarity” in discourse.

<sup>21</sup> Pucci 1997, 63, x

<sup>22</sup> Pucci 1997, 50

<sup>23</sup> Pucci 1997, 53

<sup>24</sup> Pucci 1997, 53

<sup>25</sup> Pucci 1997, 53-4

<sup>26</sup> Pucci 1997, 55

realm of mortals, and the poem moves on. The explosive claim of “textual incapacity” does not ultimately seep into the rest of the poem, at least not straightforwardly. As the characters forget it, the poem too moves on and the affective space opened up by Sarpedon dissipates—but the text’s inability to restore an ideologically naïve view of *kleos* to the reader allows us to understand how the process of haunting can affect any further reading of the poem.

Rose describes the poem as an overwhelming “ideological construct” interested in “maintaining the illusion of continuity” with tradition by “managing whatever threatens continuity.”<sup>27</sup> In a later article on ideology in the *Iliad*, which draws heavily on Williams’ notions of the “residual” and “emergent,” Rose pitched this in more concrete terms as a question of collective representations: “the victory of the aristocrats was their success in presenting their own collective interests as the collective interest of the whole community.”<sup>28</sup> Therefore, we must be careful not to equate everything disqualified by the poem’s central ideologies as evidence of non-elite concerns seeping into the poems. We will inevitably have only the smallest windows into those worlds—and the more certain details appear to fit the systems of dialectics in the poem the less likely they are to lead us in the direction of unease.

Therefore, I depart from Pucci and Rose on a related question of how to draw conclusions from residues. As I have emphasized above, I see residues as productive in their capability to haunt the ideology of the poem and to offer grounds for hope for later readers, for whom portions of the text comes to function in unexpected ways. In contrast, Rose’s work sometimes seeks out a more totalizing and utopic reading of the classics. By way of an example, here is Rose’s speculative exegesis of the *Odyssey*’s overall message.

Even its most obvious utopian projection, the dream of a single strong man to set all our troubles straight by a bloodbath, is profoundly dangerous. At the same time, the text's

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<sup>27</sup> Rose 1995, 55

<sup>28</sup> Rose 1997, 181

own evocation of the dangerous illusions of the powerful, its profound sympathy for the pain of those cut off from human society or confined to its margins, its valorization of the long painful quest for a just and affectively bound community that prominently includes women and where kin are allies and allies are as kin—all these elements open a more worthy utopian space that makes its own contribution to the long quest of our species.<sup>29</sup>

Overall, “the more worthy utopian space” imagined by Rose is itself a pious projection, one that transforms the whole poem into a monument of resistance against tradition. Elsewhere, Rose resists this tendency and criticizes scholars who have “crossed the line between sympathetic historical analysis and ahistorical essentializing.”<sup>30</sup> It is worth bearing this tension in mind because it determines the way we might, some decades after Rose, assume a reparative position with respect to the classics that avoids the integrative impulse of much Homeric scholarship to provide sweeping panoramas of the two epics, at the cost of treating these interesting tensions reductively.

Thus, while the “assessment of the complicity of the text in maintaining an order of unfreedom, of injustice” should lead us to “pause at the uncritical valorization of this most canonical of texts,” the mere identification of moments of unease only briefly reverses the thrust of the masternarratives at play.<sup>31</sup> But it is not that the uncomfortable ethical moments of the Homeric poems are balanced (or outweighed) by its idealistic musing on high themes. Rather, the unease provoking residues seem to somehow reinforce the overarching ideologies through a process of reintegration of holistic reading in ways that bears closer scrutiny. A reparative position is one from which significance can be restored to while recognizing the contingency of the unease they provoke, understanding their possible sublation as part of the poetics of unease. The notion of haunted traditions is helpful here precisely because the haunted subject does not

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<sup>29</sup> Rose 1995, 140

<sup>30</sup> Rose 1997, 187

<sup>31</sup> Rose 1995, 140

necessarily seek reprieve or release from the haunting, but learns to turn the aporetic state into a personally productive one in spite of its initial, more depressive connotations.

There is a signal gesture in Rose's work that provides a compelling model for thinking against the text's overarching processes, Gramsci's "refusal" that describes how a reader may refuse to be swept onwards by the flow of the masternarratives.

The Gramscian conception of ideological warfare presupposes a process more of persuasion than of simple, mechanistic manipulation [i.e. of hegemony rather than dominion]. To put it another way, the audience [of the Homeric epics] may refuse the intended solution and respond rather to the unavoidable reminder of its sources of discontent.<sup>32</sup>

In the rest of this chapter, I examine the "unavoidable reminders" that haunt the narrator's own reflection on his poetic labor, the genealogy of Agamemnon's scepter, and the representation of Thersites in the assembly. By staging refusals of the intended solutions that the poem proposes we can see how it shapes our affective orientation and tries to persuade us to read it in some ways rather than others.

## 2. The Invocation and the Labor of the Prosthetic Body

In the opening of this chapter, I described the invocation as provoking a series of opposing affective reactions to its conflicting (but hierarchized) materialist and metaphysical ideological views of tradition and labor. In this section I want to emphasize the contrafactual in the invocation as offering active grounds for interpretation, and how its haunting effect pushes us to reflect on the kind of labor that goes into producing and reciting epic poetry. To explore these questions, it is useful to think of the kind of performative space the epic generates, in which

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<sup>32</sup> Rose 1995, 37

interpretation occurs simultaneously with the exposition, and the semantics of the whole are more fragile given the immediacy of the experience of the poem as a progression of words, verses, and passages.

The Homeric poems can readily be approached as a script for a performance in quite a literal sense, and the invocation's reliance on first person forms heightens our awareness of this aspect of the text as readers in an analogous manner to which it would draw in its audience at a moment of recitation.<sup>33</sup> I give here the text of the invocation, emphasizing in bold face pronouns (first singular and plural) and verb forms that help us see how the passage forms a conversation between the poet and the Muses (first and second person forms, including imperatival forms), as well as particles that attract attention to the present moment of performance.

ἔσπετε νῦν μοι Μοῦσαι Ὀλύμπια δώματ' ἔχουσαι—  
ὕμεις γὰρ θεαί ἐστε πάρεστε τε ἴστε τε πάντα,  
ἡμεῖς δὲ κλέος οἶον ἀκούομεν οὐδέ τι ἴδμεν—  
οἳ τινες ἠγεμόνες Δαναῶν καὶ κοίρανοι ἦσαν·  
πληθὺν δ' οὐκ ἂν ἐγὼ μυθήσομαι οὐδ' ὀνομήνω,  
οὐδ' εἴ μοι δέκα μὲν γλῶσσαι, δέκα δὲ στόματ' εἶεν,  
φωνὴ δ' ἄρρηκτος, χάλκεον δέ μοι ἦτορ ἐνεῖη,  
εἰ μὴ Ὀλυμπιάδες Μοῦσαι Διὸς αἰγιόχοιο  
θυγατέρες μνησαίαθ' ὅσοι ὑπὸ Ἴλιον ἦλθον·  
ἀρχοὺς αὖ νηῶν ἐρέω νῆάς τε προπάσας. (2.484-93)

Speak to me now, Olympus-dwelling Muses,  
For you are goddesses, are present by me, and know all things,  
But we hear only fame/hearsay and know nothing.  
Who were the leaders of the Danaeans and their lords?  
I would not be able to recount the mass, nor name them,  
Not even if I had ten tongues or if I had ten mouths,  
An untiring voice, or if a bronze heart were in me,  
Unless the Olympian Muses, daughters of aegis-bearing Zeus,  
Called to my mind all those who came beneath Ilion.  
But I will tell of the ships' captains, and all the ships.

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<sup>33</sup> On the metapoetics of invocations to the Muses, see Maslov 2016. On Homer as performance, the seminal study is Scodel 2009. A survey of deixis in Greek and Latin literature is presented in Edmunds 2008. Papers on deixis in Greek lyric that have indirectly influenced my approach are Athanassaki 2004, Martin 2004, Peponi 2004, and Felson 1999. See also Bakker 2009.

The opening words of the passage set up a performative space, delimited at the end of the passage, with specific pragmatic aspects. When the words ἔσπετε νῦν μοι are spoken, the speaker identifies a “you” (plural) a “me” and a “now” that characterize the following verses too (2.484). The rest of the first two lines emphatically define the “you” as the Muses, with no less than two predicates, the latter of which establishes them as “present” or “close by” (2.484-5). While there is no reason to suspect the poet would be addressing the audience as “you,” when he is constituting the Muses as present in the space of performance, the audience is indirectly interpellated by the “you,” and momentarily collapsed into the identity of the Muses themselves, since the audience is to all extents and purposes present and close by. That is to say that the limiting or exclusive force of these pronouns is complicated by the context of performance in ways that disorient the audience, which is asked to assess their position with respect to the “we” and “you (pl.)” statements of the passage. The “phatic” use of the first person plural pronoun in the third verse secures the interpellation of the audience into a determinate epistemological grouping—when the poet says “we” do not know anything for sure about *kleos* his “we,” often taken as meaning “we mortals,” might be more properly taken as “we here” (i.e., the reciter and the audience) (2.486).<sup>34</sup> As we progress through the contrafactual, the emphasis is instead on the “me/I” of the reciter with one further reference to the Muses as “you” (2.488-92). The closing verse charts a clean break, closing off this particularly heightened space of exchange. The poet announces, “I” will go and tell you about the captains and the ships—beginning again (ἀν̄). The definitionally exclusive “I” statement emphasizes the agent of the labor as it is ultimately construed.

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<sup>34</sup> Martin 2020, 21

As a micro-event in the narration, the invocation therefore plays heavily on the performative pragmatics of the Homeric language, including the use of a metaleptic inclusion of the audience into the diegesis.<sup>35</sup> Apart from heightening the audience's attention to the passage in this way, the invocation constructs an epistemic intimacy by stating that audience shares in the epistemological disadvantage (with respect to the Muses) that the poet himself acknowledges as he defines his metaphysical poetic ontology. The audience is instead relatively excluded from the more private space of the poet's contrafactual, in which he lays out a potential materialist ontology, since this is in the realm of the "I" statements. This disjunction traces the hierarchization of the two ontologies of tradition—one is given as collective fact, the other as a private speculation that through its negation proves the collectively acknowledged limits of human cognitive powers.

However, on an affective level, the passage makes both options appealing in their own way. Although the audience is skewed in one direction by the persuasive logic of the invocation, by bringing the audience into the narrative the poem opens its ideological construction to a degree of risk depending on the variety of existing audience perspectives. We can assume that a successful poem accounts for this to a degree—the poet may know its audience very well—but the Homeric epics were hardly written with a single audience in mind, and even in early antiquity they would have continually reached diverse peoples.<sup>36</sup> The structures of feeling into which the residue of the contrafactual unfolds opens the passage to all sorts of unexpected interpretations. And, for all of its contrafactual posturing and phatic affirmations, the invocation cannot but help draw the prosthetic body into the performative space.

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<sup>35</sup> I discuss Homeric metalepsis in further detail in chapter two, with bibliography.

<sup>36</sup> On early Homeric receptions, see Hunter 2018, Graziosi 2002.

By way of an oblique argument to defend this last claim (since the scholia and commentators are relatively silent on this passage), we could point to how some of the later receptions of the figures of the contrafactual suggest that they could be applied to strikingly different affective contexts, even by the same poet, emphasizing the poet’s difficult work.<sup>37</sup> Virgil uses the following “line-and-a-quarter” twice: *non, mihi si linguae centum sint oraque centum, / ferrea vox* [“Not even if had I one hundred tongues and one hundred mouths (could I ...)].<sup>38</sup> In one instance, he uses it “to declare his unwillingness to embrace in his verse the totality of didactic lore on arboriculture” (cf. *Georgics* 2.43-4).<sup>39</sup> In the other, he has the Sybil speak these words when she announces that it would impossible to comprehensively list all the kinds of crimes represented by those in the underworld—nor could she even go through all the names of the punishments they suffer (*Aeneid* 6.625-7).<sup>40</sup> From the perspective of a philology of affect, this tidbit of reception history can help us acknowledge the possibility that the structures of feeling through which the Homeric verses were experienced—as a kind of hypothetical scenario with clear potential re-applicability—might have radically determined how they were heard, interpreted, appreciated, and internalized, regardless of the poet’s intended hierarchization of the respective poetic ontologies implied.

In other terms, the unknowability of a specific audience’s members enculturation, their life experience, their predisposition to certain kinds of metaphors, etc., does not mean we should foreclose potential reparative readings of the passage that imagine how such audiences

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<sup>37</sup> One scholiast, *ad loc.*, provides a parallel for this Homeric use of “hyperbole” in the context of insufficient bodily parts (*Odyssey* 12.78), where it is said that not even a man with twenty hands and twenty feet could scale the wandering rocks in the sea, since they are so large. The scholiast’s comment is terse, but it may be possible to read into the parallel as suggesting an identification of an analogous fear or sense of inadequacy in the background of the Iliadic passage. I make a similar point by other means, below. See Erbse 1961, I 288.

<sup>38</sup> Hinds 1998, 36. Hinds provides an extensive survey of the Latin reception of these metaphors.

<sup>39</sup> Hinds 1998, 36

<sup>40</sup> See also Hinds 1998, 42-5.

may have used it as an affective script for seeing themselves in the “I” of the poet as he describes his labor (even in the contrafactual). While the notion of entertaining a dialogue with the Muses requires its own sets of metaphysical dispositions, and can be seen as its own form of prosthetic enhancement to memory, the desire for bodily enhancements represents concrete grounds for identification.<sup>41</sup> If one way of understanding the poet is as “the victim of the Muses,” this might be restated as a the poet as struggling with the social demand on his labor and memory—for which both sets of prosthetics would come in handy.<sup>42</sup> Insofar as the poet is describing certain conditions that would, it seems, improve or facilitate the labor of the poet (although they fall short of his specific poetological needs) this passage may be read as speaking to forms of unfulfilled desires in which audiences could have shared—a point of departure for thinking about “inchoate selves” (Sedgwick’s phrase) that are not determined by mortal/immortal divide but available, for instance, through technological enhancement.<sup>43</sup>

For the poet, the incongruence of the human body and the divine ability required for reproduction of *kleos* brings the contingency of the poet’s personal labor into sharp focus—the contrafactual works momentarily (as the verses progress) as very real hypothetical that raises the affective stakes of the broader argument. As Sammons has remarked, “the personal tone of the invocation may hint at something more: that the drama the catalogue enacts is ultimately the poet’s drama.”<sup>44</sup> The poet’s struggle to embody tradition may also bespeak a fear of consequences, for instance, should he leave out from the catalogue figures dear to his patrons, etc. For the audience, then, a different set of personal dramas may have played out. Without speculating too broadly, we could ascribe to this passage a special relevance to audience

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<sup>41</sup> On prosthetics in Greek antiquity, see Draycott 2018.

<sup>42</sup> For the poet as a “victim of the Muses,” more broadly, see Compton 2006.

<sup>43</sup> On prosthetics and narrative discourse, see Mitchell and Snyder 2000, Wills 1995.

<sup>44</sup> Sammons 2010, 196

members that were familiar sickness or disability, difficult labor, or even with warfare. The Homeric poems have recently been read as psychological, affective, and emotional explorations that offer a language to listeners and readers for thinking about their traumas (physical and otherwise).<sup>45</sup> But an audience also experiences the contrafactual as part of an evolving argument within this micro-event, and its structures of deixis and emplacements (listed above) make that hypothetical body present at the moment of performance through the descriptive emphasis employed in listing the prosthetic figures—like a character who enters the stage, the metallic and multiplied body achieves its own kind of glistening presence regardless of the discursive logics that negate it.

As Sarah Nooter has remarked on this passage, the poet tries to assert for himself a voice that is ultimately “freed from all the baggage of the body.”<sup>46</sup> More generally, prostheses can describe an ambivalent conceptualization of voice as at once embodied and disembodied

Prostheses show voice as accessing the pains of the body but also pointing to where the divine resides. Thus they serve as a locus for considering both the degradations of corporeality and the invincibly invulnerable.<sup>47</sup>

The listing of δέκα γλῶσσαι [“ten tongues”], δέκα στόματα [“ten mouths”], φωνὴ ἄρρηκτος [“untiring voice”], χάλκεον ἦτορ [“bronze heart”] works to connote a through a concerted ordering of its elements, highlighting a physiological conception of poetic production as directional and sequential.<sup>48</sup> In the contrafactual, the organs of poetic production are reinforced, moving backwards from tongue to heart, from the point at which poetry leaves the body to the deepest recess from which it is conceived, or set forth. The attention to the details of ordered

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<sup>45</sup> Christensen 2020.

<sup>46</sup> Nooter 2019, 284

<sup>47</sup> Nooter 2019, 278

<sup>48</sup> A point of comparison is the description of poetic inspiration as a chain of magnets in Plato’s *Ion* (533d-e).

somatic experience may map onto other physiological, prosthetic, or technological process. One option for seeing the passage in this way is cogently present by Nooter.

In reality, the poet does tell and name the very multitude he claims he cannot by constructing the image of a conceptual bridge of materiality that echoes the use of actual metal in the case of the *salpinx* to transmit a cry to multitudes.<sup>49</sup>

It is worth connecting this claim about the “bridge of materiality” to the ways she described prosthetics as directing our attention to “the pains of the body.” The invocation could therefore be seen as activating an awareness of the frailty of the body, its potential need for mechanical reinforcement, and its susceptibility to pain.

The *Iliad* provides one compelling parallel for thinking through pain, prosthesis, and the directionality implicit in the production of voice. Language that echoes that of the invocation is used to describe a rather different somatic experience, when the body of Ares is penetrated by the literal force of Diomedes’ spear.

δεύτερος αὖθ' ὠρμᾶτο βοὴν ἀγαθὸς Διομήδης  
ἔγχεϊ χαλκείῳ· ἐπέρεισε δὲ Παλλὰς Ἀθήνη  
νείατον ἐς κενεῶνα ὅθι ζωννύσκετο μήτρη·  
τῇ ρά μιν οὕτα τυχῶν, διὰ δὲ χροῖα καλὸν ἔδαψεν,  
ἐκ δὲ δόρυ σπάσεν αὐτίς· ὃ δ' ἔβραχε χάλκεος Ἄρης  
ὅσσόν τ' ἐννεάχιλοι ἐπίαχον ἢ δεκάχιλοι  
ἄνερες ἐν πολέμῳ ἔριδα ζυνάγοντες Ἄρης.  
τοὺς δ' ἄρ' ὑπὸ τρόμος εἶλεν Ἀχαιοὺς τε Τρῳάς τε  
δρῖσαντας· τόσον ἔβραχ' Ἄρης ἄτος πολέμοιο. (5.855-63)

Next, Diomedes, good at the war cry, drove  
His bronze spear forth—Athena drove it  
Into the lowest part of his side, where [Ares] was girded by his waist-armor.  
He wounded him, striking there, and pierced through the fair skin,  
Before drawing the spear out again. And bronze-Ares bellowed,  
Crying out as loud as nine or ten thousand  
Men cry out in battle, when they join in the strife of Ares.  
The Achaeans and Trojans both were seized with its trembling,  
Terrified—so loud had Ares, insatiate of war, bellowed.

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<sup>49</sup> Nooter 2019, 284

In a manner similar to how the poet of the *Iliad* imagines the Muses' intervention as an irruption into the deepest recesses of the body (the ἤτορ ["heart"]), Diomedes, aided by Athena, pierces Ares' body precisely in the gap between rib cage and hips (the κενεών ["space without bones, subcostal plane"]), entering the central cavity of the torso between lungs and the other organs—that is, where the Greeks conceived the seat of thought and voice to reside (the φρήν [variously translated as “midriff, liver, heart, etc.”]).<sup>50</sup> When this center of emotion and volition is compromised, Ares emits a multiplied and supernatural voice. Before metaphorically quantifying the incommensurability of pain in the body, the narrator characterizes Ares as χάλκεος (like the “heart” in the invocation). While this epithet has several functions in the poem and may refer to Ares' armor, such name-epithet collocations can also be read in a “redescriptive” manner, through which the epithet assumes a radical local meaning in addition to its more straightforward semantic connotations.<sup>51</sup> The overwhelming rush of pain transforms Ares into something of a bronze instrument, able to expel the pain that has been caused by the spear through a voice that takes over his body.<sup>52</sup> He is for that moment no longer autonomous, the voice rushes out of him and utterly controls his body.

The loss of bodily autonomy is worth thinking through in terms of the broader implications of the invocation, in which the poet abrogates the possibilities of his own body and hands his body, so to speak, into the hands of the Muses and tradition, alienating his material sense from the sources of poetry metaphysically conceived. That being said, the common trope of the poet as a vessel or instrument of the Muses carries specific materialist connotations as

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<sup>50</sup> On φρήν see Darcus 1979, with bibliography.

<sup>51</sup> The term “redescriptive” is my own. For a similar understanding of epithets, see Ford 1997.

<sup>52</sup> This emphasis on voice in the passage is foreshadowed by Diomedes as good at the war cry, emphasizing his own ability to instrumentalize voice. The result of the wounding is a voice impossibly loud, the voice of an entire army as it enters the fray. Ares screams as loud as such an army, but the vibration of Ares' scream is also terrifying to the soldiers on the plain. The same voice that the army can produce as a multiple body is also one that terrifies each of its members.

well. It points to an alienation of labor, here partly emphasized in the coded implication of the contrafactual as marking out the effort of poetic production—so difficult, it seems, that even an enhanced body still requires the Muses assistance to name the multitudes. Shortly after the invocation (in the catalogue itself) we hear of the poet Thamyris, who claimed he could out-sing the Muses themselves—the Muses’ response was to maim him (χολωσάμεναι πηρὸν θέσαν, “angered, they maimed him”) and to take away the divine gift of song, categorically reducing him to his material self and leaving him literally impaired (2.594-600).<sup>53</sup> The invocation might even be read as pre-emptive move to avoid the same, threatening consequences of ignoring the importance of the Muses. In sum, the contrafactual, negated as it may be, carries the benefit of rendering the poet’s body visible in a way that it is usually not—and his labor, too. For the audience members, the invocation’s poetics of unease—its play on two ontologically distinct ways of understanding the body, labor, and tradition—allows the possibility of visualizing its own disappointments at the invisibility of their laboring and suffering bodies.

### 3. Genealogy of Sovereign Mismanagement: Smiles or Smirks

In his *Laocoön, or, On the Limits of Painting and Poetry* (1767), Gotthold Ephraim Lessing praised the oblique mimesis in *Iliad*’s description of Agamemnon’s scepter (2.100-9). “Instead of a copy,” or an exacting visual description fit for a book on heraldry or for use by a painter, the *Iliad* “gives us the history of the scepter.”<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> For a longer close reading of this episode and its context as a marker of the “competitive” aspects of epic composition, see Ford 1992, 96. On πηρός as “damaged or mutilated, with respect to speech, hearing, sign perhaps, or other bodily organs or function” but not likely “blind here,” although it may even mean “paralyzed,” see Kirk 1985, 217.

<sup>54</sup> Lessing 2005 [1767], 96

ἀνὰ δὲ κρείων Ἀγαμέμνων  
ἔστη σκῆπτρον ἔχων τὸ μὲν Ἥφαιστος κάμε τεύχων.  
Ἥφαιστος μὲν δῶκε Διὶ Κρονίῳ ἀνακτι,  
αὐτὰρ ἄρα Ζεὺς δῶκε διακτόρῳ ἀργεῖφόντη·  
Ἑρμείας δὲ ἀναξ δῶκεν Πέλοπι πληξίππῳ,  
αὐτὰρ ὁ αὖτε Πέλοψ δῶκ' Ἀτρεί ποιμένι λαῶν·  
Ἄτρεὺς δὲ θνήσκων ἔλιπεν πολύαρνι Θυέστη,  
αὐτὰρ ὁ αὖτε Θυέστ' Ἀγαμέμνονι λεῖπε φορῆναι,  
πολλῆσιν νήσοισι καὶ Ἄργεϊ παντὶ ἀνάσσειν.  
τῷ ὅ γ' ἐρείσάμενος ἔπε' Ἀργεῖοισι μετηύδα· (2.100-9).

And lord Agamemnon  
Stood holding the scepter, the one which Hephaestus struggled to fashion –  
Hephaestus then gave it to lord Zeus, son of Kronos,  
Then Zeus gave it to the messenger Argeiphontes,  
And lord Hermes gave it to Pelops the whipper of horses,  
Pelops in turn gave it to Atreus shepherd of men.  
When Atreus died, he left it to Thyestes rich in flocks,  
And Thyestes in turn left it to Agamemnon to bear,  
That he might rule over many islands and all of Argos –  
He leaned upon it and spoke words to the Argives.

After citing the Homeric digression on the scepter, Lessing announces his satisfaction at vividly possessing the object, “and so at last I know this scepter better than if a painter should put it before my eyes, or a second Vulcan give it into my hands.”<sup>55</sup>

He then “smiles” at it, or at least claims he “should smile” (*ich würde zwar lächeln*), were he to learn, without surprise, that “one of Homer’s old commentators had admired this passage as a perfect allegory of the origin, progress, establishment, and final inheritance of monarchical power among men.”<sup>56</sup> Lessing then imagines how such an interpretation would bracket the metaphysical wonder at the object to explore the names of mythological characters, their epithets, and their implications, toward producing a materialist account of how power is invented, distributed, and reinforced through divine and human practices—for instance, remarking on “the necessities which induced the early races of men to subject themselves to a

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<sup>55</sup> Lessing 2005 [1767], 97

<sup>56</sup> Lessing 2005 [1767], 97-8

single rule” and the manner in which warrior-kings (like Pelops), who subdued the enemies and secured the safety of the realm,” were progressively replaced by gentler rules (like Atreus), whose reign “introduced comfort and luxury,” only to pave the way for the ascent of kings (like Thyestes) who tainted the monarchy through their predilection for “gifts and bribery.”<sup>57</sup> And in concluding his self-styled digression, Lessing smiles once more: “*I should smile at all this*, but it would increase my respect for a poet to whom so much could be attributed.”<sup>58</sup>

There were indeed “old commentators” that thought the transmission of the scepter served to smooth over a heterogenous succession of political situations, one of whom even suggests that it is not the commentator but the *Iliad* that smiles or smirks at *us* in this passage. But Lessing’s smile is an affective gesture that consents to two kinds of interpretive attitudes—one trained on the givenness and presence of the undescribed object in its metaphysical auras of regality and circumstance, the other on its implicit or decipherable material history.

In this section, I close read the nine and half verses that describe the scepter, and consider the manner in which different poetic forms are brought into play—and collide—in the passage’s specific negotiation of that object’s history. I argue that a poetics of unease emerges in response to the lability of a mythic background that can always be reread to suit different agendas. As I do so, I present several instances of scholarly reception that—like Lessing’s—evinced the structures of feeling that have surrounded the scepter in different times and places. This reading builds on the performative and poetological discussion of the previous section by focusing on an object that attains a forceful presence of the scene, but it also looks forward to my next section in which I discuss Thersites, a Homeric character that has invited his own set smiles and smirks that muffle much more complex structures of feeling that can be recovered through a philology of

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<sup>57</sup> Lessing 2005 [1767], 97-8

<sup>58</sup> Lessing 2005 [1767], 97-8 (my emphasis)

affect (also a character that feels the weight of the scepter in a rather different way than those discussed below when Odysseus strikes him with it). In a sentence, these last two readings will bring out the extent to which the *Iliad* is generatively haunted by the broader literary and mythological tradition that deploys a poetics of unease to mask an underlying taxonomies of labor values that give society its hierarchical form.

The genealogy of Agamemnon's scepter has been the source of much controversy over the centuries given its ambiguous pragmatic role in the *Iliad*: does the poet's aside praise Agamemnon on the verge of the disastrous *diapēira* ("the testing of the troops") or is it foreshadowing his incompetence?<sup>59</sup> More abstractly, is it a ratification of Homeric kingship or a radical critique of the pretenses through which kings establish the continuity of kingship as institution, obviating clear breaks in dynastic succession, episodes of cruelty, and the suffering they produce? My argument is that the *Iliad* here assumes both positions at once. It deftly performs the former by mustering the formal structures of official discourse while consistently undermining them through a series of markers that point the audience in the direction of the latter. But a reparative reading that restores a lability to the passage and brings out the range of affects it can activate will show us just how effectively a single residue can, in principle, cause a reevaluation of the Homeric world of heroes.

The genealogy is a particularly useful passage for understanding the *Iliad*'s poetics of unease because it can even be read as a miniaturized epic, an outline of a song to be sung elsewhere. Thucydides alluded to it by name as the σκήπτρου παραδόσις ["handing down of the scepter"], which can also be translated as the "tradition of the scepter" (1.9), suggesting it was

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<sup>59</sup> For the two positions, discussed at length below, paradigmatic papers are Easterling 1989 and Danek 2010a. On the *diapēira* and ambivalent speech acts in *Iliad* 2, see Christensen 2015.

independently appreciated and “celebrated” even in antiquity.<sup>60</sup> As an in-set narrative, it also affords us an opportunity to see the poem at work “reading itself” (in Pucci’s terms). It achieves its status as a *mise-en-abîme* of epic through a process Ford labeled “generification,” encoding itself through the conventions of overlapping genres and sub-genres (such as catalogue, genealogy, ekphrasis, digression, etc.), formally engaging with the seemingly traditional tenets of epic song in such a way as to retroject their importance as generic markers, and therefore marking itself as legitimate.<sup>61</sup> Thus, it enacts its own canonization at the same time as it throws a wrench into the neatness of Agamemnon’s lineage.

But on a first reading, it can also be seen as an utterly traditional picture of a royal lineage that rests on the mix of traditional genres, including digression, genealogy, catalogue, and object biography, all of which confer prestige onto kingship itself. The balance of the verses and their symmetry persuades readers that nothing is amiss, reinforcing the passage’s “generification” by softening the weighty presence of these established registers of official speech. Consequently, respected studies and commentaries have often concluded that genealogy’s chief function is that it *unterstreicht Agamemnons institutionell fest etablierte Autorität* [“underlines Agamemnon’s strongly established institutional authority”].<sup>62</sup> But even the champions of this position notice how easily the passage seems to invite other reactions, which they argue need to be staved off. Pat Easterling sees “impeccable credentials” and a “thoroughly orderly succession” in the passage, and warns readers that “it would be dangerous to treat this passage as making ironic allusions to such possible versions” of the myths of the Pelopidai that include themes of familial violence, treachery, incest, rape, enforced cannibalism,

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<sup>60</sup> Henry 1906, 98

<sup>61</sup> Ford 2019

<sup>62</sup> Latacz et. al. 2010, 38, with bibliography.

usurpation, and the like.<sup>63</sup> Similarly, Geoffrey Kirk urges readers to ignore these “distracting” details, which the poet seems to eschew in order to preserve “the passage of kingship in regular stages...that is important here.”<sup>64</sup>

But when read against the grain, the *Iliad* is here less interested in representing kingship than it is interested in showing its readers how kingship represents itself through traditional discourses, marginalizing its menacing aspects but always keeping them in view. The *Iliad* establishes a critical distance through which to replicate these practices in such a way as to render them open for scrutiny. Each formal aspect of the passage plays a role in this dialectic, beginning with its status as a Homeric digression. As a digression, the passage is usually read as a merely informative plug—a narratorial aside, seemingly presenting “an innocuous tale, useful for establishing relative chronology, and the prestige of an artefact, but not much more.”<sup>65</sup> On the other hand, such a digression creates a formal pause in the narrative that heightens an awareness to its details. As we saw in Lessing, they even create a space of performative enactment not unlike the one I described with respect to the metaphors of the invocation. In the last verse, at the end of the genealogy, we see Agamemnon lean onto the scepter to begin his speech—the object’s physical presence asserted indirectly in a gesture that might even have been imitated by a reciter.<sup>66</sup> Egbert Bakker has similarly pointed out that the use of tense and aspect (and strategic absence of augment) in the passage presents the genealogy as a past event with present “immediacy.”<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Easterling 1989, 105

<sup>64</sup> Kirk 1985, 127

<sup>65</sup> Martin 2013, 48

<sup>66</sup> For similar readings, see Kretler 2011 (Appendix B).

<sup>67</sup> See Bakker 1999, 55-6 (close reading this passage) and Bakker 2001, 15-16 (more general quantitative study with references to scepter).

The catalogic form of this passage oscillates in similar ways. The formal features of catalogues associate them with veridiction, approximating a degree zero of poetry.

Cataloguing constitutes the supreme distillation of poetry's capabilities for truth, rigor, order, history, sequentiality: mere names, mere numbers, and no *mêtis*; or, as we would say no connotations, no rhetoric, no fiction. Almost no poem.<sup>68</sup>

In these terms, it is absurd to question the catalogue's meaning as it would be to tinker with it in composition: *Namenkataloge tragen das Stigma der Unfindbarkeit, denn man glaubt, sofort zu bemerken, wenn schlecht erfunden worden wäre* ["catalogues of names bear the stamp of uninventability, for it is supposed that we would notice immediately were they composed poorly"], or if something extraneous were included.<sup>69</sup> But this feature of catalogic genealogies is especially prone to abuse. They are often an instrument of ideological projection, back-formation, and revisionist history—often carefully designed to buttress the status quo and that take advantage of their unassuming form to pass as mere fact.<sup>70</sup> If catalogues are read as deliberative strategies designed to litigate a presumed crisis of legitimacy (experienced here by Agamemnon), then we can see that their ideological success rests more on their persuasive force than on their content. Their "diagrammic iconicity" (their status as allegedly fixed textual units of discursive authority) seems to leave no space for unpacking subtexts, but further readings are always possible because the indices remain visible.<sup>71</sup> Reflecting on this phenomenon more broadly, Porter wryly noted that Homer's genealogies in a sense pre-empt Nietzsche's own development of a genealogical method: reading into these "uncertain histories" we discover "not a history but a logic of human belief—or rather of credulity, in the face of massive

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<sup>68</sup> Pucci 1996, 21

<sup>69</sup> Blumenberg 1988, 47

<sup>70</sup> Apart from Blumenberg, see Sahlins and Graeber 2017, Hall 2002, *inter alia*. I discuss this topic again with respect to the Sumerian King List in Chapter 3.

<sup>71</sup> Tsagalis 2012 (CHS Electronic Edition, Chapter 7)

incredibility.”<sup>72</sup> They are useful in analyzing a poetic of unease because they “map out the desperations of the human mind in the face of its own products.”<sup>73</sup>

But, as Ford notes in reading a portion of the *Odyssey*, “it is not to be thought that the basis of genealogy as words, discourse, escaped the Greeks.”<sup>74</sup> The unease with producing a coherent whole from the disparate elements of the tradition is pronounced and noticeable to audiences, because the text subtly reminds us of a mythological backdrop that includes a long history of cruelty spanning the generations of the Pelopidai. That the *Iliad* is drawing our attention to these uncomfortable myths is confirmed by several formal features of the passage. Firstly, there are implicit references to the problematic themes in the names and their epithets.<sup>75</sup> While some readers of this passage have tended to underplay this feature of the genealogy, these signs cannot but conjure up the stories that give them their meanings.<sup>76</sup> In Homeric poetics, traditional referentiality is thought to have operated by building on the memory of an enculturated audience precisely in this fashion.<sup>77</sup> Further, the passage presents an unabashedly dense and structured network of references. As Georg Danek remarks, we should not underestimate the audience’s “knowledge of mythology, and how it produces meaning through reference to this “cultural memory”,” particularly through “the kind of associations that are linked with the name of a given hero.”<sup>78</sup>

In each step of the genealogy, we can attend to different kinds of miniscule residues that each ripple outward through the passage, interfering with it sequentially and creating fraught

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<sup>72</sup> Porter 2004, 19

<sup>73</sup> Porter 2004, 19

<sup>74</sup> Ford 1992, 63

<sup>75</sup> Danek 2010a, Peradotto 1993

<sup>76</sup> Tsitsibakou-Vasalos 2007 (a concerted reading of the Pelopids in these terms throughout Homer). See also Ford 1992, 70.

<sup>77</sup> Kelly 2007

<sup>78</sup> Danek 2010a: 225, citing Assman 1992.

patchwork of signs and affects. The first of such remainders shows how the *Iliad* appears to be deliberating over itself, substantiating the notion that the genealogy dramatizes the uneasy act of navigating tradition in order to produce one canonical version from a range of mythical options. The assertion that the scepter was crafted by Hephaestus creates an emotional and intellectual dissonance with the history of the scepter given by Achilles in *Iliad* 1.<sup>79</sup>

ναὶ μὰ τόδε σκῆπτρον, τὸ μὲν οὐ ποτε φύλλα καὶ ὄζους  
 φύσει, ἐπεὶ δὴ πρῶτα τομῆν ἐν ὄρεσσι λέλοιπεν,  
 οὐδ' ἀναθλήσει· περὶ γὰρ ῥά ἐ χαλκὸς ἔλεψε  
 φύλλά τε καὶ φλοιόν· νῦν αὐτὲ μιν υἱεὺς Ἀχαιῶν  
 ἐν παλάμῃς φορέουσι δικασπόλοι, οἳ τε θέμιστας  
 πρὸς Διὸς εἰρύαται (1.234-9).

By this very staff, which will never again produce leaves and shoots since it first left behind its stump among the mountains, nor will it come into bloom: for the bronze has shorn all its sides of leaves and bark. And now the sons of the Achaeans carry it in their hand when they act as judges, who protect the Zeus' ordinances.

In *Iliad* 1, a scepter is clearly described as a lopped branch, the bark of which has been shorn off by a bronze axe or blade. We learn a few lines later that it was χρυσείοις ἤλοισι πεπαρμένον [“studded with golden nails”] (1.246). While the provenance of the wood is vague, the passage emphasizes the aspect of production that involves the transformation of an ecofact into an artifact, a process through which nature itself is marked (the bereft stump) and then converted into the origin of a cultural practice—indirectly inscribing divine law into nature, concretizing an ideological conception of cultural norms in the process, “the tree-turned-scepter is now equated with civic justice.”<sup>80</sup> This reification of nature is also compounded in a phrase repeated twice in *Iliad* 2, in which the scepter is described as σκῆπτρον πατρώϊον, ἄφθιτον αἰεὶ [“the scepter of the forefathers, forever undecaying”] (2.46 and 2.86). The result is that a scepter embodies a rousing

<sup>79</sup> See Stein 2016.

<sup>80</sup> Porter 2019 (CHS Electronic Edition, Chapter 2)

contradiction: while “it is a product of irrevocable cleavage and severance, it is also a symbol of tradition, a code of customs to be guarded and preserved.”<sup>81</sup> In this way the scepter’s ambiguous background captures the tension of organizing tradition through the trope of drawing material from a tree, a common poetological image. This is coded into the passage through its specific grammar: the scepter is the agent of its own creation, it “leaves” the tree from which it comes, and the labor expended upon it is similarly disembodied, grammatically, a bronze axe (?) shears it, not a person.

While it cannot be categorically denied that Hephaestus might have performed a similar physical labor to that described by Achilles in *Iliad* 1 for the scepter of *Iliad* 2, this seems highly unlikely. Firstly, because Hephaestus is not mentioned, as would be expected given his stature. Secondly, because this kind of workmanship presents a striking contrast to other descriptions of Hephaestus at work at his furnaces and in his smithy, surrounded by wondrous automata and a host of assistants.<sup>82</sup> From this perspective, the genealogy’s first assertion—and in a sense the first act of kingship—is an act of violent appropriation, although Hephaestus is recognized as the subject of the laboring. In a classic contrast of metaphysical and materialist appreciations of value, the genealogy of Agamemnon’s scepter alienates the scepter from both its producer and its material source.

The materialism described in *Iliad* 1 haunts the mention of Hephaestus in a way that also provokes further investigation. The basic alienation of the manual labor when it is sublated into a kind of divine activity is compounded by another alienation: Hephaestus δῶκε [“gave”] the scepter to Zeus, after having worked hard to manufacture it (2.102-3). The *Iliad* produces a stark hierarchy even within the divine realm that speaks to the appropriative activities at the root of

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<sup>81</sup> Lynn-George 1988, 48

<sup>82</sup> *Iliad* 18.373-377. See Bosak-Schroeder 2016. For a different view, see Stein 2016.

Zeus' right to establish and distribute kingship. In schematic terms, the emphasis on Hephaestus' alienation from his handiwork is itself a displacement of the alienation of the banausic. But the pathos of alienation is more readily visible in the displaced attention to Hephaestus' labor, because the divine manufacture of the scepter is clearly not an unmarked point of origin. It serves to connect the scepter to several important objects in the heroic world, such as the shield of Achilles and also the throne Hera promises to Sleep.<sup>83</sup> Further, acts of manufacture in the Homeric poems often function as a cypher for poetic creation itself, and Hephaestus' labors are no exception—again aligning the formation of the scepter and with the poetological labor in the manipulation of tradition.<sup>84</sup> The language of the *Iliad* points us towards an irreducible unease in the ideological construction of authority (and its retroactively crafted origins).

The formula κάμει τεύχων [“struggled to fashion”] contains a moving affective residue that I will now discuss at length to prove this point (2.102). Often, the formula is misconstrued because κάμνω later comes to mean simply “make.”<sup>85</sup> But in a Homeric context κάμνω retains its semantic shading of “exhaustion” and even “toil, pain.” The participle καμόντες is even used to describe, simply, “the dead” who have completed their “toils.”<sup>86</sup> And while formulas are sometimes where meaning goes to die, calcified by repetition and idiomatic usage, the same formulas can expose crucial tensions in the fabric of the poem, such as in their “redescriptive” force, as I labeled above in my discussion of the bronze Ares. As Richard Martin has recently remarked, “variations and creative, even catachrestic, redeployments of formulae shape meaning

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<sup>83</sup> The latter at *Iliad* 14.230ff.

<sup>84</sup> See Aubriot 2003.

<sup>85</sup> Le Feuvre 2018.

<sup>86</sup> See, for instance, the dead in the underworld in the *Odyssey* (11.47). Speaking more generally about “figures of death” in Greek literature, Vernant writes that “the reserves of [life] force disappear completely at death; the dead are the *Kamontes* or *Kekmekotes*, those who are tired, exhausted, empty. But these forces also flow are spent in the toil of war with its exhaustion, its sweat, its tears of pain and grief ...,” see Vernant 1986, 58.

for listeners of the poems.”<sup>87</sup> Thus, we can read into the exhaustion of the laborer implied by this phrase, which we will see provides fertile grounds for a reparative reading. With the full force of the phrase in mind, we can see that the *Iliad* pinpoints the physical exertion required to produce things that will accrue disproportionate social value and that are not mere commodities.<sup>88</sup> The formula is used three times of Hephaestus in the *Iliad*, and once of another quasi-divine laborer Τεῦχος (i.e. a personification of labor) in a direct modeling of the formula’s use for Hephaestus’ crafts.<sup>89</sup> To suffer while working can be seen as a characteristic of a certain kind of over-exertion in the production of artifacts that are more than mere commodities, since their value is inestimable—objects like the scepter that “is a special cultural artifact imbued with the authority of that corporate body [“the Achaeans”] ... to administer the proper social rules (*themistes*) that come from Zeus himself.”<sup>90</sup> The exertion implied is also emphatically coded as one of class or status: whether in terms of an identification with the banausic labor that haunts the passage, or reactivated in other terms by the acknowledgment that even within the divine hierarchy Hephaestus is in some ways a subordinate figure, whom Jan Bremmer has even labeled the only “peasant” god.<sup>91</sup>

Looking forward to a comparison I explore further in chapter four, we can place this formula in an older Indo-European framework as part of a tentative reconstruction of Proto-Indo-European (PIE) affects or as an affective semantic paleontology. The same PIE root of κάμνω finds a reflex in certain Sanskrit nominal and verbal forms that occupy analogous semantic

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<sup>87</sup> Martin 2020, 18

<sup>88</sup> On the scepter as

<sup>89</sup> Hephaestus: 8.195 (cuirass), 2.100 (scepter), 19.368 (gifts of the gods). Τεῦχος: 7.220 (bronze shield). See Le Feuvre 2018, 163-4.

<sup>90</sup> Rose 1988, 16

<sup>91</sup> Bremmer 2010, 207. I return to Bremmer’s points (apart from immediately below) also in a comparison proposed in chapter four of this dissertation. The clear disparity in social status, which marks him as a lesser god, only highlights that even the blacksmith of the gods cannot be said to possess the scepter in the same ways as a king—emphasizing his alienation. For further analysis in this vein see Lincoln 1994, 35.

landscapes. Like κάμνω, the verb *śamyati* [“I toil, exert myself”] (common in Classical Sanskrit) goes back to \*kemH- and shows evidence of a similar diachronic double duty to that of κάμνω (carrying the semantic shading of exhaustion and suffering). That is, the earliest attestation of the Sanskrit root *śam-* < \*kemH- is in the *Rigveda*, where nouns and participles based on the root carry the specific (older and more specialized) meaning of “to toil, fatigue.”<sup>92</sup> The noun *śāmi* [“toil, labor,” also *śāmi*] appears several times in contexts that involve the ancient divine figures known as the Ṛbhus, who are manufacture important divine objects. As in the case of Τεῦχος, the Ribhus are etymological personifications of a word meaning “laborer”: the name *Ṛbhuh* is simply the personified form of the noun *ṛbhu* meaning “artist, smith, builder,” or, literally “laborer,” and that is cognate with Latin *labor*.<sup>93</sup>

In the relevant hymns of the *Rigveda*, the Ṛbhus’ improbable acts of labor (making one cup into four cups, resurrecting a cow, restoring youth to the old, etc.) are qualified by the instrumental forms of the noun *śāmi* to emphasize the overbearing nature of their labor—i.e., to mark out some of those efforts that they use to petition the gods for immortality. Their plan succeeds, but in some texts the older gods look down on them because they sweat and smell—or because of their skills risk undermining the gods. The natural degradation of their body through labor is used to form the grounds for their implicit demotion, even within the divine realm. Returning to the *Iliad*, I would argue that the phrase κάμε τεύχων serves to carry similar connotations about Hephaestus. In a surprising parallel to the Vedic material, Hephaestus is the only god who sweats in Homer (18.372 and 414-5).<sup>94</sup> His labor is patently on display, but

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<sup>92</sup> See chapter four for specific citations and in-depth discussion. Compare discussions of Hephaestus as the only “proletarian” god in Hall 2018a, 212, and Hall 2018a (on disability as well).

<sup>93</sup> Compare the personified Virgilian *Labos*, merely an archaic spelling of *labor*, in *Aeneid* 6, who stands in for Greek *ponos*. Another reflex of the same root can be seen clearly in the \*arb- of Gothic *arb-aiþs* and German *Arbeit*. See Monier-Williams Sanskrit-English Dictionary, and further bibliography in chapter four.

<sup>94</sup> Bremmer 2010, 199. Bremmer also mention that Hera sweats in a single context. More precisely, she claims she sweated, to make her point. Regardless, the parallel is interesting as sweat stands there in close association with the

recognized as bodily excess.<sup>95</sup> In sum, both the R̥bhus and Hephaestus are characterized through similar syntactic constructions, based on a form of overdetermination of redundancy whereby the emphasis on suffering is expressed through a doubling of verbs which basically both mean “to labor.”

Thus, the formula and the next verse can thereby be seen as opening a gap for affective discomfort, severing the worker from his product through the argument that it is only the sovereign’s right to establish origins and meanings on a symbolic level. As mentioned, the scepter is not merely an exchangeable good or a commodity with clear use-value, as its hereditary transmission makes clear. It is what anthropologists have described as an “inalienable possession” that is used to consolidate hereditary lines and to imply a stability in the order of the cosmos—it is an object that can be used, as it is here, to perform a “cosmological authentication” by connecting its current holder with its divine origin and its ordainment as a traditional marker of authority.<sup>96</sup> (“Inalienable” is here understood as not properly exchangeable as anything but an inestimable good—there is plenty of alienation and theft in the genealogy as a result.) Through its claims to metaphysical forms of value, it sidesteps both the value of the laborer’s labor and—as we will now see, the (more often than not) disobedient facts of social history that might impinge on its status as a device that confers unimpeachable authority. Deploying the formula κάμε τεύχων at the head of this genealogy, the *Iliad* leaves open an opportunity to reflect on how such metaphysical objects could possibly be created, except out of alienation and myth. The metapoetic corollary to this question points to the poet’s anxiety that poetry too, like the scepter,

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verb κάμνω: πῶς ἐθέλεις ἄλιον θεῖναι πόνον ἢ δ’ ἀτέλεστον, / ἰδρῶ θ’ ὄν ἴδρωσα μόγῳ, καμέτην δέ μοι ἵπποι [“How dare you make vain my endless labor, / the sweat I sweated in my toil, and how my horses toiled (καμ-)” (4.26-7).

<sup>95</sup> On sweatiness in Homer, see also Purves 2015.

<sup>96</sup> See Weiner 1992, 4 ff.

is a symbol of tradition whose value can be modulated by those in power, rather than fixed by the poet himself through his labor.

The unease that haunts the opening of the genealogy is then carried forward throughout the passage through a false dichotomy that invites us to read every stage of the scepter's transmission against the grain. Each use of "giving" and "leaving" in the genealogy opens up a critique of how continuity is forged through a rearticulation of discontinuity. While the very common forms of δίδωμι "to give" and then of λείπω "to leave" are in principle unmarked verbs, they become marked through the relevant mythic subtext because they seem to divide the genealogy into two neat parts.<sup>97</sup> The dichotomy seems straightforward enough: it separates "good" characters from "bad" ones by respectively using the verbs "to give" and "to leave" to describe amicable and coerced acts of dynastic succession. However, closer scrutiny suggests that none of the transmissions are amicable. When the references to the broader traditional background are made explicit, the order of sovereignty and its mythic pedigree are revealed to be entirely aberrant because each use of *both* verbs conceals acts of coercion, alienation, and violence. The *Iliad* sets up an uneasy syntactic orderliness (imitating royal genealogies) but gives away the false dichotomy on which it rests, and through which it would normalize certain forms of sovereign impropriety. The gaps in this story are an art form of their own.

The affective force of this play on verbs was noticed as early as in the 5<sup>th</sup>c. BCE by Licymnius, whose argument is preserved in scholia to this passage.<sup>98</sup>

Λικύμνιος δὲ παραδηλοῦσθαί φησι τὴν ἔχθραν λεληθότως, ἵνα μὴ βλασφημήσῃ τὸ γένος· τὸ μὲν γὰρ δῶκε φιλίας τεκμήριόν φησι, τὸ δὲ καταλιπεῖν ἀνάγκης· διὸ ἐφ' ὧν μὲν τῷ δῶκεν ἐχρήσατο, ἐφ' ὧν δὲ τῷ ἔλιπεν.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> The unassuming force of these verbs is perhaps prefigured in *Iliad* 1 when the stump of the tree is described as λέλοιπεν ["left behind"] (1.235), on which see Stein 2016, 453.

<sup>98</sup> On Licymnius see Radermacher 1951, 117–119, cited after Danek 2010a, 227 fn. 4.

<sup>99</sup> Scholia bT *ad Il.* 2.106, see Erbse 1961, I 201.

Licymnius says the enmity [between Thyestes and Atreus] is imperceptibly shown, in order that the [the poet] may avoid insulting the family. He says “he gave” (δῶκε) as a sign of amicable relationships but [he says] “to leave” (καταλιπεῖν) [as a sign of] necessary [ones, i.e. forced relationships]. This is why he uses “he gave” (δῶκεν) for some cases and “he left” (ἔλιπεν) for others.

Licymnius acknowledged that the poet of the *Iliad* may have been aware of “the conflicts within the Tantalidae family,” but that he hints at them λεληθότως παραδηλοῦσθαι [“imperceptibly” or “secretly showing”] them. Licymnius’ position was recently rehabilitated by Danek, who agrees the poem reveals a more disconcerting truth behind each verb “only by the way of subtle allusions” and that an intertextual node that can accommodate competing ideological assessments.<sup>100</sup> But it is important to emphasize that for Licymnius this passage raises affective just as strongly as ideological ones. Licymnius is uneasy because the poetic subterfuge takes place ἵνα μὴ βλασφημήσῃ [“so that he may avoid insulting”] Agamemnon and his ancestors.

Licymnius’ unease points us in a valuable direction, although we do not need to draw similar conclusions about the poet’s intent. It is unlikely that “the poet” was avoiding insult because the composer(s) of the *Iliad* do not hold back from criticizing characters, including Agamemnon himself, on the level of the narratorial frame (as well in speeches by other characters). Further, if the poem was designed to avoid the possibility of insult—why even include the covert references?<sup>101</sup> If anything, Licymnius shows us that the genealogy can be read as a contrived piece of flattery that *also* quietly produces a scathing critique of the dynastic order. This is the key element in its poetics of unease.

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<sup>100</sup> Danek 2010a, 227. It should be mentioned that it is not made clear in Danek what the technical difference might be between a subtle or explicit allusion. On this question readers may want to refer to Currie 2016 (generally) or Porter 2019 (specifically for this passage).

<sup>101</sup> On the peculiar implications of such a question of unforced inclusions see Rose 1988, 14ff., who discusses similar interpretive dead-ends with respect to the Thersites episode.

It is precisely the success of this dissimulation that caused Licymnius' confusion, as well as a tendency in scholarship to limit the passage's ambiguity (as we saw above). This hermeneutic angle, deeply suspicious and paranoid about the text's polyvalence status, became axiomatic in the Hellenistic period. Scholia from that period even posit that the improper connotations could have emerged only as an accident of later influence, either through interpolation or through the corrupted memory of readers who had been exposed to too much Greek tragedy. This attitude was apparently held in the 3<sup>rd</sup>c. BCE by no other than Aristarchus, who putatively marked these lines as suspect (applying a *diple* to the passage) precisely because the *Iliad* here seemed to espouse a problematic set of insinuations about its heroes.<sup>102</sup> While the passage's authenticity has never come into question for any other reason, Aristarchus' legacy likely played a major part in the recalcitrant interpretive dispositions toward this passage, since it effectively neutralizes the haunting quality of an ideological passage that exposes the expropriative artifices of ideology itself.

In contrast, Licymnius was a deeply perceptive reader because he recognized that the names, epithets, and verbal play in this passage all work together. He was aware that to strip these elements of their connotative value (e.g., by taking the names as mere names without backgrounds) would strip the genealogy of its superficial aura, which appears to ratify kingship until it is scrutinized more closely. However, Licymnius (like Lessing who partly acceded to and dismissed certain forms of reading) only partly explored the possible implications of the passage's lability. However, Eustathius reached a similar but further ranging conclusion after

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<sup>102</sup> Scholia A *ad Il.*2.106, see Erbse 1961, I 200, discussed further in Danek 2010a, 227.

reviewing Licymnius' position. He noted explicitly that the binary opposition between “giving” and “leaving” is not really borne out by a close reading of the passage.<sup>103</sup>

ἐν δὲ τῷ χωρίῳ τούτῳ καὶ ἄλλο τι σημειοῦνται οἱ παλαιοὶ, ὅτι ἐξ ἐκάστου τῶν προσώπων ἢ τοῦ σκῆπτρου διάβασις ἀνομοίως γίνεται, κάτεῦθεν ποικιλίαν μηχανησαμένου τοῦ ποιητοῦ τῷ γενεαλογικῷ τόπῳ τούτῳ. οὐ γὰρ κατὰ τὸν αὐτὸν λόγον Ἥφαιστος Διὶ καὶ Ζεὺς Ἑρμῆ καὶ οἱ ἐξῆς τοῖς μετ' αὐτοῦ τὸ σκῆπτρον διδόασιν ... (184.39-43).

But there is something else that the ancient commentators interpret in this passage, because from each of the characters [in the genealogy] the transmission of the scepter is different, and there is variety in the poet's contrivance (μηχανησαμένου) in this genealogical passage. For it is not according to the same meaning (λόγον) that Hephaestus gives the scepter to Zeus, Zeus to Hermes, and those that follow to those after them...

By pointing out that even the putatively benign uses of δίδωμι conceal as much as they show, Eustathius goes on to report on a case-by-case basis that the binary between forms of δίδωμι and λείπω does not withstand close scrutiny—each use of both verbs ends up bearing rather different implications every time it is used.<sup>104</sup> Hephaestus is ordered to make the scepter by Zeus, but Zeus orders Hermes to carry it to Pelops, and so on. By clarifying each relation individually, he makes explicit that the verbs attenuate much more complex semantic ranges. The verbal play is therefore understood to be a pointed μηχανησάμενος [“contrivance”] on the part of the poet.<sup>105</sup>

Eustathius in effect described the *Iliad*'s poetics of unease.<sup>106</sup> To him, this passage is less interested in participating in the ideological discourse of kingship, which conceals its acts of

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<sup>103</sup> His running commentary on *Iliad* 2.100-9 expounds on Licymnius' and Aristarchus' position at length (181ff.). Coming to the question of the distinction between the verbs δίδωμι and λείπω, he initially assumes Licymnius' language, remarking τινὲς δὲ φασὶ τὸν ποιητὴν εἰδέναι [“but some say the poet knew”] about the bad blood between Atreus and Thyestes but that the poet σιωπῆσαι [“was silent”] about it διὰ τὸ τῆς ἱστορίας οὐκ εὔφημον καὶ ἵνα μὴ βλασφημήσῃ τὸ γένος [“because the content of the stories was improper and so that he might not offend the family of Agamemnon”], partly quoting earlier scholia (184.28-9). The first reason behind such a “silence” provided by Eustathius, in imitation of Licymnius and Aristarchus, is that the omissions exist οὐ γὰρ εἴθε κακολογεῖν Ὅμηρος [“because Homer does not customarily insult”] (184.29). However, Eustathius is not ultimately satisfied with this view because he realized that one consequence of positing unambiguously pious connotations for all relationships in order to absolve the poet of blasphemy would in turn invalidate the necessity for a verbal binary in the first place.

<sup>104</sup> Although Kirk hedges against such a conclusion, a complementary view is articulated in Kirk 1985: 127.

<sup>105</sup> See broader passage at 184.44.

<sup>106</sup> It is unfortunate that this line of interpretation seems to have died out. It is not included in Renaissance commentaries, although Licymnius' position is occasionally mentioned.

coercion, exploitation, and violence, than it is in provoking a reaction to this kind of discourse. While a formal vocabulary for describing the affective result of the poet's poetics was not current at the time, he may be hinting at it a possible affect later in his reading of the genealogy, while commenting on certain lexical choices in the passage.

Ὅρα δὲ καὶ ὥς, εἰ καὶ καλὸν ὑπομειδιᾷ ἢ ῥηθεῖσα γενεαλογία, οἷς ἐκ τοῦ ῥητορικοῦ κάλλους ἔχει, ἀλλὰ καὶ ἑτεροίως ταῖς ποιητικωτέραις τῶν λέξεων χρῶζεται. (185.13-5)

You can see that, even though the genealogy, as spoken, smiles/smirks finely (καλὸν ὑπομειδιᾷ), it is able to do so on the basis of rhetorical beauty, but otherwise it makes use of the more poetic of terms.

This passage is complexly embedded in Eustathius discussion and ὑπομειδιάω is not used in such a specific sense (describing a portion of a text) anywhere else. But it is unambiguously the “genealogy” that either smiles, grins, or smirks. This uncanny smirk, in a striking complement to Lessing’s hypothetical smile, prefigures discussions of textual affect in quite radical terms. Through this metaphor, Eustathius identifies the complexity of the structures of feelings that can emerge from a poetics of unease—the way in which a detail can haunt a passage. He equips us with a powerful tool with which to perform a reparative, accretive reading of the rest of the passage. The “smirk” sheds light on how the *Iliad*’s poetics of unease indirectly transforms the genealogy into a meditation on authority by encompassing in the genealogy aspects of suffering and alienation usually left out of epic discourse.

As we seen, the use of a “giving” verb to describe the relationship between Hephaestus and Zeus obscures a whole set of broader issues related to the loss of one’s labor products in order to proleptically assimilate this coerced transmission into the flow of dynastic succession. But the passage also seems to “smirk” at this reductivism by subtly insisting on the suffering of Hephaestus. I will now unpack the verbal binary and the genealogy’s reductive linearity, which

muffles the object's globally fraught path through rank and kin. In each instance of either verb, the poem smirks at how a metaphysical order is constructed out of violent, material disorder.

When the scepter passes from Zeus to Hermes the expectation of a line of succession is again subverted by another false start, a transition from divine king to divine herald.<sup>107</sup> The specific issue that the text is deliberating in this transition is somewhat opaque, not least because δίακτορος [“messenger, guide, herald?”] presents some interpretive difficulties as an epithet. However, Hermes is unambiguously named ἄναξ [“lord, king”] just like Zeus. Scholars interested in religious belief have understood this appellation to syncretize the scepter's royal and heraldic functions, a nontrivial part of the scepter's symbolic value as a tool that ratifies the right of speech and the authority of an utterance.<sup>108</sup> Instead, I would argue that the use of ἄναξ is partly ironic: the poem is foreshadowing how weakly the scepter's movement actually follows the expected dynastic transmission, foisting the title onto Hermes in a nearly aporetic moment of self-awareness. Thus, the incongruity of the appellation emphasizes the instability of the genealogy, preparing readers to appreciate the minatory aspects of Hermes as an active participant in the highly contrived establishment of the Pelopids as sovereigns.

To say that Hermes “gave” the scepter to Pelops overwrites a complex set of myths about the structure of that specific kingship and its instauration.<sup>109</sup> The kingship of Olympia was not given to Pelops at all. He stole it, or earned it, depending on your perspective. The rightful king of Olympia Oenomaus received a prophecy that he would be killed by his son-in-law. Given that Oenomaus had a beautiful daughter Hippodamia with many suitors, he systematically offered

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<sup>107</sup> Kirk 1985, 126.

<sup>108</sup> In his sweeping study of Hermes' role in Greek religion, Pisano arrives at just such an ultimately agnostic position on the question—spurred by this passage—of Hermes' status as liminal, caught between sovereign and messenger functions. See especially Pisano 2014, 259-66. On heralds and scepters in the *Iliad*, see also Unruh 2011 and Mondì 1980.

<sup>109</sup> These became very well-known as part of the founding myths of the Olympic games. Pelops and Oenomaus are represented in the pedimental program of the temple of Zeus at Olympia.

these men the opportunity to race him in a chariot. He schemed against them, because the penalty for losing in the chariot was death, and Oenomaus rigged the races in his favor. He would display their severed heads as a warning to future suitors.<sup>110</sup> This is a clear portrait of a king who is anxious about losing his position to a son-in-law that might oust him. His scheming could be read as both a stain on his character or as a completely reasonable response to the oracle. This tension provides the grounds for an exploration of the fraught enigmas of succession as a symbolic (or not so symbolic) murder of the displaced king. The myth underscores that sovereign authority is rarely “given” or “left” to someone. It is emphatically something that is taken, triggering a form of crisis. Each succession is therefore a form of restoration, in which tradition is re-established so as to produce the appearance of continuity. The delegitimization of Oenomaus’ rule, which we know about from several versions of this myth that go to great lengths to portray him as something of a despot, unwilling to marry off his beautiful daughter, and in a few cases even suggesting that he is engaged in an incestuous union with her, is part of the process of rewriting the facts of the matter—that Pelops took something he wanted from someone else who had it. Further, Pelops bribes Myrtilus (Oenomaus’ charioteer and Hermes’ own son) in order to win. Myrtilus sabotages Oenomaus’ chariot, causing him to be launched to his death from the chariot as it makes a sharp turn. Pelops’ connivance is then presented as heroic in contrast to his negative traits, but we should not overlook that Hermes and his son helped depose Oenomaus through Pelops’ deceitful regicide.

Notions of right or wrong give way to the starkly contrived mechanisms through which kingship is structured and maintained. In some retellings of these myths, Myrtilus then attempts to rape Hippodamia, or demands that he be allowed to have sexual intercourse with her on the

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<sup>110</sup> See Tzetzes commentary to Lycophron’s *Alexandria* 156; Lucian, *Charidemus* 19; Hyginus *Fabulae* 253.

grounds that he helped Pelops attain the kingship. This leads to Pelops' murder of Myrtilus, which triggers a curse from Hermes, who is now "seeking revenge."<sup>111</sup> Even though we cannot reasonably expect every member of the audience to have had a comprehensive grasp of the mythic background, some of which may also postdate the epic significantly, the *Iliad* applies the epithet *πλήξιππος* ["whipper of horses"] to Pelops, pointing to the story of the chariot race and suggesting that Pelops' skill, rather than his natural birthright, gained him the throne.<sup>112</sup> It would take an exceptionally avoidant reader to fully forget that "the acquisition of this epithet marks an important and consequential phase in Pelops' mythical "life"."<sup>113</sup> The simulation of neutrality in the *Iliad* provokes its audiences at the same time as it might appease a certain kind of king—the kind whose actions are best forgotten, although their cruelty is vivid and memorable.

The final use of the verb *δίδομι* is no more apt than the earlier usages. It certainly understates the tensions between Pelops and his fratricidal sons, obscuring the later disagreements between the surviving sons Atreus and Thyestes, such as the fact that in certain versions of the myth the latter "is...served by Atreus with his own children for dinner!"<sup>114</sup> Momentarily bracketing the treacherous plots and pies filled with human flesh, a more crucial issue emerges here that also points to radical discontinuities that underwrite royal ideology. The issue is so simple it may nearly seem glib: when we consider the myth's basic outline, we find that nobody actually gives the scepter to anyone, and the identity of the scepter itself may here be compromised. Pelops' sons Atreus and Thyestes killed their half-brother Chrysippus and were consequently banished by their father.<sup>115</sup> This geographical estrangement is used in the mythic

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<sup>111</sup> For more information on the relevant myths see Tsitsibakou-Vasalos 2007, 125

<sup>112</sup> A very large part of these myths is likely archaic. See Pindar *Olympian* 1 as just one example of an archaic text that already deliberates such issues actively. See Nagy 1986, with bibliography.

<sup>113</sup> Tsitsibakou-Vasalos 2007, 125

<sup>114</sup> Kirk 1985, 127

<sup>115</sup> Pausanias *Travels* VI. 20.4; Hyginus *Fabulae*; Scholia *ad* Thucydides i. 9; Pseudo-Plutarch *Greek and Roman Parallel Stories* 33.

record to explain one of several geographical shifts in the royal line, in this case to Mycenae, where Atreus and Thyestes then competed violently to assume an essentially vacated throne (belonging not to their father but to Eurystheus, a cousin of Heracles). Thus, a fresh dynasty is established there, without impinging on Pelops' throne, although he is now without a clear heir. Different audiences might quibble over one or other detail, but all would struggle to identify in the myth any act that can adequately be described with a verb like δίδωμι. There is no "giving" of the scepter to be spoken of at all. The only continuity to be found here is in the mythic "doubling" that takes place as the two brothers move into exile and compete to begin an independent line, itself cursed in its initial stages by their behavior, echoing the origins of the dynasty in Pelops (the instances of banishment and cannibalism in particular repeat multiple times across over the dynasty).<sup>116</sup> Again, the *Iliad* suppresses an entire model of sovereign formation in a single verb, reminding us to forget that credible continuity can often be strung together, through the persuasiveness of myth, precisely in the absence of stable transmission.<sup>117</sup>

An analysis of the rest of the passage organized around the verb λείπω further evinces the haunted background of the genealogy. Thyestes assumes a peculiar role as the ultimate guarantor of Agamemnon's standing. This was noted by Kirk, who suggested on the basis of the apparent smoothness that "[the] quarrel [between Atreus and Thyestes] seems to be totally ignored by Homer," at least in the *Iliad*.<sup>118</sup> But we should not conclude that "Atreus and Thyestes [*sic.*] are implied by 106f. to be on good terms."<sup>119</sup> The genealogy is not a straightforward passage from which to infer the shape of the mythological background. Rather, it is a moment of jarring rhetorical implication that needs to be accounted for as a Homeric intervention on the tradition,

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<sup>116</sup> On mythic doubling see Levi-Strauss 1958.

<sup>117</sup> See Finkelberg 1991.

<sup>118</sup> Kirk 1985, 127

<sup>119</sup> Kirk 1985, 127

moderating the visibility of that background in a subtle manner. In particular, the phrase *λείπε φορῆναι* [“left it for him to bear”] cannot be taken as a transparent statement because its difference from the other verbal constructions draws attention to its own irony. It makes explicit a renunciation or capitulation to the next heir, although (again) we have no case of giving at all, but a further displacement of the line to Sparta, necessary to embed Agamemnon and his brother Menelaus into the myth of the Trojan War—for it is there that they marry Clytemnestra and Helen. The disjunction between a passive process implied by the verb (that of “leaving” something behind for someone to inherit) grinds against the active processes at work in the myths, including usurpation and exile.

The genealogy concludes with a final twist, “or smirk,” at its readers. It appears to end on a happily-ever-after, affirming Agamemnon’s stable hold over Argos and the islands.<sup>120</sup> But even this gesture carries a proleptic irony, as Agamemnon’s imminent future contains his death at the hands of Klytamnestra and Aegisthus, Agamemnon’s cousin, the son of Thyestes and Pelopia (Thyestes’ daughter, whom Thyestes rapes), bringing the frenzy over the scepter to a new head in a story that will continue to redouble itself into the myths of Orestes and Elektra and their revenge against their mother and usurping uncle. These myths have their more famous moment in the days of Greek tragedy, but they are unambiguously present in the Homeric subtext. The Homeric poems are even keenly aware of different manners in which such myths can be recast for competing reasons.<sup>121</sup> Therefore, the genealogy’s happy ending can be reanalyzed as a final gesture that turns the audience’s attention toward a future horizon already tinged with future disaster.

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<sup>120</sup> On this peculiar conceptualization of “Argos,” see Drews 1979.

<sup>121</sup> See Porter 2019 and Radke 2007, as well as the major commentaries. I return to this in my discussion of Agamemnon’s court singer in chapter two.

In sum, the scepter's genealogy is structured as an index to a much larger and more complex tradition, which it artificially reduces to a plain-looking continuity. But to understand the poetics of unease it is not sufficient to think in terms of the explicit narrative against the implicit one—it is necessary to take stock of the affective weight of such a passage, what Eustathius' may have labeled its smirking quality. That is, the passage is not offering up two views, on equal footing, of the same story. Rather, it is fronting a discourse of cohesion and continuity, not in spite of the audience members' likely knowledge of at least some of the uncomfortable details, but because of it. The poet is presenting the continuity as a performative utterance, overwriting the very myths that it reminds the audience that it knows, although leaving them for the most part unsaid. This is in some ways a reminder to forget, a discursive move designed to highlight the power differential between speaker and listener. The passage invites us to move on from the uneasy implications, directing us to a more comfortable alternative.

As an object biography the genealogy foregoes an ekphrastic component, as Lessing noted.<sup>122</sup> The scepter's history is painted through words, which replace its visual presence with a narrative substitute that carries a more specific affective weight.<sup>123</sup> The rhythm of the passages both on a horizontal level (the verse) and on a vertical level (the progression of verses) paints a map of the social and kin relations that the scepter charts in its movement down the generations, offering a minatory story of how power is attained and consolidated at every step. The

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<sup>122</sup> This absence is particularly conspicuous given the presence of a prototypical *faber* figure such as Hephaistos. Compare the episode of the Shield of Achilles at *Iliad* 18.478-608, to which several shorter descriptions of separate pieces of armor might be compared at 8.195 or 19.369ff. More broadly, compare the biography of the helmet of Meriones (10.254-272), which is perhaps the closest parallel in terms of the passage's linguistic structure. Some other Iliadic examples are the history of the armor of Ereuthalion (7.136-150) and of the silver mixing bowl (23.740-9). On the status of these descriptions, see Minchin 1999. In the *Odyssey* the best point of comparison is the object biography given for Odysseus' bow (21.8-42). The descriptions of the Trojan Horse in the *Odyssey* also effect a connection between object biography, production of objects, and poetic authority, on which see Nooter 2018.

<sup>123</sup> It might be said to ask us to look at the object through the refractive lens of what Marjorie Perloff termed "negative ekphrasis, the verbal evocation in question being intentionally incommensurate with the visual object and vice versa so as to problematize the process of perception itself." Perloff 1990, 82-3

genealogy's scepter is then an "entangled object," "an objective correlative of [Agamemnon's] claim to rule."<sup>124</sup> James Whitley's use of T. S. Eliot's phrase is prescient, glossing the scepter here as "a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion."<sup>125</sup> The scepter assumes the affective connotations of kingship, but of kingship as a kind of threat, whereby the official narrative will always be reworked to suit the holder of that object. Through its poetics of unease, the scepter becomes one of those "appurtenances" that grants a "governing elite" their "aura of being not merely important but in some odd fashion connected with the way the world is built."<sup>126</sup> The "odd" relation between kingship and the realities that underwrite it is thus guaranteed by the power of unease to persuade people from looking away, making the artifice appear natural.

At the beginning of this narrative stands the expropriation of Hephaestus' labor. It is telling that many scholars have seen the scepter's origin in the divine, locating in Zeus, against the text's explicit narrative. Here we see how unease also exposes a detail that allows us to rethink the whole, working against the affective movement of persuasion. As I showed, inhabiting the unease allows some contingent options for developing a critique of kingship and its mythic discourses. Since the myths that subtend the genealogy ultimately map out a tendentious blueprint for how tradition can be modulated, the *Iliad* provokes unease as it works with fragile illusions to lay the all too real foundations of authority. Its own metaphysics of power and tradition is haunted by its materialism, the submerged labor it cannot fully conceal.

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<sup>124</sup> Whitley 2013, 397

<sup>125</sup> Eliot 1920, 92

<sup>126</sup> Geertz 1983, 124, cited in Easterling 1989, 107

#### 4. Thersites and the Inversion of Tradition: Pained Smiles

In my final Iliadic example, I emphasize the contrast between the Homeric Thersites and the epichoric Thersites.<sup>127</sup> I show how this tradition haunts the *Iliad*, potentially transforming this episode into an uneasy reflection on Homeric manipulation of epichoric matter—one that opens the field for a sympathetic identification with the wronged hero, briefly threatening the values of the broader poem by bringing the matter of disavowed labor quietly to center stage.

At the heart of any discussion of Thersites is the description that Homer provides of his physical appearance. Few minor characters receive such a lengthy and visceral description in the *Iliad*. He is the embodiment of a radical alterity, paralleled only in some details by Hephaestus himself.<sup>128</sup>

ἄλλοι μὲν ῥ' ἕζοντο, ἐρήτυθεν δὲ καθ' ἕδρας·  
Θερσίτης δ' ἔτι μῶνος ἀμετροεπῆς ἐκολῶα,  
ὃς ἔπεα φρεσὶν ἦσιν ἄκοσμά τε πολλά τε ἦδη  
μάψ, ἀτὰρ οὐ κατὰ κόσμον, ἐριζέμεναι βασιλεῦσιν,  
ἀλλ' ὅ τι οἱ εἴσαιτο γελοῖον Ἀργείοισιν  
ἔμμεναι· αἴσχιστος δὲ ἀνὴρ ὑπὸ Ἴλιον ἦλθε·  
φορκὸς ἔην, χολὸς δ' ἔτερον πόδα· τῶ δέ οἱ ὤμῳ  
κυρτῶ ἐπὶ στήθος συνοχωκότε· ἀντὰρ ὑπερθε  
φοξὸς ἔην κεφαλῆν, ψεδνὴ δ' ἐπενήνοθε λάχνη. (2.211-19)

While the others sat, packed in the seats,  
Thersites alone still spoke words without measure,  
Whose mind was filled with many and unpleasant things  
With which he vainly lambasted kings, in not proper manner,  
But so as to cause laughter amongst the Argives.  
He was the most hated of the men who went to Ilion,  
Limping, lame in the other foot, with shoulders that  
Stooped over onto his chest, and above them  
A warped head, covered in scant strands of hair.

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<sup>127</sup> I use the term “epichoric” in this section merely to refer to versions of Thersites in the broader epic tradition (in the Cycle, for instance) and the versions of Thersites that emerge slightly later. I do not mean use the term in the technical sense, implying geographic difference, although that too may have been the case in a way that it is difficult to account for with any specificity.

<sup>128</sup> Hall, 2018a, Thalmann 1988 (the comparison to Hephaestus is discussed further, below).

This description is strikingly detailed, conjuring Thersites' material body with particular vividness (as noted by ancient scholars of *energeia* and ekphrasis).<sup>129</sup> His presence has been so strongly felt that R. Clinton Simms ventured a diagnosis of Thersites' condition as *cleidocranial dysplasia*, arguing he displays the tell-tale signs of that "rare genetic bone condition," including "the absence of clavicles, which allow approximation of the shoulders over the chest, patent sutures, which cause a bossing of the cranium, and dental abnormalities, which cause irregular and supernumerary teeth," the last of which Simms claims may help account for his description (later in *Iliad* 2) as a bad speaker.<sup>130</sup> The vivid form of Thersites even led the eminent conchologist Lovell Reeve to name a species of shell after him (*Turbinella thersites*, "the humped turbinella," later renamed *Africolaria thersites*), one that "is in an immature state of growth and belongs probably to a species larger in size."<sup>131</sup> The radical othering of Thersites in these terms draws our attention to the complexity of the structures of feeling evoked by the *Iliad*'s unusually emphatic description of one of its minor characters.<sup>132</sup> The *Iliad* presents us with a material, human body in urgent need of an account, since Thersites is categorically distanced from the categories of beauty, honor, lineage, prestige, etc. that are a hallmark of the *Iliad*'s metaphysical view of value.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> See Webb 2009, 58, 197.

<sup>130</sup> Simms 2005, 34

<sup>131</sup> Reeve 1847, pages unnumbered (species 21). The species description: *testa fusiformi, basi gracilis, elongate, anfractibus transversim subtilissime et creberrime corrugato-striatis, tuberculis prominentibus, peculiariter elongates concentrice armatis* ... ["shell fusiform, slender and elongated at the base, whorls transversely very finely and closely striated in a wrinkled manner, concentrically armed with prominent peculiarly elongated tubercles ..."] (translation in original).

<sup>132</sup> On Thersites' "exceptional ugliness" in contrast to the *Iliad*'s "poetic of beauty," in a reading framed in terms of disability studies, I await Christensen (forthcoming).

<sup>133</sup> On the distance between Thersites and ideals of heroic beauty ("the established regime of beauty") in the *Iliad*, see Lincoln 1994, 22-3, following Nagy and others.

But there is no strong evidence for a physically deformed Thersites before Homer.<sup>134</sup> The epic Thersites was certainly abrasive in speech, but Homeric audiences would have been unlikely to expect a physical appearance of this kind. A helpful approximation of the epic Thersites is found in Proclus' summary of the *Aethiopsis*, supplemented with material from Apollodorus.<sup>135</sup>

Ἀμαζῶν Πενθεσίλεια παραγίνεται Τρωσὶ συμμαχήσουσα, Ἄρεως μὲν θυγάτηρ, Θραϊσσοῦ δὲ τὸ γένος, <ἀκουσίως Ἴππολύτην κτείνασα καὶ ὑπὸ Πριάμου καθαρθεῖσα. μάχης γενομένης πολλοὺς κτείνει, ἐν οἷς καὶ Μαχάονα. Ἀρ.> καὶ κτείνει αὐτὴν ἀριστεύουσαν Ἀχιλλεὺς Θερσίτην ἀναιρεῖ λοιδορηθεὶς πρὸς αὐτοῦ καὶ ὄνειδισθεὶς τὸν ἐπὶ τῇ Πενθεσιλείᾳ λεγόμενον ἔρωτα. καὶ ἐκ τούτου στάσις γίνεται τοῖς Ἀχαιοῖς περὶ τοῦ Θερσίτου φόνου. μετὰ δὲ ταῦτα Ἀχιλλεὺς εἰς Λέσβον πλεῖ, καὶ θύσας Ἀπόλλωνι καὶ Ἀρτέμιδι καὶ Λητοῖ καθαίρεται τοῦ φόνου ὑπ' Ὀδυσσέως.<sup>136</sup>

Penthesileia the Amazon, daughter of Ares, of Thracian descent, came to Troy as an ally, after she unwittingly killed Hippolyta and was purified by Priam. She killed many men as the battle went on, among whom was Machaon. Achilles killed her as she showed her valor, and the Trojans buried her. Then, Achilles killed Thersites because Thersites reproached him, insulting his alleged love for Penthesileia. This resulted in strife (*stasis*) amongst the Achaeans due to the murder (*phonou*) of Thersites. After these events, Achilles sailed to Lesbos, where he made sacrifices to Apollo, Artemis, and Leto, before he was purified (*kathairetai*) by Odysseus of the [impurities caused by the] murder (*phonou*).

There are reasons to accept this version of the story as a baseline against which the *Iliad* articulates its own view of Thersites (whether or not the *Aithiopsis* pre-dates the *Iliad*).<sup>137</sup>

Consider Thersites' rank: in the *Iliad* Thersites is not a *basileus*, but in the *Aethiopsis* his noble heritage is clear. Thus, "if [...] the non-Homeric material is derivative of the *Iliad*, it is difficult

<sup>134</sup> Late scholia connect his deformation to the myths of the Kalydonian boar hunt in his youth. I discuss this evidence below.

<sup>135</sup> While other sources for a pre-Homeric Thersites might be inferred, they tend to problematize the question of his later reception more than they inform his role in the *Iliad*. For discussion of these sources and the many later ones related to Thersites. See Lincoln 1994, 32-34, West 2013, 140-143, Spina 2001, and Rose 1988. There is a trend in German scholarship to argue for a more complex picture, involving further allegedly pre-Homeric sources. Kullman even saw the *Cypria* as relevant to reading Thersites, on which see Ebert 1969, 166-7, 171-2.

<sup>136</sup> This text, including the supplements from Apollodorus, is taken from West 2003, 110.

<sup>137</sup> Much has been said about the question of the *Aithiopsis* chronological position relative to the *Iliad*. Readers interested in this topic can turn to Davies 2016, with bibliography. I take the cycle and Homeric epics to be essentially contemporaneous, drawing on a shared body of material—that each poem uses both to connect itself to the past and as the source of striking innovations.

to see why, given Thersites' behavior there and the poem's authority, he would [later] be elevated to the rank of *basileus*.”<sup>138</sup> Further, many later receptions of Thersites engage in a direct *réhabilitation de Thersite* [“rehabilitation of Thersites”], reverting back from the Homeric version as if it had never happened.<sup>139</sup>

Further, there survives an ancient reaction that registers the unease generated by the surprise of Thersites' body and his treatment in the *Iliad*, accounting for his body with recourse to a potential mythic background.

Φερεκύδης δὲ καὶ τοῦτον ἓνα τῶν ἐπὶ τὸν Καλυδόνιον κάπρον στρατευσάντων φησίν. ὑποδείσαντα δὲ καὶ τὴν τοῦ σῶος ἐκκλίνοντα μάχην ὑπο Μελέαγρου κατακρημισθῆναι· διὸ καὶ λελωβῆσθαι τὸ σῶμα. Ἀγρίου δὲ καὶ Δίας τῆς Πορθάνου αὐτὸν φασιν. εἰ δὲ συγγενὴς ἦν Διομήδους, οὐκ ἂν αὐτὸν ἔπληξεν Ὀδυσσεύς· τοὺς γὰρ ἰδιώτας μόνον ἔτυπεν. εὖ δὲ καὶ οὐκ ἀπὸ πατρὸς αὐτὸν συνέστησεν, οὐδ' ἀπὸ πατρίδος, ἀλλ' ἀπὸ τοῦ τρόπου μόνου καὶ τῆς μορφῆς, ὧν χρεῖα τὰ νῦν.<sup>140</sup>

Pherecydes says that [Thersites] was one of the men that hunted down the Kalydonian boar. But he was afraid and avoided participating in the hunt, on account of which he was thrown from a cliff by Meleager. For this reason, his body was mutilated. He is said to be the son of Agrios and of Dia the daughter of Porthanos. But if he was related to Diomedes, Odysseus should not have struck him! For he strikes common men only. But [Thersites] is not construed through his father, nor through his fatherland, but from his manner and the appearance alone, which are necessary for the current circumstances.

Pherecydes of Leros (5<sup>th</sup> c. BCE), or someone before him, likely produced the story of the Kalydonian boar in order to explain Thersites' body in the *Iliad*, or there may here be a confusion with an Aitolian mythic figure with the same name.<sup>141</sup> In either case, the scholiast notes that such an etiology for the striking disfigurement of Thersites remains unsatisfying—

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<sup>138</sup> Marks 2005, 3

<sup>139</sup> Spina 2001, 280. On broader receptions and on Thersites as the inspiration of the comic tradition, see Rosen 2007, 2003. Meltzer 1990 provides a different but related approach.

<sup>140</sup> Scholia T *ad Il.* 2.212, see Erbse 1961, I 228

<sup>141</sup> West 2013, 140-143. On Pherecydes, Fowler 2000, II 706-10.

because it does not address the question of rank in the *Iliad*.<sup>142</sup> The physical disfigurement of Thersites is seen as “necessary” to the *Iliad*, for reasons that are left unstated.

The *Iliad* itself contains traces of this tension at the level of its poetics.<sup>143</sup> As Steve Reece notes, “the traditional language of heroic epic was not so well equipped to describe his unheroic characteristics: the language is notably unformulaic, the passage is remarkably high in enjambement, and hapax legomena are extraordinarily frequent,” as is the case throughout the Thersites episode.<sup>144</sup> His discussion indirectly suggests that we might see the passage’s own metrical lopsidedness as an icon of the “dragging” lame-footed Thersites. There are also aspects of an affective forcefulness in the narrator’s description of Thersites. Not only does Thersites enter the *Iliad*, as we saw, in a passage that bristles with difficult vividness that is hard to visualize without recourse to a nearly medical grade of attention, the description of his body is enjambed “progressively” and “violently” into the text: 2.211 is a complete sentence to which eight full verses are appended, overturning the simplicity of the first, independent clause.<sup>145</sup> The narrative frame “interlaces” the “mimetic” speech with the “diegetic” retrospective description of Thersites, such that a moral and visual assessment of his character maps his social impropriety onto his perceived ugliness, culminating in an aberrant genealogy, not of his own descent, but of his anti-royal tendencies.<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Comparison to other scholia reinforces the conclusion that  $\nu\tilde{\nu}\nu$ , here substantivized, refers to the context of the *Iliad*, as opposed to the moment of the scholia’s composition.

<sup>143</sup> Indeed, his name alone constitutes a kind of residue, since “the bold one” (in positive and negative senses) is one of those “so-called significant names—names that are visibly non-arbitrary, that contain a sense in addition to a reference, and that in effect supply their own identifying description.” Peradotto 1990, 114. The seminal study of the name’s meaning has long been Chantraine 1963. For updated bibliography see Higbie 1995, 32 n. 33. The name may be extremely old, if Rupert is correct to identify in a Linear B tablet from Pylos where we can read a “man’s name *to-si-ta*,” which, if it can be read “/Thorsitās/,” provides a parallel for  $\Theta\epsilon\rho\sigma\acute{\iota}\tau\eta\varsigma$ . See Rupert 2010, 192. The tablet is PY Cn 719.

<sup>144</sup> Reece 2009, 232

<sup>145</sup> On progressive and violent enjambement, see Higbie 1990.

<sup>146</sup> Spina 2001, 278

The *Iliad* replaces Thersites' kin relation and his rank with a literal lack of normative form, replacing the usual genealogical information that defines a character with a list of deprecatory attributes. The demographic taxonomies that are constitutive of Greek identity are conspicuously absent: "in striking contrast to every other character who plays a role of similar importance (and many of far lesser importance), Thersites is not provided [in the *Iliad*] with a patronym, a genealogy, or a place of origin."<sup>147</sup> Compounding the significance of his physical alterity, this strategy transforms Thersites into an embodied excess—into a residue that eludes ideological mapping except through a poetics (and politics) of exclusion. For the rest of the episode, the *Iliad* negotiates this new Thersites through his speech against Agamemnon and then in Odysseus' retort. Finally, Odysseus strikes him with the scepter, cowing him into silence. Disciplining his body and his speech, Odysseus casts him out of the assembly and reconstitutes the heroic order in such a way that is untroubled by his physical and critical presence.<sup>148</sup>

The negotiation of Thersites' physical appearance is indirectly but powerfully connected to how his labor is disavowed in the economy of the heroic world. In a recent article, William Brockliss has drawn attention to the relation of disability, as a social and cultural category, to (the exclusion from) intimacy in the Homeric poems, pointing specifically to the manner in which Thersites' critique of Agamemnon repeatedly underscores that Agamemnon and the *basileis* are hogging the spoils, and that the spoils include women is significant.<sup>149</sup> Intimacy, and sex, are seen as a prerogative of heroic action—as just rewards, even wages. This shows us, in part, how the epicchoric Thersites, who had criticized Achilles' intimacy with women in the

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<sup>147</sup> Lincoln 1994, 32. See also Marks 2005, 4.

<sup>148</sup> The ideological process of containing Thersites has been studied in detail from many angles. For a conspectus of the range of arguments, see Stuurman 2004. The discussions I have found most helpful are Marks 2005, Lincoln 1994, Rose 1988, Thalmann 1988.

<sup>149</sup> Brockliss 2019

*Aethiopsis*, haunts the *Iliad*—although the object of his critique has shifted from Achilles to Agamemnon.<sup>150</sup>

ἦ ἔτι καὶ χρυσοῦ ἐπιδύεαι, ὄν κέ τις οἴσει  
Τρώων ἵπποδάμων ἐξ Ἰλίου υἱὸς ἄποινα  
ὄν κεν ἐγὼ δῆσας ἀγάγω ἢ ἄλλος Ἀχαιῶν,  
ἢ ἔτι γυναῖκα νέην, ἵνα μίσγεται ἐν φιλότῃτι,  
ἢν τ' αὐτὸς νόσφι κατίσχει; οὐ μὲν ἔοικεν... (2.229-33)

Do you [=Agamemnon] still want gold, which one of the horse-taming Trojans  
Might give you from Ilion as a ransom for his son,  
Whom I or some other of the Achaeans have bound and led off,  
Or [do you want] a young woman, so that you may have sex with her,  
[A woman] whom you may keep to yourself, away from us? It is not right...

Thersites fronts his own labor and lack of recompense in terms of material exclusion from gold and women. The emphasis on women remained part of the structures of feeling that clustered around Thersites in antiquity, as is shown, for instance, in Ovid's ironic imagining of a possible response by Agamemnon to Thersites.

Quod si quis vestrum factum hoc incusat, Achivi,  
Est aliquid valida sceptrum tenere manu.  
Nam si rex ego sum, nec mecum dormiat ulla,  
In mea Thersites regna, licebit, eat. (*Remedia Amoris* 479-82)

If anyone of your deeds impinges on this, O Achaeans,  
(Know that) it is another thing to hold a scepter in a strong hand.  
For I am king, and no woman sleeps with me,  
Then (even) Thersites will be allowed to take over my rule!<sup>151</sup>

Agamemnon's recourse to an ontological difference, that those with a scepter may behave differently and have their actions override those without one, shows us the full range of implications behind Thersites even in the *Iliad*. The argument about intimacy, as a subset of the argument about the material recognition of labor, exposes the frailty of the ontological

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<sup>150</sup> On the implications of criticizing erotic desire, see McNeils 2014, 593, Konstan 2014, 173, Nagy 2013, 76, Lincoln 1994, 23-24.

<sup>151</sup> Portions in brackets added to convey the tone of the passage.

prerogative for the *basileis* to appropriate wealth indiscriminately—not only from each other, but also from the masses of common soldiers. The irony that Thersites is elsewhere in the tradition himself a *basileus* only heightens the manner in which his argument disrupts the *Iliad*'s ideological negotiation of his positions as outcast and outsider.

Throughout the episode, the *Iliad* oscillates in its descriptions of Thersites' utterances. It appears to afford Thersites a clear privilege in allowing him to speak at length and complexly on the subject of rank and social standing. The narrator even ratifies his speech as *muthos*: αὐτὰρ ὁ μακρὰ βοῶν Ἀγαμέμνονα νεΐκεε μύθῳ [“but, shouting loudly, he railed at Agamemnon in a *muthos*”] (2.224). Martin long ago established an operative binary in Homeric poetics through which the term *muthos* is the marked counterpart on the unmarked *epos*; while both are words that can be translated “speech,” the marked *muthos* is best understood as an “authoritative speech act.”<sup>152</sup> More than conferring authority, the genre of *muthos* points also to a desire to emulate and surpass previous speeches. But the narrator had already described Thersites as ἀμετροεπής [a compound word that can be rendered “of unmeasured *epos*”] at 2.212, suggesting Thersites struggles to organize the parts of his speech into coherent, authoritative wholes.<sup>153</sup>

Odysseus, seemingly working against the narrator's assertion that Thersites' speech was an authoritative *muthos*, applies to Thersites the highly charged epithet *akritomuthe* [a compound formed from *a-kritos* “without judgement, badly discerned” and *muthos* “authoritative speech”].<sup>154</sup> Through this rare epithet, Odysseus challenges the validity of Thersites' speech as *muthos*. As Martin remarks, Odysseus implies through this word that “he does not have the

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<sup>152</sup> Martin 1989. This binary was already activated in the text earlier on, when Odysseus rounded up the troops and kings who had been thrown into disarray by Agamemnon's speech (see 2.188-9 and 2.196-206).

<sup>153</sup> See Martin 1989, 17

<sup>154</sup> Martin 1989 argues that Thersites' speech contains a significantly high incidence of correption because he is a bad speaker. For a contrary view, see Marks 2005.

heroic martial performance record needed to back up his words,” or “valid poetic memory for his own career.”<sup>155</sup> The concessive claim, λιγύς περ ἐὼν ἀγορητής [“although you are a clear assembly speaker”] is then read as sardonic.<sup>156</sup> But the possibility of irony does not foreclose the possibility of Odysseus (or the poem’s internal and external audiences) recognizing the speech as a “well-polished invective.”<sup>157</sup>

Odysseus’ resistance to Thersites is marked by his recourse to the scepter as a symbol that ontologically ratifies the distinction between *basileis* and common soldiers. Just before Thersites entered the scene, Odysseus had pointed to the scepter (and used it as a beating stick) in order to constitute the assembly. His speech reaffirmed the value of the scepter by closing on its metaphysical value.

δαιμόνι’ ἀτρέμας ἦσο καὶ ἄλλων μῦθον ἄκουε,  
οἷ σέο φέρτεροί εἰσι, σὺ δ’ ἀπτόλεμος καὶ ἀναλκις  
οὔτέ ποτ’ ἐν πολέμῳ ἐναρίθμιος οὔτ’ ἐνὶ βουλῇ:  
οὐ μὲν πως πάντες βασιλεύσομεν ἐνθάδ’ Ἀχαιοί·  
οὐκ ἀγαθὸν πολυκοιρανίη· εἷς κοίρανος ἔστω,  
εἷς βασιλεύς, ᾧ δῶκε Κρόνου πάϊς ἀγκυλομήτεω  
σκῆπτρόν τ’ ἠδὲ θέμιστας, ἵνα σφισι βουλεύησι. (2.200-6)

*Daimonie*,<sup>158</sup> sit still and stop moving! And listen to the speech (*muthos*)  
Of those men who are better than you. For you are unwarlike and weak,  
You don’t count in war or in the assembly,  
For not all of us Achaeans can be kings here,  
The rule of many is not good; there needs to be one lord,  
One king, to whom the son of Kronos of crooked counsel gave  
The scepter and the right to make judgements, so that he may lead the people.

As the men take their seat, respectful of the scepter’s authority, an audience is constituted on the fringes of a performative space. It is into this space that Thersites irrupts, already constituted as something of a performer by the *Iliad*’s claim that he would say “anything he thought the

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<sup>155</sup> Martin 1989, 111

<sup>156</sup> Heath 2005, 89-91

<sup>157</sup> Kirk 1985, 140

<sup>158</sup> A term of address of “exaggerated (and here definitely ironical) politeness,” Kirk 1985, 136.

soldiers would laugh at” (2.215).<sup>159</sup> But he subverts the expectations of comedy, and those predicated on his appearance. His speech is perfectly suited to the occasion dictated by Odysseus’ genealogy of the scepter, which takes for granted a positive reading of the genealogy discussed earlier. And after the speech, Odysseus attempts to overwrite Thersites’ claim by twisting the terms of the argument in language reminiscent of the scepter’s authority (as discussed in my previous section). Odysseus dismisses the question of the common men’s labor, suggesting that they “gave” (δίδουσιν) their spoils to Agamemnon (2.255-6)—forming an indirect echo of the use of the same verb in the genealogy of scepter as a potential marker of appropriation. The elites take what they want, but the men are portrayed as happily giving up the spoils. Was it not Thersites’ point that the merit of the elites is construed through an appropriation of labor—that to earn and to deserve are two different things?

The episode ultimately ends in a threat of violence (and then actual violence), which shores up the metaphysical ideology of kingship by returning our attention to Thersites’ material body and his desires.

ἀλλ’ ἔκ τοι ἐρέω, τὸ δὲ καὶ τετελεσμένον ἔσται  
εἴ κ’ ἔτι σ’ ἀφραίνοντα κινήσομαι ὥς νύ περ ὦδε,  
μηκέτ’ ἔπειτ’ Ὀδυσῆϊ κάρη ὤμοισιν ἐπεῖη,  
μηδ’ ἔτι Τηλεμάχοιο πατὴρ κεκλημένος εἶην,  
εἰ μὴ ἐγὼ σε λαβὼν ἀπὸ μὲν φίλα εἴματα δύσω,  
χλαῖνάν τ’ ἠδὲ χιτῶνα, τὰ τ’ αἰδῶ ἀμφικαλύπτει,  
αὐτὸν δὲ κλαίοντα θοὰς ἐπὶ νῆας ἀφήσω  
πεπλήγων ἀγορῆθεν ἀεικέσσι πληγῆσιν. (2.257-64)

Let me tell you—and be sure of its coming to pass—that  
If I ever again encounter you acting mindlessly as you have been doing right now,  
May the head of Odysseus no longer stand upon my shoulders,  
And may I never again be called the father of Telemachus,  
If I do not lay my hands upon you and strip you of your own clothes  
Your cloak and your chiton, which cover your shameful parts,  
And send you in tears off to the swift ships

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<sup>159</sup> Rosen 2007, 68

Beating you out of the assembly with disgraceful blows.

The *Iliad* had already denied Thersites a genealogy, and now Odysseus threatens to deny him the possibility of the pleasure for which he had criticized Agamemnon—underscoring the consequences of what Brockliss discussed as the disabled body's distance from intimacy through the threatened exposure and disciplining of Thersites' genitals.<sup>160</sup> But in a clearly performative gesture designed to move away from Thersites' words, Odysseus swears an oath and defines himself in terms of his future, as someone who will be remembered as the father of Telemachus (2.259-60). The implication, then, is not merely that Thersites will not be able to have sex—but that the possibility of reproduction into the future is symbolically foreclosed. The ancestor-less Thersites will also be the childless Thersites. In addition to losing the fruits of his physical labor, Thersites will be denied the possibility of his own reproductive capacity. By exposing that the war is in reality driven by the desire for material wealth, Thersites leverages his precarity to demand that everyone recognize that the unevenly distributed metaphysical forms of value and prestige afforded only to certain figures are thinly veiled appropriations of actual material wealth generated primarily through the labor of the common soldiers. The heroic ideology exposed, its restoration rests no longer on persuasion, but violence.

Two conclusions can be drawn here that complement each other. On one level, Odysseus has just restored Thersites to the normative order of the Homeric world, characterized by ties of inheritance, heterosexual relationships that chart relationships of property, and the discourse through which identity is established. But the argument for the reintegration of Thersites into the ideological profile of the Homeric world also provides a haunting residue if the passage is read in a more self-contained manner: the image of a world in which labor receives its fair recompense

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<sup>160</sup> Brockliss 2019, 15

and heteronormative patterns of possession and reproduction do not necessarily produce value for all.<sup>161</sup> Thersites laid no claim to vast networks of property determined by parentage, a wife, or children. He implicitly but fundamentally questioned the premise of how value is construed when he said, in quite simple and straightforward terms, that he wanted to be paid properly and desired to have sex as well. His complaint could be taken as pointing out that the *basileis*, as they enact their view of what societal order should be like, are so greedy that they also foreclose other possible societal orders as they impose their own metaphysical theory of value onto everyone. His argument was merely that value can exist on the basis of work alone, even in spite of one's detachment from those higher orders that the heroes take to confer value on humans and their deeds—and from which the narrator and Odysseus had maximally distanced him by describing him as the opposite of beautiful, worthy of praise, and deserving of merit.

That Odysseus has either missed the point or even felt it too acutely may be confirmed in the surprising follow up to his threat. Odysseus had said he would strike Thersites if he caught him acting this way again. Instead, he strikes him immediately.<sup>162</sup> Perhaps, because he had exposed in his own words the manner in which ideology is imposed rigidly on much more fluid potential forms of social experience, Odysseus strikes now to rediscipline physically the body he had already disciplined verbally, wounding Thersites and making a laughingstock of him.

ὥς ἄρ' ἔφη, σκήπτρω δὲ μετάφρενον ἠδὲ καὶ ὦμω  
 πλῆξεν· ὃ δ' ἰδνώθη, θαλερὸν δέ οἱ ἔκπεσε δάκρυ·  
 σμῶδιξ δ' αἱματόεσσα μεταφρένου ἐξυπανέστη  
 σκήπτρου ὑπο χρυσέου· ὃ δ' ἄρ' ἔζετο τάρβησέν τε,  
 ἀλγήσας δ' ἀχρεῖον ἰδὼν ἀπομόρξατο δάκρυ.  
 οἱ δὲ καὶ ἀχνύμενοί περ ἐπ' αὐτῷ ἠδὺ γέλασαν·

<sup>161</sup> This is not to imply that homoerotic relationships, for instance, is not also constitutive of that world, or that other forms of value do not exist. It just happens to be the case here that Thersites' complaint about material exploitation and his alienation from the products of his labor is couched in the (common) terms of heteronormative desires, and also through the view of women as a privileged form of property and the importance of familial ties and genealogy.

<sup>162</sup> Kirk remarks that the action is jarring also on the formal level through an “integral enjambment with runover-verb sounds temporarily harsh and suits the action” at lines 2.265-6. Kirk 1985, 143. What Kirk calls “integral” is elsewhere described as “necessary,” see Higbie 1990.

ὧδε δέ τις εἶπεσκεν ἰδὼν ἐς πλησίον ἄλλον·  
 ‘ὦ πόποι ἦ δὴ μυρί’ Ὀδυσσεὺς ἐσθλὰ ἔοργε  
 βουλὰς τ’ ἐξάρχων ἀγαθὰς πόλεμόν τε κορύσσω·  
 νῦν δὲ τόδε μέγ’ ἄριστον ἐν Ἀργείοισιν ἔρεξεν,  
 ὃς τὸν λωβητῆρα ἐπεσβόλον ἔσχ’ ἀγοράων.  
 οὐ θῆν μιν πάλιν αὖτις ἀνήσει θυμὸς ἀγήνωρ  
 νεικεῖεν βασιλῆας ὀνειδείοις ἐπέεσσιν.’  
 ὧς φάσαν ἠ πληθύς· (2.265-78)

Thus spoke [Odysseus], and with the scepter both [Thersites’] back and shoulders  
 he struck. He was doubled over, a fresh tear fell from him,  
 and a bloody weal started up from his back  
 from under the golden scepter. He sat down and was afraid,  
 in pain, looking about helplessly, he wiped away his tear.  
 But the others, although pained, laughed sweetly at him,  
 And thus would one speak to his neighbor with a glance:  
 “For shame! Indeed Odysseus has done many great things  
 In leading the with good counsel and as a lord in war,  
 But now this is a most excellent one he has done for the Argives,  
 He has restrained this foul slanderer from flinging about words in the assembly.  
 Surely now his bold spirit will not urge him back again  
 To revile kings with reproachful words.”  
 Thus spoke the masses.

This is a pointedly gruesome and material ekphrasis of Thersites’ somatic reactions to the  
 beating. As in the opening description of his body, the narrator is clinical in his description of the  
 body as it suffers a clearly material kind of pain. As scholars have noted, it is at this moment that  
 the scepter, conversely, most specifically loses its metaphysical form for an instant and returns to  
 being, “quite simply, a length of wood with which to hit people—in short, a cudgel.”<sup>163</sup> For the  
 metaphysical view of value to maintain hegemony over the material one, the ultimate recourse is  
 to violence—not persuasion—which exposes the “domination” that underwrites hegemony in the  
 first place.<sup>164</sup>

To conclude this section, I want to consider how the passage just cited also gives an  
 audience a metaleptic access to Thersites’ inner world. The narrator pierces through the diegetic

<sup>163</sup> Unruh 2011, 290

<sup>164</sup> Rose 1988, 16-17 (with reference to Gramsci)

frames and acquaints us uncomfortably with his pain and fear: Thersites ἀχρεῖον ἰδὼν [“looks around vainly”] (2.269) creating an opening for our affective engagement with the scene as Thersites scans the internal audience (as a model of the external one).<sup>165</sup> This gaze is the inverse of interpellation’s call: it is an uneasy residue that exposes how ideology has reduced Thersites to a series of terms and binary opposition that do not represent him, and that do not allow his grievances to be heard. The narrator’s interest in the reaction of the audience speaks to the unease generated by Thersites and the haunting force of his argument. The other men at the assembly are caught in a sympathetic relation to Thersites οἱ δέ, καὶ ἀχνύμενοί περ, ἐπ’ αὐτῷ ἠδὺ γέλασσαν [“but the [rest of the assembly], although pained, laughed sweetly at him”] (2.270). The participle ἀχνύμενοί is set in a concessive clause and their laughter is tempered by an undefined sweetness—one of the more affectively loaded moments in either epic, another example of the tense smiles and smirks that Iliadic unease can provoke. It is only then that they speak to one another in the terms of the reconstituted hegemony, essentially in agreement with Odysseus’ actions. But in their pained, sweet smile, the audience members also acknowledge, quite radically, that Thersites is not categorically wrong—there just isn’t a space for people like Thersites in the entrenched political framework of the heroic world. Their laughter allows them to gloss over the deep disjunction in their affective experience, and to move themselves back into alignment with an ideology that Thersites had at least momentarily ruptured. They manage their own unease and move on, providing an implicit model for the broader audience—but one that can be resisted through a reparative reading of Thersites’ materialism.

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<sup>165</sup> There may here be an implicit contrast to how Odysseus had earlier been described as ὑπόδρα ἰδὼν [“looking darkly”] (2.245) at Thersites. The phrase emphasizes the breach of boundaries between ranks, signaling an affective limit has been reached such that an intervention becomes practically necessary—it may even be described as “haunted look” that activates a need for reestablishing ideological boundaries. See Lincoln 1994, 25 and Holoka 1983.

An enigmatic scholiast reports that ancient scholars ἐπίτροπον τοῦ ποιητοῦ φασιν αὐτόν, σφετερισάμενον τὴν οὐσίαν [“said that [Thersites] is the poet’s agent, appropriating [the poet’s] essence”].<sup>166</sup> Perhaps, he saw in the character a similarity to the struggling body of the invocation, or the narrator’s subtle resistance to the ideologies espoused through the scepter. But it may be useful to think of the haunting quality of Thersites in the terms of ἐπίτροπον [literally, “someone to whom something is entrusted” and thus an “attendant, guard, steward, administrator”] and σφετερίζω [literally, “a making something one’s own” and thus “to appropriate” but also in a more charged sense, as in the translation “to usurp”]. The *Iliad* marks Thersites out in a relatively unique manner so as to make his aberrant body the object of a sharp critique. But that body—and person—resists the notion of their less-than-ness on several fronts, and asserts its presence vividly before it is forced into submission. To that extent it momentarily “usurps” the narrative into which it is inscribed and forces uneasy reflections on the kinds of narratives and ideologies into which the audience itself may be inscribed—the kinds of subjects always already positioned to disavow the labor of some in favor of the symbolic prerogatives of others.

## 5. Iliadic Ontologies in Review

In this chapter, I looked at three instances in *Iliad* 2 in which a poetics of unease allows a form of materialism to take momentary precedence over the metaphysical ontology which governs the poem as a whole. I argued that these Iliadic materialisms haunt the *Iliad*’s deliberations over the untested value of tradition and the hierarchy of labor that it implies. Pucci prefaced his own

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<sup>166</sup> Scholia AbT *ad Il.* 2.212, see Erbse 1961, I 227-28.

readings of the *Iliad* by arguing that he would “uncover in the text the ensconced signs that reveal the frailty of [the *Iliad*’s] sublime rhetoric and deconstruct its tremendous compactness and force by showing also its perversity, destructiveness, and errancy.”<sup>167</sup> My own work built on this objective, but differed in the respect that (as explained in section one) I accounted for affects like unease that, although they can be activated momentarily, are also in a sense managed by the broader whole. The “tremendous compactness” is not deconstructed as much as it is revealed to be the result of an active process. I accounted for the way the poem manages the way residues haunt its ideology in terms of the poem’s “movement” through and beyond a passage, a concept that I return to in my discussion of the *Odyssey* in the next chapter, where I look at a selection of episodes taken from across the whole poem. My emphasis there will ultimately be less on the specific contours of competing ontologies than on the kinds of reparative reading the poetics of unease of the *Odyssey* offers.

But by way of concluding my discussion of the *Iliad*, I want to return to Pucci’s well known theory that “the *Odyssey* appropriates the *Iliad* with a gesture of disavowal.”<sup>168</sup> This chapter has, along the way, proposed a modification or extension of this thesis. The Odysseus that disciplines Thersites, and that identifies himself as the father of Telemachus as if to assert his identity as an Odyssean Odysseus in order to distinguish himself from the Iliadic Odysseus, may represent an attempt to haunt the tradition of Odysseus narratives (if it is not in some ways a “response” to the *Odyssey*).<sup>169</sup> It is after all peculiar that Odysseus is the antagonist of Thersites in the *Iliad*, considering Thersites’ explicit critique is leveled at Agamemnon (and the epic choric

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<sup>167</sup> Pucci 1997, xii

<sup>168</sup> Pucci 1997, 6

<sup>169</sup> Haft 1992, 225. Haft cites Pucci’s view of mutual influence of the two epics (in Pucci 1987), and collects bibliography regarding Odysseus’ use of the paedonymic, “commonly regarded as evidence of the *Iliad*’s familiarity of the *Odyssey* or the Odyssean tradition.”

Thersites is an antagonist of Achilles). This view of Odysseus as the enforcer of a metaphysical ontology of tradition and labor value is one that emerges sharply in my reading of the *Odyssey*, and that prefigures his violence toward the slave women in the closing books of that poem.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Odyssean Murmurings

The *Odyssey* encompasses many smaller stories within its narrative frames, including some that are never told in it.<sup>1</sup> In *Nobody: A Hymn to the Sea* (2019), Alice Oswald reflects on how the *Odyssey*'s stories ripple outward, “floating on the sea-surface wondering what next / These stories flutter about / as fast as torchlight.”<sup>2</sup> She was inspired by a miniscule story within a story, nearly a poetic afterthought in the broader ecology of Nestor's lengthy speech in *Odyssey* 3—the story of Agamemnon's court singer, whom Aegisthus abandons on a deserted island in order to seduce Clytemnestra.

τὸν δ' ἠμείβετ' ἔπειτα Γερήνιος ἱππότης Νέστωρ·  
‘τοιγὰρ ἐγὼ τοι, τέκνον, ἀληθέα πάντ' ἀγορεύσω.  
ἦ τοι μὲν τάδε καὐτὸς οἶεαι, ὥς κεν ἐτύχθη,  
εἰ ζῶν γ' Αἴγισθον ἐνὶ μεγάροισιν ἔτετμεν  
Ἄτρεΐδης Τροίηθεν ἰών, ξανθὸς Μενέλαος·  
τῷ κέ οἱ οὐδὲ θανόντι χυτὴν ἐπὶ γαῖαν ἔχευαν,  
ἀλλ' ἄρα τόν γε κύνες τε καὶ οἰωνοὶ κατέδαψαν  
κείμενον ἐν πεδίῳ ἐκάς ἄστεος, οὐδέ κέ τίς μιν  
κλαῦσεν Ἀχαιάδων· μάλα γὰρ μέγα μήσατο ἔργον.  
ἡμεῖς μὲν γὰρ κεῖθι πολέας τελέοντες ἀέθλους  
ἦμεθ'· ὁ δ' εὐκηλὸς μυχῶ Ἄργεος ἱπποβότοιο  
πόλλ' Ἀγαμεμνονέην ἄλοχον θέλγεσκ' ἐπέεσσιν.  
ἦ δ' ἦ τοι τὸ πρὶν μὲν ἀναίνετο ἔργον ἀεικὲς  
διὰ Κλυταιμνήστρη· φρεσὶ γὰρ κέχρητ' ἀγαθῆσι·  
πὰρ δ' ἄρ' ἔην καὶ ἀοιδὸς ἀνήρ, ᾧ πόλλ' ἐπέτελλεν  
Ἄτρεΐδης Τροίηνδε κιῶν ἔρυσασθαι ἄκοιτιν.  
ἀλλ' ὅτε δὴ μιν μοῖρα θεῶν ἐπέδησε δαμῆναι,  
δὴ τότε τὸν μὲν ἀοιδὸν ἄγων ἐς νῆσον ἐρήμην  
κάλλιπεν οἰωνοῖσιν ἔλωρ καὶ κύρμα γενέσθαι,  
τὴν δ' ἐθέλων ἐθέλουσαν ἀνήγαγεν ὄνδε δόμονδε. (3.253-72)

Thus Geranian Nestor, the horseman, replied to him:

<sup>1</sup> On Odyssean “para-narratives,” see Alden 2017

<sup>2</sup> Oswald 2019, 1-2

“Truly, child, I will tell you the whole truth.  
 Indeed, you yourself would be able to guess what would have occurred  
 had ruddy-haired Menelaus, son of Atreus, returning from Troy,  
 found Aegisthus still living in [Agamemnon’s] halls—  
 not even in death would they have poured for him a mound,  
 but the dogs and birds would have feasted  
 on him, lying on the plain outside the city, nor would any  
 of the Achaean women wailed for him; for he contrived a terrible deed.  
 We were there at Troy, completing our many toils,  
 but he, at ease in a corner of horse-pasturing Argos,  
 often charmed the wife of Agamemnon with his words.  
 At first she shirked from the unseemly deed,  
 divine Clytemnestra, for she had a noble heart,  
 and there was a man, a poet, next to her. He had been clearly charged  
 by the son of Atreus, as he left for Troy, to protect his wife.  
 But when the fate of the gods bound her to damnation,  
 then indeed [Aegisthus] led the poet to a deserted island  
 and left him to be a prey and spoil for the birds,  
 And he led her, as willing as he, back to his own home.

The singer is never mentioned again. Often the passage is read an implicit comparison to the situation at Ithaca, and the story of the marooned singer also provides Telemachus with an indirect image of a potential and disastrous end for Odysseus himself—compromising the entire *nostos* of the first half of the *Odyssey*.<sup>3</sup> As Oswald explains in a prefatory note, her own “poem lives in the murkiness between those stories ... as if someone set out to sing the *Odyssey*, but was rowed to a stony island and never discovered the poem’s ending.”<sup>4</sup>

This impulse to expand on the story of Agamemnon’s singer, forming widening ripples of narrative, has a long history of its own. In antiquity the inset narrative invited scholiastic reflections on the proper role of poets as teachers and moral guardians, and on the contrast between this figure and Phemius and his relationship to Penelope.<sup>5</sup> One result was the

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<sup>3</sup> Narratives about Aegisthus and Clytemnestra recur in the *Odyssey* as exempla for Telemachus (and for the audience) to think about Odysseus’ return home. See Radke 2007, de Jong 2004, and Hölscher 1967.

<sup>4</sup> Oswald 2019, page unnumbered

<sup>5</sup> Scholia *ad loc.* and, later, also in Athenaeus (1.14b). On the passage and its commentators see Andersen 1992, Scully 1981.

preservation of Demetrius of Phaleron’s catalogic genealogy of Demodocus, a para-text that takes on a life of its own as it resurfaces in the Byzantine commentators.<sup>6</sup> Eustathius opens us to the possibility that the poet ἀποσεμνύνει δὲ ὁ ποιητῆς ἐνταῦθα τὴν κατ’ αὐτὸν τέχνην [“here glorifies his very own craft”] (1.125), asserting the importance of poetry as both a conduit of memory and as an integral component of political power.<sup>7</sup> Even Denys Page, who dismissed the singer-guardian-of-virtue as a vestige, an anachronism that would be “unintelligible” and “grotesque” as a Homeric invention, glossed the passage through his own recourse to pre-Homeric “Dark Age” mysteries, remitting the singer to the mythic generation of Olen, Orpheus, and Musaeus and thereby accounting for him as a peculiar vestige of a more ancient poetic history.<sup>8</sup>

The poet abandoned on an island without audience occasions an accretive desire, understanding Aegisthus’ highest treachery to be his subtraction of another song. What other epics have we been denied? Whose voices got lost along the way in situations like these? Oswald’s own creative exploration of the *Odyssey* is driven by a desire to restore a voice to characters (and things, like the sea) that are not granted a voice in the epic we instead have.<sup>9</sup> As mentioned, this impulse to respond to the *Odyssey*’s suggestive subtractions and to perform a kind of compensatory labor in the wake of the exiled singer has a complex history. While explaining the logic behind Aegisthus’ actions, Eustathius makes some perfunctory remarks about character motivation before veering into an exegetical digression on purple birds.

λογιστέον δ’ ἐνταῦθα καὶ ὡς αἰοιδὸν μὲν ἄνδρα σοφὸν ἀπεχθῶς ἔχειν πρὸς μοιχείαν  
καινὸν οὐδέν, ἐκεῖνο δὲ ξενίζει ὡς μάλιστα εἰ καὶ ἀλόγῳ ζῶῳ τοιαύτη ἀρετὴ ἐμφαίνεται.

<sup>6</sup> See Pontani 2010, 92, and text and translation in Fortenbaugh and Schütrumpf 2000, 251-2. Reprinted in Eustathius among the passages discussed below.

<sup>7</sup> A new online edition and translation of Eustathius’ commentary to the *Odyssey* is available, cited as Cullhed and Olson 2020. The relevant passages begin on Rome Page 1466. I use their translations.

<sup>8</sup> Page 1972. See also Heubeck et al. 1988, 176.

<sup>9</sup> For another approach to the Homeric sea in similar terms, emphasizing the sea as a “narratological frame” that binds the poem but also allows it wide berth in its narrative excesses, see Blankenborg 2020.

πορφυρίων γοῦν, φασί, τὸ ὄρνεον, ὃς Λίβυς μὲν ἐστὶν ἱερός δὲ τῶν ἐκεῖ θεῶν καθὰ καὶ ἡ ἴβις, λέγεται δαιτώμενος ἐν οἰκίαις τηρεῖν τὰς ὑπάνδρους τῶν γυναικῶν, πικρῶς ἔχων τοιαύτην αἴσθησιν, φασίν, ἐπὶ ταῖς μοιχευομέναις, ὥσθ' ὅταν τοῦθ' ὑπονοήσῃ, προσημαίνει, φασί, τῷ δεσπότη ἀγχόνη τὸ ζῆν περιγράψας (1.126).

One has to consider that there is nothing strange about a bard, a wise man, being hostile to adultery, but it is an astonishing thing, to say the least, if an irrational animal displays this virtue. At any rate, they claim that the purple gallinule, a bird from Libya which is sacred to the Libyan gods, just like the Ibis, is said to keep a close eye on the married women in the house when it is domesticated, and feels so strongly about the situation, if one of them is seduced, that whenever it suspects that this is going on, it informs its master, they say, by ending its life by hanging itself.

The anecdote is followed by a description of the bird in question and an etymological excursus that is unrelated to the Homeric passage. Only a bit later, when Eustathius discusses why it was important for Homer to mention the island was specifically “deserted” are we implicitly offered insight into the ground of comparison.<sup>10</sup> He explains, Aegisthus’s strategic choice to abandon the poet on the island (rather than offing him on the spot) serves to avoid miasma—and we can know this because οὕτω καὶ οἱ τραγικῶς τὴν Ἀντιγόνην καταχώσαντες ἀφωσιώσαντο μὴ ἐναγεῖς εἶναι [“in this way those who buried Antigone in tragedy averted being polluted”] (1.126). The link, between the poet ex-isled and left to die by adulterous Aegisthus and the suicidal bird dear to the Libyan gods, is yet another story, whose features only imperfectly map onto the first two. The singer and Antigone (technically not murdered), Antigone and the gallinule (suicide by hanging), the gallinule and the singer (dislike adultery).

A structure of feeling is described by this rippling outward from individual words in the *Odyssey*, in an exegetical mode built on reaching for pockets of semantic matter that provide even the barest affective analogs to the passage at hand. Instead of moving on from the abandoned singer and the lost song, Eustathius repairs our attention to him and brings out the

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<sup>10</sup> On strategic forms of emotional reading in Eustathius, “that tell us about different audiences and reader responses, testifying to diverse ways of engaging with a tradition that was felt to be at once authoritative and problematic,” see Pizzone 2016, with extensive bibliography.

pathos of the abandoned singer through a reverie of literary associations, each of which supplies his readers with an already formed narrative model (and its language) for not merely reading, but feeling along with the *Odyssey*. Through a surprising slippage of associative thought, the *Odyssey* becomes a poem also about Libyan birds and Theban heroines.

The story of Agamemnon's singer, put by Nestor to use in the context of Aegisthus' seduction of Clytemnestra, partly underscores the importance of bards as faithful records of events, of the past, and tradition.<sup>11</sup> Nestor shows us and Telemachus, by way of warning, that the removal of a singer and the erasure of his memory can be a component of political subterfuge and the usurpation of a household. Hence, Eustathius' first comment: the poet here valorizes his own profession. But at the same time, by painting a portrait of how easily a singer can be isolated and left to die, Nestor implicitly reveals the fragility of the singer's tradition—and his body as a vehicle for that tradition.<sup>12</sup> The result is that the *Odyssey* uneasily cleaves open a space in which it ought to be at once valorized as the surviving record but where it can also be seen for what it is, a motivated and selective recasting—one occasioned, in part, by the politics that shape the transmission of poetry.

In this chapter, I explore the poetics of unease in the *Odyssey* by examining two further episodes in which a residue disturbs the sequence of a longer narrative and invites a reparative reading of voices that are left behind, on literal islands or otherwise. The first is the Sirens episode, told in fragmentary and overlapping snippets across *Odyssey* 12. Each telling haunts the next, uneasily

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<sup>11</sup> This passage is a particularly metapoetic version of the story, not merely because a singer is mentioned, but due to Aegisthus' speech patterns (he acts like a poet in his seduction of Clytemnestra, *θέλγεσκ' ἐπέεσσιν* ["charmed her with words"]) and Nestor's claims about his own speech, that echoes language used to describe the Muses who can speak the whole truth. See Nünlist 2012, Katz 2007, Dickson 1993.

<sup>12</sup> Hence, Phemius' claim to Odysseus, later in the poem, that Odysseus will regret killing him in the future (22.345), for "without a singer the final transformation of Odysseus' experiences into poetic glory cannot be achieved." Biles 1993, 206. See also Dougherty 1991.

pointing to the processes of narrative inclusion and exclusion as the story is told. I argue that the unease that subtends Odysseus' narration of himself to the Phaeacians indirectly grants us purchase on the labor of his crewmates, the difficult (if more mundane) labors that make possible the labors of heroic adventurers. Concluding with the Sirens' invocation of Odysseus, the implications of the episode chart out the sense of threat at the basis of the epic tradition. The second example is the execution of the maids, which takes place in *Odyssey* 22 (but is prefigured in several instances in earlier books as well). By reading into the poetics of unease surrounding the maids in these passages, I argue that that the *Odyssey* gives us access to at least two versions of the restoration of Ithaca. The first, predicated on the re-establishment of Odysseus' authority—a cypher for the stability of tradition. The second, in the brief portions of text given over to maids' life as slave women, presents a rippling crescendo of unease that instead turns our attention to brittleness of ideology and tradition. I argue that we can see in the representation of the maids a partial projection of another Ithacan society, unrealized in the *Odyssey* but present nonetheless. A society that the narrator at moments seem to acknowledge could only be realized through a suspension of the tradition, leading to occasional patches of an affective narratorial distance in which the narrator recoils from the actions of his protagonists. In both my reading of the Sirens and the maids, I emphasize how audiences of the *Odyssey* are guided through structure of feeling that have also been recognized or defined belatedly, either in later literary works or artistic ones (as shown through my discussions of Oswald and Eustathius above).

This chapter build on the methods of chapter one in two significant ways. My readings in this chapter are not centered on a single passage from the epic but on sets of passages that work together. As we saw above in my discussion of Agamemnon's singer, this is not for a lack of relatively discrete residues in the *Odyssey*. But the proliferating acts of storytelling that

characterize the *Odyssey* carry consequences for any attempt to describe an aspect of Odyssean poetics, since it might be described as a quintessentially metapoetic text. Even the micro-narrative of the singer is wound tightly into a slightly larger narrative about the House of Atreus. Accordingly, I precede my close readings with a brief survey of Homeric scholarship that forms the basis of my approach, highlighting theoretical toolkits relevant to the close readings of this chapter, including Michel Foucault’s theorization of the *Odyssey*’s “murmurings.”

### 1. The Murmuring *Odyssey*

That the *Odyssey* is a substantially more self-referential poem than the *Iliad*, and that it is engaged in a concerted negotiation of tradition, has been noted by many scholars who see it as a poem that self-consciously styles itself as the end of a tradition.<sup>13</sup> This understanding of its own position as a poem made out of poems—as well as competing with and overcoming past poems—carries several clear tensions that mark it as haunted text.

The complexity of the metapoetics of the *Odyssey* and its relation to tradition can be epitomized through a pair of complementary claims made by two of its protagonists. Early in the poem, Telemachus claims that the “newest” songs earn the praise of their listeners (1.346-349). Later on, Odysseus closes his narration to the Phaeacians with the claim that ἐχθρὸν δέ μοί ἐστιν / αὐτίς ἀριζήλως εἰρημένα μυθολογεύειν [“I find it hateful to tell again a story that has been thoroughly retold already”] (12.452-453).<sup>14</sup> The irony that these statements are uttered in an epic that is explicitly about the events of the past and destined to be repeated as a performance piece

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<sup>13</sup> Martin 1993. See also Danek 2010b, Ford 1992, Peradotto 1992, Todorov 1978.

<sup>14</sup> Saussy 2016, 84

(and already has been), would not have been lost on its audience.<sup>15</sup> If anything, the *Odyssey* is “new” in its specific canonization of certain traditional elements of the past, not in any wholesale departure from traditional myths. Thus, both of the statements point to an unease concerning the facility with which the songs of the past encroach upon the present, how their affective weight lingers and can disturb the coherence of the new narrative.

This fraught outlook on tradition is an inextricable component of Odysseus’ own ascension to quasi-authorial status in the *Odyssey* as the singer of his own life story. Prompted by Alcinous to in essence perform his own identity, he conveniently edits and arranges the elements of his life in order to shore up a particular image of himself. By figuring the role of the singer in its protagonist in this way, the *Odyssey* is seen to be deftly “recapturing this proto-tradition, before song,” thematizing a new canonization of selected material within the bounds of its narrative.<sup>16</sup> The result is that both the *Odyssey* and Odysseus can be said to acknowledge what Zachary Biles has labeled the “perils of song” that haunt its exuberant metapoetics, and a narratological attention to the specifics of the codependency of narrator and character-narrator can help flesh out the implications of Biles’ conclusion that “internally the implications of song for actual characters are potentially unsettling.”<sup>17</sup> On the most basic level, the “prospect of future songs ... motivates characters through their concern for *kleos*,” as we saw in the *Iliad*.<sup>18</sup> Readings that would compromise *kleos* are extant in the *Odyssey*, and can be activated as complications of the struggle for *kleos*, but also (and significantly) as residues that speak to other ideological and affective realities—ones that are not defined by an ideology of immortalization

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<sup>15</sup> Ford 1992, 109, citing Jensen 1980, 118

<sup>16</sup> Biles 2003, 191

<sup>17</sup> Biles 2003, 191

<sup>18</sup> Biles 2003, 191

but by a recognition of the more quotidian kinds labor and suffering that make such a world possible.

Overall, the *Odyssey* strikes a balance in the representation of heroic labor as more valuable than everyday labor with a success evident in its enduring legacy as a heroic epic. But the *Odyssey* has also been recognized as a poem that gives over a surprising amount of space to the kinds of labors that it otherwise disavows—as we saw in the introduction, where I discussed the mill-grinder. But the subsumption of the latter under the auspices of the former has led to a tendency to idealize the role of the Homeric poet—or his “genius”—even in instances in which the poem can be squarely said to be operating (however momentarily) against the idealizing premises of its broader narrative. As Joseph Russo remarked,

these are the moments...when the particular, the special, the unique, gain the upper hand, when we think we can see how Homer resists his tradition, when we see him refusing to take it as it comes and instead twisting it and reshaping it to his own special ends. These are the moments that give Homer the poet his existence, and bring us back to the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* again and again.<sup>19</sup>

There is a risk, as I remarked in chapter one, to see in the moments that provoke unease an opportunity for nearly reversing the meaning of the entire poem. But if innovation is itself a traditional mode of composition, as Russo implies, then it too needs to be treated with a kind of skepticism, since it forms the basis of a clearly persuasive aspect of the Homeric poems. If we accept that ideological hegemony is achieved precisely through the illusion that the new traditional is continuous with the old, then mode through which the unusual is presented must itself become the grounds of further investigation. That is, the presentation of residues may serve, overall, to help us ignore them—even if some readers may resist the broader movement of the poem away from the very material that the *Odyssey* briefly offers up for scrutiny.

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<sup>19</sup> Russo 1968, 294

Biles offers a related paradigm for understanding the kinds of poetic momentum or movement that makes even un-neutralized details appear less relevant as the poem rushes onward. His emphasis is on the affective result of this movement, and how it personalizes the poem with a kind of affective agency. He writes, the *Odyssey* contains “expressions of confidence about its [own] genesis” and “takes one last glance back at its initially ambivalent status relative to the other *nostoi* traditions, from the comfortable position of having now successfully avoided the ruin such a song would impose on its hero.”<sup>20</sup> The poem is successful because it subsumes the risks of unexpected surprises, pre-empting the manner details in the narrative may cause unease.

One way to assess how the poem pre-empts and forecloses departures from its main trajectory is to take a closer look at how the *Odyssey* in place revises itself as part of its broader narrative, to examine the repeated narration of the same myths or stories within the *Odyssey* itself. A recent debate has brought the consequences of so doing to the fore. Ruth Scodel has observed that “if we assume that the main narrative is reliable in what it actually says (despite its occasional omissions), nearly all such ‘mirror scenes’ are slightly inaccurate.”<sup>21</sup> But as Adrian Kelly notes more recently, there is no reason to accept the premise that the main narrative is reliable—instead, it can be argued that “Homer’s narrative authority is a trick of misdirection.”<sup>22</sup> In a system in which there is no authoritative original, and where every difference is *de facto* a marked difference, the interplay of a base narrative and apparently autonomous retelling is an illusion. A possible route into this problem is to assess the metaleptic tendencies of the poem across an episode, as its narrator and characters intervene and organize material on the level of

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<sup>20</sup> Biles 2003, 207

<sup>21</sup> Scodel 1999, 62

<sup>22</sup> Kelly 2018, 353, see also Ahl 1989.

different interlocking diegetic frames (including those in which, in principle, a narrator or character ought not be able to intervene).<sup>23</sup>

For instance, when Nestor psychologizes Clytemnestra and Aegisthus in the passage above, he uses certain phrases that form extra-Nestoric leitmotifs in the poem. Most incisively, during the second *nekuia* in the closing book of the *Odyssey* the dead Agamemnon will praise Penelope by describing her ἀγαθαὶ φρένες [“excellent thoughts”] (24.194), echoing the use of that phrase to describe Clytemnestra in the passage above (3.266).<sup>24</sup> This creates an unsettling similarity between the two women—both of whom initially possess “excellent thoughts,” but only one of whom is ultimately persuaded into not-so-excellent deeds by a suitor. The echo can on one level be explained in terms of shared, gendered forms of discourse—ἀγαθαὶ φρένες may have been a phrase commonly applied to women by men, hence its reoccurrence in these passages. But at the same time that the echo assumes its poetic value as a contrast between figures, which can be experienced on the narratological level of audience and narrator, it also offers more subtle grounds for unpacking the phrase’s standing as an indicator of merit, and for pointing out that Clytemnestra and Penelope are comparable because they are also very much alike. Thus Nestor’s language in *Odyssey* 3—particularly his emphasis on agency, τὴν δ’ ἐθέλων ἐθέλουσαν ἀνήγαγεν [“he led her, who was willing...”] (3.272)—can also serve the audience in ways in which Nestor did not necessarily intend, since it restores to Clytemnestra the agency of her ἀγαθαὶ φρένες and potentially opens up a reconsideration of her embroilment in a discourse oriented usually only around the agency of men. What if—nearly unthinkable from Nestor’s

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<sup>23</sup> On metalepsis, see Genette 1982—but I discuss metalepsis further in specifically Homeric terms, below.

<sup>24</sup> On the comparison to Penelope implicit in the passage from *Odyssey* 3, see Andersen 1992, 10, 16. n. 2 (with bibliography). On Penelope and Clytemnestra generally, see Katz 1991. The translation of φρένες as “thoughts” is given *exempli gratia*, on this problem, Agamemnon’s discussion of Penelope, and the poetics of “epic remembering,” see Bakker 2007, 73-4

perspective—part of her excellence was precisely the desire to rid herself of Agamemnon, in any case not the best of husbands—or he had, in his absence and in the passing of time, simply become less desirable?<sup>25</sup> Such metaleptic patterns can therefore elicit slippery, oblique logics of reading, highlighting residues where they are seemingly passed over in silence by the poem’s preponderant narrative priorities.

These unexpected turns of interpretation embed the poem in something akin to an atmosphere of hushed but urgent conversations. That they appear beside the point, overly psychologizing and maybe even gossipy as an artifact of the poem’s own ambition to leave certain questions behind on the way to its narrative denouements. An invitation to engage with the proliferating narrative possibilities in nearly reparative terms (although less focused on gendered discourse specifically) has been forwarded before. In several draft pages that Michel Foucault chose not to include in his *L’archéologie du savoir* (1969), Foucault referred to the Homeric poems as *récits* (narratives with a foregrounded speaker) and described their autopoiesis and frustrated hierarchization of tradition.<sup>26</sup>

Ainsi le récit se noue au récit, prolifère à partir de lui-même, et trouve, dans l’intervalle, de ses propres paroles le lieu à la fois invisible et manifeste de sa naissance. Qui voudrait écrire de tels discours et mettre en lumière la loi qui les habite ne devrait pas simplement s’attacher à ces liens qu’on connaît déjà: ceux qui les lient, de l’intérieur, à ce qu’ils disent, ou ceux qui les lient aux autres récits qui ont pu réellement les précéder ou qui vont les suivre; il faudrait aussi décrire le réseau de tous ces récits qu’ils fomentent eux-mêmes, et auxquels pourtant, ils se soumettent.<sup>27</sup>

Thus the *récit* is tied to *récit*, it proliferates beginning from itself, and it finds in the interval of its own words the at times invisible and at others manifest place of its own

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<sup>25</sup> The mythic background to their relationship was hardly neutral, given the overall tenor of Agamemnon’s behavior. I discussed in chapter one the mythic background of the House of Atreus, and we could add to those myths the sacrifice of Iphigenia. While the Homeric poems do not address the sacrifice explicitly, they may have reasonably been in the background of the audience’s mind because the episode is clearly attested in detail as part of Hesiod’s *Catalogue of Women*. See Solmsen 1981. Similar arguments of romantic disenchantment have been forwarded about Penelope, discussed later in this chapter.

<sup>26</sup> These pages have been transcribed and published by Martin Rueff. Cited here as Foucault 2016. A much more condensed version of these views was eventually published in Foucault 2013, 116-17, 125.

<sup>27</sup> Foucault 2016, 114

birth. Whoever may want to write about such a discourse and shed light on the law that inhabits it cannot simply take stock of the connections that he already knows: the connections that bind it, from within, to [those narratives] they mention, or those [connections] that bind them to other *récits* that may have actually preceded them, or which will follow; it is necessary to also describe the network of all of these *récits* that they themselves foment, and yet to which they submit.

Foucault's emphasis on the affective present of reading the *Odyssey* trains our attention on the poems' own emphasis on the similarly affective experience of tradition (in terms of fomentation and submission). His language of knowing applies just as easily to feeling—and the recursion in the network he describes evokes the restlessness, the dizzying effect of how these poems locate and establish their origins within themselves, creating a background from which they claim to emerge. As Foucault goes on, he arrives at the figure of the *Odyssey*'s “murmurings.”

*Prises comme modèles de tous nos récits l'Iliade et l'Odyssée nous montrent comment le récit, aussi premier qu'il paraisse, se dédouble, projette autour de soi des ombres qui lui ressemblent, suscite ses analogues et ses contraires, engender ses propres copies, passe à l'extérieur de soi pour se percevoir, comme du dehors, s'invente de merveilleux modèles, et imposants. Comme si le récit ne supportait pas de rester seul, en tête à tête, avec ce qu'il doit raconter: comme s'il ne supportait pas d'avoir, purement et simplement, des antécédents historiques et de réels successeurs mais comme s'il devait, par quelque nécessité, faire entendre dans le lointain, toute la rumeur d'une parentèle: murmure d'avant lui, vers lequel il tendrait l'oreille pour le répéter et l'articuler aujourd'hui: murmures qui entrent en concurrence avec lui et qui viennent le croiser; murmures à venir qui parlent de lui, le prennent pour objet, racontent comme il est né, disent ce qu'il sera pour les auditeurs à venir. Le récit est fait de récits, en ce sens qu'il raconte les récits innombrables de ce qui est raconté.<sup>28</sup>*

Taken as models of all our *récits* the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* show us how the *récit*, even before it appears, doubles itself, projects around itself shadows which resemble it, gives rise to its analogues and contraries, engenders its own copies, moves outside of itself in order to perceive itself, as if from without, invents for itself wonderful and imposing models. As if the *récit* could not bear to remain alone, one on one with that which it needs to narrate: as if it could not bear to have, purely and simple, historical antecedents and real successors, but as if it needed, by some necessity, to make heard in the distance the whole noise of a descent-group [kinship, clan]: a *murmuring* towards which it turns its ear as if to repeat it and articulate it today: a *murmuring* that enters into competition with it and crosses it: a *murmuring* of the future that will take it as its object, narrating how it was born, saying what it will be for readers of the future. The *récit* is made of *récits* in the sense that it narrates the innumerable *récits* of that which is narrated.

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<sup>28</sup> Foucault 2016, 114

The *Odyssey*'s "murmurings" are a hallmark of its poetics of unease. The figure offers us a more open metaphorization of many of the processes described by other scholars above, one that powerfully described how structures of feelings ripple outward from the poem as its semantic proliferate in unexpected ways. To Foucault, this tension is still directly related to the establishment of a position of epistemic advantage (and, consequently, to the exercise of hegemonic and ideological power through language). But by emphasizing the power of the lower register of a "murmur," in contrast, for instance, to the *Odyssey*'s "confident" declarations (as in Biles), Foucault gives audiences of the Homeric epics a space in which to inhabit their unease as part of the experience of a textual event that ultimately forecloses certain kinds of thought. In characterizing the *Odyssey* as at once haunted by murmurs and as a poem that reproduces those murmurs, we can begin to see how the poem—perhaps more than the *Iliad*—allows us to eschew totalizing readings that might, in passing, lend legitimacy to the text's manipulations of the material it organizes. This is not to say that we should not read (and perhaps aesthetically appreciate) the poems for their articulation of overarching ideologies, but that the very imperfection of that articulation is in and of itself a feature of the poems, and one deserving of scrutiny as a poetic quality of the Homeric epics.

## 2. Two Singers in Ex-isle

A great deal has been written on the Sirens, their adjacency to the Muses, and their status as metonyms of the broader tradition from which the *Odyssey* draws and on which it builds.<sup>29</sup> The

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<sup>29</sup> Nooter 2018, Pucci 1997, Doherty 1995, Ford 1992, Rachewiltz 1987. On the reception of the Muses, see Bettini and Spina 2007 and Spina 2020

murmuring manner in which they haunt the poem derives ultimately from the fact that they know everything that γένηται ἐπὶ χθονὶ [“happens on earth”] (12.191). In contrast, the audience of the *Odyssey* learns virtually nothing about them—their appearance is never described, their song is given to us only a snippet, and the reason for why we should fear them is never fully fleshed out—although the structure of feeling that surrounds them is primarily one characterized by fear. The “eerie art” of the Sirens, whom Ford sees as “infernal counterparts of the Muses,” “shows the dangers of an unmediated contact with the heroic tradition.” It shows the *Odyssey*, through its hero and part-time narrator, as if it were itself retreating from their island, recognizing their song to be overwhelming and dangerous, “a piece of art that seduces its audience unto death.”<sup>30</sup>

A strand of post-structuralist criticism has also seized on the indeterminacy of their affective presence in the poem to argue that episode forms a *mise-en-abîme* of the *Odyssey*’s negotiation of tradition—a tradition which it ends up folding into itself.<sup>31</sup> For instance, Maurice Blanchot wrote that entire epic *n’était rien d’autre que le mouvement accompli par Ulysse au sein de l’espace que lui ouvre le Chant des Sirènes* [“is nothing other than the movement performed by Ulysses in the heart of the space that the Song of the Sirens opens to him”].<sup>32</sup> To think of the epic as a response to cues scripted within its own narrative helps us see the recursive quality of any notion of tradition, the two views of tradition as “inert” mass belonging the past and as a “selective” strategy that determines the present. In these terms, Odysseus’ struggle as he charts an asymptotic trajectory past the island of the Sirens gives the *Odyssey* its determined and authoritative shape, set against the endlessly proliferating background of myth and poetry that preceded it. The appeal of Odysseus’ grand labors in the episode obfuscate its many flaws.

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<sup>30</sup> Nooter 2018, 41

<sup>31</sup> Peraino 2006, Salecl 1999, Todorov 1971, Horkheimer and Adorno 2002 [1944/7]

<sup>32</sup> Blanchot 1959, 13-14.

One way of thinking of this tension is to remember that, by the time he tells the story, Odysseus is the only surviving witness to that encounter. And although it seems to assume a kind of haunting importance in the narration to the Phaeacians, he can barely keep his facts straight. The structure of feeling that emerges is complicated by this. Later paintings of this episode have consequently focused on the haunted quality of the episode's fragmentary presentation.<sup>33</sup> In an image on an Attic red-figure stamnos, we see one Siren in flight, nose-diving onto Odysseus' ship, and two others appear perched and ready to follow its lead (Figure 1).

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<sup>33</sup> I give these images only a brief treatment, since a thorough survey of the visual reception of the Sirens in antiquity, emphasizing the interplay of art and ideology, can be found in Grethlein 2017, 1-18



**Figure 1** *Odysseus and the Sirens, Attic red-figured stamnos by Siren Painter, British Museum, 480-470 BCE*

Perhaps, the painting is to be understood as a narrative scene: the diving Siren is the same Siren that started out further on the right. The painting catches two moments in a progression—the Siren perched, then, a second later, diving down through the ship's rigging. Even so, this visual multiplication intensifies the way in which the Sirens haunt the scene through their minatory presence.

In a Pompeian wall-painting the haunting gets even worse—the Sirens' own islands are haunted by skeletons that seem nearly to be standing straight, a ghostly and eternal audience to the Sirens' endless song (Figure 2).



**Figure 2** *Odysseus and the Sirens, Pompeian wall painting, British Museum, 50-75 CE*

As renderings of the type-scene established by the Homeric epic, these paintings engage their subject through several media-specific transformations of the episode. As Grethlein notes, these paintings introduce a multiplicity of islands from which the minatory presence of the Sirens converges on Odysseus' ship—charting out a multi-directional soundscape.<sup>34</sup> The introduction of motion I discussed in the first painting might similarly be interpreted as a synesthetic movement that represents not just the passing of time, but also the reverberation of sound. Such affective

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<sup>34</sup> Grethlein 2017, 8-9

dimensions of the episode are generally heightened in literary reception as well, as in Apollonius of Rhodes' rendering of the Argo's encounter with the Sirens—in which a frantic acoustic battle takes place between Orpheus and the Sirens, as the former attempts to drown out their alluring song with his own (4.891ff.).<sup>35</sup>

But all these details represent an unusual kind of departure from the *Odyssey*—and not merely because the “sly” literary treatment they receive in the epic resists transformation into a visual medium, as Grethlein suggests.<sup>36</sup> Rather, the details are unusual because through their richness they show up by contrast just how empty the *Odyssey*'s portrait of the Sirens really is: no mimetic description, no soundscape, only one island (ambiguously described, as I discuss below), and not even a lick of wind to rustle some feathers (if they had any). In brief, the receptions expose that the Sirens are characterized much more haphazardly through Odysseus' narration than is usually noted, and that it is our investment in coherence and concrete imagery that helps to complete picture. The *Odyssey* seems to elicit—through its haunting residues of the Sirens—a kind of integrating desire, the temptation for the reader or audience (or a later painter) to do the *Odyssey*'s work of persuasion on its behalf.

In this section, I will instead detail just how underdetermined an image of the Sirens is presented in the *Odyssey*, and how the unreliable translation produces an empty portrait that then contrasts the much clearer picture that emerges of Odysseus himself, as he styles himself before the Phaeacians, and of his crewmates—the sailors at work at their sailing. Indeed, if we take one last glance at the paintings above, we can see that it is the sailors and Odysseus that are the figures at the center of the scene. The parallel lines of the oars, the ship, and the sailors' silhouetted bodies

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<sup>35</sup> On the construction of this scene out of diverse poetic precedents, see Hunter 2015, 205, with bibliography.

<sup>36</sup> Grethlein 2017, 7

(or heads lined up in profile, on the *stamnos*) form the substantial moving foundations from which Odysseus emerges, like a slender pillar. In the wall painting especially, practically *in cruce*, it takes me a second to unsee the halo haunting his head. I argue that the *Odyssey*'s poetics of unease develops a similar misdirection of emphasis within the Sirens episode itself: it shows us a self-consciously narcissistic narrative that draws attention away from anything that is not Odysseus himself, at the same time that that self-consciousness activates unease because audiences become aware that the narrative is necessarily self-serving.

To unpack the poem along these lines, I build on Pucci's suggestion that "a synchronic analysis of the three scenes [in which the encounter with the Sirens is articulated] ... would be rewarding," particularly one that "take[s] into account both the personality of the narrators and the strategy of the narrative... for we cannot neglect the fact that the song of the Sirens is related and termed a ruinous "enchantment" by three masters of incantation and magic," namely, Circe, Odysseus, and the narrator.<sup>37</sup> In fact, with a minute exception, every reprise of the Sirens episode is ultimately focalized through Odysseus. By the time the Phaeacians hear of the Sirens, other witnesses are either unavailable (Circe) or dead (his men). He is therefore virtually the only narrator capable of evoking the event. As part of Odysseus' broader analepsis presented to the Phaeacians, three moments of nested prolepsis lead up to the actual encounter: Circe's instructions to Odysseus (12.39-54), Odysseus's repetition of the instructions to his crew (12.160-5), and the preparation for the encounter that then blends into the encounter itself (12.166-200). This complex "viewpoint blending" (or metalepsis) and "embedded focalization" grants us insight on the overarching narrator's conferral of narratorial agency onto Odysseus, who accordingly shapes his narrative for an explicit internal audience (the Phaeacians), whom he

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<sup>37</sup> Pucci 1997, 7, 7-8 n. 12. On the position of the episode between the Calypso and Circe episodes, see Deriu 2019 and Vernant 1986.

intends to please.<sup>38</sup> But by allowing Odysseus the exclusive right to shape his version of events, the Odyssean narrator also allows Odysseus to reveal himself an unreliable and motivated narrator (as Pucci intuited, hinting at his narratorial “personality”). Subtle but important discrepancies emerge—“distinctions” across repetitions that, “precisely because they are fragile, define the special authority Homeric epic claims for itself, and when we too rapidly demystify them, we fail to see how the epic sees itself.”<sup>39</sup>

The discrepancies between Circe’s instructions as Odysseus repeats them to the Phaeacians (12.39-54) and the same instructions as Odysseus tells the Phaeacians he repeated them to his men (12.160-5) provide rich first examples of residues. One crucial difference concerns the very necessity of Odysseus’ stratagem. As Odysseus reports her words, Circe’s proposal is open ended: ἀτὰρ αὐτὸς ἀκουέμεν αἶ κ’ ἐθέλησθα [“but should you want to listen...”] (12.49). But when Odysseus reports how he repeated the instructions to his men, her proposal becomes an exclusive and direct command: οἷον ἔμ’ ἠνώγει ὄπ’ ἀκουέμεν [“she bade me alone to listen to their voice”] (12.160). The gap is available to both internal and external audiences. As Marianne Hopman notes in reference to similar issues, “the Phaeacians are described [in the *Odyssey*] as perfectly capable to pick on the traditional referentiality of Odysseus’ narrative ... and understand the rhetorical implications of Odysseus’ storytelling” because “they are seasoned auditors of epic poetry,” who, among other things, even have their own resident bard.<sup>40</sup> Therefore, Odysseus’ formulation exposes from the start that his narration is motivated by the view of himself and of his labor that he wants to promote, more than by the alleged events.

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<sup>38</sup> Bonifazi 2018, de Jong 2004. See also Hopman 2012 for similar readings of Odysseus’ motivation with respect to his audience.

<sup>39</sup> Scodel 1998, 171-2

<sup>40</sup> Hopman 2012, 22

The oscillating description of the Sirens' island offers us a more complex instance of Odysseus' reformulation of Circe's instructions. This is what Odysseus reports to the Phaeacians that Circe said.

ὅς τις ἀιδρεΐη πελάση καὶ φθόγγον ἀκούση  
Σειρήνων, τῷ δ' οὐ τι γυνὴ καὶ νήπια τέκνα  
οἴκαδε νοστήσαντι παρίσταται οὐδὲ γάνυνται,  
ἀλλὰ τε Σειρήνες λιγυρῆ θέλγουσιν ἀοιδῆ  
ἤμεναι ἐν λειμῶνι, πολὺς δ' ἀμφ' ὀστεόφιν θίς  
ἀνδρῶν πυθομένων, περὶ δὲ ῥινοὶ μινύθουσι. (12.41-6)

Whoever may draw near, in ignorance [of the danger], and listens to the voice  
Of the Sirens, will not return home, so that his wife and children  
/ may stand by him and rejoice.  
Instead, the Sirens charm him with their clear-voiced song,  
As they sit in a meadow, a great pile of bones around them  
Of the rotting men, their skin shriveling around them.

This highly textured description develops an opposition between ignorant and knowledgeable, casts the failure of the ignorant in terms of the loss of familial unity (clearly echoing Odysseus own anxiety about returning home), and it describes the effect of the Sirens' song in uncomfortably visceral terms—potentially even introducing a pun through the participle *πυθομένων* (here evidently the present of *πύθω* ["to rot"] but identical in form to the aorist of *πυνθάνομαι* ["to learn, to inquire"]), the meaning "they were curious" haunting the meaning "now they are rotting." The Sirens' island asymmetrically reproduces the predicament of Agamemnon's singer. Their audiences appear to meet a fate similar to that foreseen for the singer. Unlike him, the Sirens are (it seems) immortal and can continue to utter their songs indefinitely. But, like him, they are similarly isolated—their song and their tradition, stranded, will not reach audiences on foreign shores.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Hyginus in *Fabulae* 125 suggests that the Sirens' fate was to keep singing until someone stopped by. This late text is likely building on the outcome of the narrative of the *Odyssey*, but it may shed light on a popular conception about the Sirens' mortality or immortality. The *Odyssey* does not make their immortality explicit, as I discuss below.

The usual understanding is that the men are either killed by the Sirens or that their song is so enchanting it captivates audiences unto their death—a total entertainment that makes them forget the need for food, the desire for their families, and thereby shatters the social order of mankind. But evidence for the violent monstrosity of the Sirens is not available in the *Odyssey* (unless their monstrous behavior is inferred from the bones and this specific passage is used as evidence). That their song is endlessly long or that it permanently enraptures its audience is also never stated in the poem, although this misprision may stem from a common misreading of Odysseus’ summary of the episode to Penelope. He tells her that he Σειρήνων ἀδινάων φθόγγων ἄκουσεν [“he heard the voice of the loud-voiced sirens”] (23.326). Over the last one hundred years, ἀδινάων [“thick, close packed,” hence, “loud,” perhaps, etymologically, “satisfying”] has sometimes been taken to mean “unceasing” or “endless,” either in the sense of “who sing unceasingly” (preserving the syntax of the verse, as in A. T. Murray’s translation) or as “endless voices” (by presuming hypallage and adjusting the syntax, as in Emily Wilson’s recent translation).<sup>42</sup> While such translations have their own elegance, the meaning of ἀδινάων is forcefully transformed by an assumption made, it appears, on the basis of the passage above, and not on any evidence that their song behaves in such a way.<sup>43</sup>

The audience is not presented with an explicit connection between the Sirens’ song and the dead bodies, and it is not at all clear that the Sirens are even deadly. And while it may seem eminently reasonable to infer that the bones are related to the activity of the Sirens, the *Odyssey* frustrates any simple reading of that connection. Odysseus’ own role in this characterization of

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<sup>42</sup> Murray 1919, Wilson 2018

<sup>43</sup> In a tenuous attempt to address this issue, we could take the subjunctive in 12.191 as “having a future sense,” implying “this means that their song is without end” because it would be impossible to stop singing of the future, if the future is assumed to be boundless—see de Jong 2004, 298-9. This is hardly satisfying. The notion of their infinite song is grounded in a series of interpretive assumptions that have taken on a life of their own, as I will discuss further, below.

the Sirens and their island opens itself to further scrutiny when he repeats the description of the island to his own men. His retelling omits any mention of the pile of bones and the shriveling bodies.

Σειρήνων μὲν πρῶτον ἀνώγει θεσπεσιῶν  
φθόγγον ἀλεύασθαι καὶ λειμῶν' ἀνθεμόεντα. (12.158-9)

First, she told me to avoid the divinely sweet  
Voice and their flowery meadow.

Flowers suggestively replace the bones and bodies. There are several ways to account for this problem, but they are all unsatisfying (perhaps precisely because they are too neat). For example, we could see the epithet as marking the island as a *locus amoenus*, in keeping with islands Odysseus visits in which he meets women characterized as dangerous, or where the ways of life have their own, more mysterious but darker sides.<sup>44</sup> It is also possible that an audience aware of a diverse set of narratives about the Sirens would have recognized in this discrepancy two versions of the island that both made it into the *Odyssey*.<sup>45</sup> A more narratological, intentional explanation can be provided by arguing that Odysseus is concealing the most terrifying aspect of the Sirens from his men, leaving only a minor trace of their monstrosity to shine through, as if to steel them against the oncoming terror. But, if anything, a mention of the bones and bodies would serve to consolidate Odysseus' argument that the Sirens are a threat that the sailors should take very seriously. Omitting their mention may weaken the appeal to his men and displays bad leadership, or it may be an expedient to avoid the risk of mutiny. But all of these readings attempt to restore a coherence, continuity, and sincerity to Odysseus' narration. But the issue is that Odysseus has

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<sup>44</sup> Xian 2018. Consider also the parallel to the island of the Lotus-Eaters, οἳ τ' ἄνθινον εἶδαρ ἔδουσιν [“they who eat the flower food”] that also suggests a seductive, society destroying appeals by ending the desire for *nostos* (9.84).

<sup>45</sup> See *inter alia* Gresseth 1970, Reinhardt 1960, Pollard 1952.

once again revealed himself an inconsistent narrator. So, “the question remains: did a huge pile of bones in fact lie around the Sirens?”<sup>46</sup>

Pucci’s tongue-in-cheek question points to a very real issue about what we think we know about the Sirens, and how we know it. Although certain traditional readings (and misreadings) have set a template for interpretation, we are not bound to follow them. Given the actual evidence of the *Odyssey*, there are rather different ways we could read Circe’s (or Odysseus’) island covered in bones, particularly if we remember that, while the voice of the Sirens is divine-like, there is no evidence in the poem that they themselves are necessarily divine. What could Odysseus be hiding from view as he asks his audience to imagine two dangerous singers (women, too) on a remote island, surrounded by bones? By pointing to the seductive and dangerous aspects of poetry, Odysseus could be read as describing competitors to his own way of telling his (and the *Odyssey*’s) story, monstrosifying them. What if the Sirens were just a couple of abandoned singers just trying to get their story heard (or have themselves and their tradition rescued)? What if the bones were the bones of Agamemnon’s court singer, or the bones of previously ex-isled bards? Through the depiction of Odysseus imperfect narration, the Odyssean narrator allows the narrator it has here empowered reveal himself engaged in the ideological process of claiming continuity in the face of a clear divergence. Here we have one of the clearest pictures of the *Odyssey*’s poetics of unease.

My reading of Odysseus’ motivated characterization of the Sirens as the uncomfortable truths of tradition is confirmed by his categorical desire to prevent anyone but himself from hearing the song of the Sirens. When he repeats the song to the Phaeacians, he does not report any substantial part of the privileged knowledge that he may have acquired.

ἀλλ’ ὅτε τόσσον ἀπῆμεν ὅσον τε γέγωνε βοήσας,

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<sup>46</sup> Pucci 1997, 8 n. 13

ρίμφα διώκοντες, τὰς δ' οὐ λάθην ὠκύαλος νηῖς  
ἐγγύθεν ὀρνυμένη, λιγυρὴν δ' ἔντυνον ἀοιδὴν·  
δεῦρ' ἄγ' ἰὼν, πολύαιν' Ὀδυσσεῦ, μέγα κῦδος Ἀχαιῶν,  
νηῖα κατάστησον, ἵνα νωιτέρην ὅπ' ἀκούσης.  
οὐ γάρ πώ τις τῆδε παρήλασε νηὶ μελαίνῃ,  
πρὶν γ' ἡμέων μελίγηρυν ἀπὸ στομάτων ὅπ' ἀκοῦσαι,  
ἀλλ' ὅ γε τερψάμενος νεῖται καὶ πλείονα εἰδώς.  
ἴδμεν γάρ τοι πάνθ' ὅσ' ἐνὶ Τροίῃ εὐρείῃ  
Ἀργεῖοι Τρῳῆς τε θεῶν ἰότητι μόγησαν,  
ἴδμεν δ', ὅσσα γένηται ἐπὶ χθονὶ πουλυβοτείρῃ. (12.181-91)

But when we reached shouting distance  
Driving quickly by, the swift ship did not escape their notice  
As it drew nearer, and they intoned their clear song.  
“Come here, Odysseus of the many tales, great glory of the Achaeans.  
Stop your ship, in order to hear us two [Sirens].  
For never has any man yet passed by this island in a black ship  
Before he has heard our sweet voice, from our mouths.  
Indeed, enjoying it so, he goes onward knowing more.  
For we know all those things in wide Troy  
That the Argives and Trojans suffered due to the gods' will,  
And we know all the things that will be on the nourishing earth.”

As an external audience, we should not expect to hear the song in full, given the conventions of reporting songs within Homeric poetics.<sup>47</sup> But the recitation of a proem is in and of itself an unusual and polyvalent gesture.<sup>48</sup> It announces the subject of their song and implies the epistemic advantage that Odysseus now controls, to the exclusion of his shipmates and of the Phaeacian audience. In this case, it is an absolute knowledge. A condescending affect colors this passage, as Odysseus teases his listeners by cutting short his narration and specifying that he was so enraptured that he struggled to listen on (12.192- 200).<sup>49</sup>

Instead of the Sirens' song we have Odysseus' song. David Schur argues that the *Odyssey* overwrites the absence of the Sirens' voice by focusing on Odysseus' sense of his own triumph,

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<sup>47</sup> Palmisciano 2007

<sup>48</sup> Moraes 2012, 98 cited in Moraes 2018, 4

<sup>49</sup> There is even the possibility that Odysseus did not hear anything more, and that this performance attempts to gloss over this fact. See Schur 2014.

which sympathetically produces “our sense of triumph over the Sirens” that “often leads us to mistake [the Sirens’] silence for their song.”<sup>50</sup> For many readers this strategy is eminently successful and the actual content of the Sirens’ song falls out of speculative interest because Odysseus’ heroic labor and his own song “essentially replaces the song of the Sirens” within the *Odyssey*, and “the epic—in its self-affirming role as a master narrative—does this by making over the sung promise into the *promised* song.”<sup>51</sup> But we have seen that the *Odyssey* leaves the question of the song’s content and its value open-ended. Our curiosity is not attenuated by Odysseus’ claims, although his ominous characterization of the Sirens may make us hesitant.

If there is a sense in which the Sirens’ song becomes the song of Odysseus’ triumph it is to be found within the poem’s first line. The Sirens do not open through an invocation to the Muses, but with a direct invocation of Odysseus. As Richard Steadman-Jones argues (with reference to Derrida’s theory of the “call”), the Sirens interpellate Odysseus through an “archival promise” of traditional knowledge, constituting him through “an archival concept of subjectivity, one in which the self consists of a storehouse of the already uttered,” who is only then recognized as a “distinct and autonomous subject.”<sup>52</sup> Accordingly, they call to him with the words *πολύαιν’ Ὀδυσσεῦ*, adopting an epithet which can mean both “Odysseus of whom many stories are told” but also “Odysseus, who has many stories to tell.”<sup>53</sup> Pucci contextualizes this unique noun epithet combination with respect to his argument that we have here a generally Iliadic tone, i.e. that the Sirens represent the Iliadic background from which the *Odyssey* is departing, through the metaphor of sailing by the island.<sup>54</sup> But more broadly, the tradition, the

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<sup>50</sup> Schur 2014, 2

<sup>51</sup> Schur 2014, 2

<sup>52</sup> Steadman-Jones 2013, 24

<sup>53</sup> Peradotto 1993, 173

<sup>54</sup> Pucci 1997, 2

epic “plupast” of the *Odyssey*, is calling to Odysseus and constituting him as its editor, investing him with the right to determine what is canon, and what is not.

Turning with the knowledge above to the manner in which Odysseus reports he was able to listen to the Sirens, we will see that it provides fertile grounds for several reparative readings of the Sirens episode. Tying himself to the mast and plugging the ears of his sailors, Odysseus develops himself into a listening machine through a mixture of mechanical and biological engineering that evinces his unease with the threat that the Sirens’ song may pose to his self-established identity and the integrity of his future *kleos*. The machine-building aspect of the episode concretizes the power dynamics of Odysseus’ rule in both social and narrative terms—exploring issues central to his identity, which he is in the process of shoring up against any possible change.<sup>55</sup> The song he reports the Sirens as singing is one that is highly confirming of this identity: the picture that emerges is one of Odysseus as an inflexible individual who resists all sorts of invitations to change, precisely in order to secure his homecoming and the restoration of the old status quo. The manner in which the labor of his crew muted in this micronarrative is itself telling, given how much Odysseus’ own labors are emphasized in this episode, and since the work of the men (and their agency) is elsewhere thematized in greater depth.<sup>56</sup>

Binding himself to the mast, Odysseus attempts to transform himself into a “tape” recorder. His embeddedness into the machinery is emphasized in one of his own additions to Circe’s instructions, the purpose clause ὄφρ’ ἔμπεδον αὐτόθι μίμνω [“that I may remain firmly in

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<sup>55</sup> By looking at Odysseus’ identity in terms of class, sexuality, and mental health, I do not mean to use the *Odyssey* as a staging ground for modern concerns, or to equate modern understandings of class, sexuality, and mental health (and their intersections) with ancient ones. Rather, I use these categories heuristically to point to the broad manner in which the *Odyssey* uses a poetics of unease to show us just how fragile Odysseus’ identity is precisely in a moment in which he is so actively working to secure it against any possible fluctuation.

<sup>56</sup> Although, as in the episode of the Cattle of the Sun or in the one of the Lotus-Eaters, their agency is described in such a way as to emphasize how it leads to their demise—making them into convenient foils for Odysseus to explain away his own success. For a reading of the proem of the *Odyssey* as foreshadowing this trend, see Nagler 1990.

place where I am”] (12.161).<sup>57</sup> The construction of ships is a well-attested metapoetic trope in the *Odyssey*, and one that usually prefigures an encounter with tradition.<sup>58</sup> But rarely do we encounter as detailed a procedural description of the building or modification of both a ship and its crew as we do in the Sirens episode, in which the technological and prosthetic extension of Odysseus’ body and its capabilities is documented in a form that can be analyzed closely.<sup>59</sup>

That the bonds serve to hold together Odysseus’ identity can be seen in the language of his pseudo-repetition of Circe’s instructions (originally given at 12.36-54) to his men. I noted above that one shift is that Circe’s invitation becomes a command. But Odysseus’ emphasis on the act of binding is also expanded substantially, heightening the urgency surrounding the encounter, “turning Kirke’s flirtatious suggestion into a compelling proposition,” even though the men will not reap the benefits of their labor.<sup>60</sup> The instructions center on him grammatically and figuratively, as a pole (or post) around which the men’s activity takes place—and to which the bonds and ropes fasten him ever more tightly.

οἷον ἔμ’ ἠνώγει ὄπ’ ἀκουέμεν· ἀλλὰ με δεσμῶ  
 δήσατ’ ἐν ἀργαλέῳ, ὄφρ’ ἔμπεδον αὐτόθι μίμνω,  
 ὀρθὸν ἐν ἰστοπέδῃ, ἐκ δ’ αὐτοῦ πείρατ’ ἀνήφθω.  
 εἰ δέ κε λίσσωμαι ὑμέας λῦσαι τε κελεύω,  
 ὑμεῖς δὲ πλεόνεσσι τότ’ ἐν δεσμοῖσι πιέζειν. (12.160-5)

She bid that I alone should listen to the voice [of the Sirens]; but bind me  
 With a painful bond, that I may remain firmly in place where I am,  
 Upright at the foot of the mast, and from the mast make fast some ropes.  
 And should I to implore or command you to set me free,  
 Then tie me up with more bonds.

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<sup>57</sup> The use of the term ἔμπεδον is programmatic, highlighting his integration into the whole and coloring it with the moral weight of all things being correctly disposed, perhaps even proposing a comparison with his own bed, which is embedded into the oikos and ἔμπεδον, a symbol of his rule and the sexual economy of Ithaca that needs to be restored since it is a sign of identity. See Zeitlin 1995, 125-6, and also a broader approach in Eccleston 2019, 25.

<sup>58</sup> Dougherty 2001, 19-20

<sup>59</sup> Other examples of unique craftwork in Homer have also been described as metapoetic. See Nooter 2018.

<sup>60</sup> Peraino 2006, 14

For Peraino, the *Odyssey* here revels in the language of tying and binding, presenting a barely muted sexualized “scene of bondage.”<sup>61</sup> She reads the quasi-sadistic mingling of pleasure and pain and the seductive qualities of the Sirens as a reversal of the heteronormative order espoused by Odysseus’ mission to return to Penelope and restore the power of his (nuclear and typical, heteronormative) family. The game of bondage allows Odysseus to flirt with the queer encounter represented by the Sirens without an actual risk to that sexual order.<sup>62</sup> Peraino’s reading is cogent in its suggestive approach to Odysseus’ exploratory desire as a form of heteronormativity and the dangers of seduction (etymologically, a “leading astray,” from Lat. *se-duco*) as a form of queerness in which the heteronormative revels, but while maintaining its distance. Certainly, to never return home to wife and children (as Circe put it) represents the Sirens in terms that are threatening to the restoration of social and sexual order at Ithaca (no less than being seduced by Calypso, or Circe herself).

But it is not clear that the elements of bondage are necessarily indicative of “seduction” away from a heteronormative order in a society, like the *Odyssey*’s, in which sexuality was understood largely as a relation of dominance and possession.<sup>63</sup> The queerness of the episode is therefore to be located in Odysseus’ willingness to be constrained by his inferiors, and his constitution of two selves—one subjected, who has precedent over the other, domineering self that issues instructions to his crew.<sup>64</sup> The overdetermined description of the bondage presents an uncomfortable residue that asks us to think through how power dynamics can be inverted for the sake of maintaining power whilst appearing to renounce it, or by conveniently feigning forms of passivity.

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<sup>61</sup> Peraino 2006, 14

<sup>62</sup> Peraino 2006, 15-19

<sup>63</sup> Discussed further with reference to the slave women, below, with bibliography.

<sup>64</sup> See an analogous discussion in Ainslie 2001, 40-42.

The kind of help that Odysseus requires of his men is really an affectively very difficult form of care. They are instructed to ignore the orders and entreaties of their leader, and even to apply stronger and more painful bonds as Odysseus experiences an “utter failure of mind in the presence of the music.”<sup>65</sup> They are in essence tasked with preserving his earlier identity even against his express, later will. This form of contractual reasoning has achieved its own classical posterity as the “Ulysses contract” or “Ulysses pact” (*vel sim.*) in psychotherapy, economics, and social theory.<sup>66</sup> In this kind of contract, the subject’s proleptic instructions countermand any later order, whether or not given in a state of sound (to avoid regressive decision-making at all costs). Odysseus pacts have been scrutinized and critiqued heavily for some of their ethical suppositions, which do not necessarily map onto the world of the *Odyssey*. But there are several aspects that can be highlighted, although the analogy may be imperfect, such as the deeply conservative nature of such decision making (and its unclear positive outcomes as a kind of escalation of commitment), the hierarchical structure of the strategy (in which the future is discounted as accomplished, cleaving the subject’s agency), and, most importantly, the physical and affective difficulty with which this kind of contract is enforced (the labor is usually unilaterally decided upon by a subject and then actually performed by people who are not the subject, but who must be willing to both care for and work against the will of the subject).<sup>67</sup> It is unsurprising that Odysseus’ affective world entirely overwrites that of the men, who robotically execute his commands, although Odysseus’ “hyperbolic discounting [of the future] sets a person against herself and makes Ulysses hearing the Sirens the enemy of Ulysses setting out for home,” and by implication a threat to the very lives he promised to preserve.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Peraino 2006, 15

<sup>66</sup> Dresser 1984

<sup>67</sup> Atkinson 2004. See also Elster 2000, 1981.

<sup>68</sup> Ainslie 2001, 62

An audience, including the Phaeacians as expert mariners, would have noted that Odysseus' pleasure is afforded to him by the men, who provide him care as part of their labor, so that he may ultimately remain unaltered (and in the process they forego both pleasure and care, not least because they all end up dead soon after). His passivity and powerlessness are then fabricated tools through which to make the Sirens' song become true—to escape the manner in which his own agency and actions haunt the traditions of his representation. For a moment, his status as a passive aural instrument seems to be ratified when, realizing that he cannot shout orders or entreaties to his men (because of the wax stopping their ears), he has to nod at them to signal that he wants to be released (12.192-7). But because he has transformed the entire crew and the ship into a prosthesis that acts on his behalf, his loss of control is a simulation that actually established a clear hierarchy of privilege.

Throughout the episode, the *Odyssey* offers us also another narrative of the Sirens episode—keyed to the bodies of the men do not get to rest from active work. Even the supernatural conspires against them as their humanity and their labor are placed into relation with a natural environment that affords them no rest. The gentle breeze ceases once the ship approaches the island of the Sirens, creating a νηνεμῖη γαλήνη [“windless serenity”] as a god lulls the waves to sleep (12.167-9). They intensify their labor in order to counteract these conditions.

ἀνστάντες δ' ἔταροι νεὸς ἰστία μῆρυσαντο  
καὶ τὰ μὲν ἐν νηὶ γλαφυρῇ θέσαν, οἱ δ' ἐπ' ἔρετμὰ  
ἔζόμενοι λεύκαινον ὕδωρ ξεστῆς ἐλάτησιν. (12.170-2)

The comrades stood up and drew down the ship's sail  
And they placed it within the hollow ship, and then they  
Sat down and made the water white with their polished oars.

Their physical labor permits the encounter to take place safely in spite of nature's dangerous invitation to slow down as the island comes into view. The passage acts as a commentary on the powers of technology to extend the range of human possibility, but it also reveals how the benefits of that activity are disproportionately accorded to the various agents involved in the labor implied by that process.

Their bodies are further subjugated by the wax placed in their ears. This gesture is much more complex than it may seem, both in principle and in the excessive, rich terms in which the *Odyssey* describes it. Evidence of the peculiar emphasis on the wax itself as a means of defense or analgesic can be found in the confused reception it has received, in medieval times and often much later, by writers who recall Odysseus putting the wax into his own ears.<sup>69</sup> While this does not happen in the *Odyssey*, it is true that the emphasis is certainly on Odysseus as the one who produces wax as a negative prosthetics that will integrate the men's bodies more firmly into the machinery he has designed.

αὐτὰρ ἐγὼ κηροῖο μέγαν τροχὸν ὀξεί χαλκῶ  
τυτθὰ διατμήξας χερσὶ στιβαρῆσι πῖεζον·  
αἴψα δ' ἰαίνεται κηρός, ἐπεὶ κέλετο μεγάλη ἴς  
Ἥελίου τ' αὐγῆ Ὑπεριονίδαο ἄνακτος·  
ἐξείης δ' ἐτάροισιν ἐπ' οὔατα πᾶσιν ἄλειψα. (12.173-7)

I cut a large block of wax with my sharp sword  
into small pieces, kneading it with my strong hands.  
Immediately the wax softened, commanded by the great force of  
Helios and the rays of lord Hyperion.  
Subsequently I smeared it onto the ears of all my comrades.

The process of Odysseus' labor contrasts starkly with the labor of the sailors. His much less intensive manual activity is directly aided by the natural and supernatural conditions of climate and gods. The overdetermined description of the simple kneading of wax into small pieces draws

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<sup>69</sup> Vredveld 2001. On other misprisions related to the richness of this passage, see Spina 2007.

attention to itself on a metaphorical and lexical level—not least because this passage is still part of Odysseus’ narration to the Phaeacians, forming a peculiar aside. Indeed, lexical technicalities in the passage have invited scrutiny, and at least one scholar has claimed that 12.176 is interpolated.<sup>70</sup> As one commentator put it, “there seems to be a conscious touch of humour in the use of such majestic language to describe the kneading of a cake of wax.”<sup>71</sup> But the superfluous contrivance in the language evinces a commentary on the relation of labor, the supernatural, and the natural. The heat is described as ἴς [“a force”], a term more usually applied to a person’s physical vigor or strength. As a force, it κέλετο [“commands”] the wax to soften. The choice of verb accords with its divine origin, since κέλομαι is used nearly exclusively in Homer for divine exhortations, and usually only for persons.<sup>72</sup> The wax’s property as an object that absorbs voice is highlighted by this metaphor, in which the heat invokes the wax to mollify as if through speech. Odysseus is shaping this tool like he shapes tradition—in order to block out other narratives about his motivations, he introduces the presence of the divine into the expediency of the wax itself.

When he applies the prosthetic, the ecofact of the wax becomes an instrument through which to seal their ears, impeding their body from experiencing that which their labor might permit them to enjoy. Closing an opening into their body, he forecloses their pleasure as well as one of their senses. No further window is offered onto the affective reality of the silent pantomime into which the sailors are plunged. Odysseus seems to be saving their lives, but in fact he is securing the efficacy of their labor, assuring that they will keep their head down and

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<sup>70</sup> Nitzsch’s position, reported in Merry *et al.* 1886, *ad loc.*

<sup>71</sup> Merry *et al.* 1886, *ad loc.*

<sup>72</sup> Merry *et al.* 1886, *ad loc.*

row onward no matter what happens. Their role is now purely technological, “they reproduce the life of the oppressor as part of their own.”<sup>73</sup>

Here, the *Odyssey* seems to approach the “administered world” that Sianne Ngai (following Adorno) takes as characterizing the affective contours of late modernity.<sup>74</sup> On one level, Adorno’s own readings of the *Odyssey* seem to have prepared the ground for treating the episode as an inevitable pre-figuration of the capitalist workplace. The sailors are, to an extent, workers in a “floating factory.”<sup>75</sup> And as Adorno puts it, “workers must look ahead with alert concentration and ignore anything which lies to one side. The urge toward distraction must be grimly sublimated in redoubled exertions. Thus the workers are made practical.”<sup>76</sup> Certainly, the structures of feeling in the episode permit for such identification and provide a key to navigating the kinds of ideological implications that Adorno describes in his work.

But Adorno overlooks the affective critique that the episode makes available to a reparatively minded reader or listener. The episode is not merely a parable of a boss who desires his workers perform their tasks with increasing efficiency. It is also an episode that shows how the sailors’ desires are not aligned with those of Odysseus, to the extent that he has to physically impair them to make them useful to him. We see the sailors throughout the *Odyssey* eat of the lotus, feast on Helios’ herds, open a bag of winds that should have remained shut—their desires are defined as idling, silly, and wretched, and finally they themselves are ungovernable, uncaring about consequences (all meanings of ἀτασθαλία).<sup>77</sup> *Cui bono?* If ἀτασθαλία was understood to be literally the θάλλειν [“flowering, proliferation”] of ἄτη [“misfortune, disaster, delusion, folly,

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<sup>73</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno 2002 [1944/7], 27

<sup>74</sup> Ngai 2007, 1.

<sup>75</sup> Stoetzler 2018, 149

<sup>76</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno 2002 [1944/7], 26

<sup>77</sup> The adjective is applied to the sailors from the opening proem of the poem. See Nagler 1990, cited already above.

error”], why is it Odysseus’ role to impose his meaning of care onto his men, whose own desires are relatively inscrutable but that may desire other things—less idealized things, and may even be tuning in to Sirens radio on their days off. Odysseus’ self-narration of the Sirens episode is shot through by a poetic of unease surrounding the ultimate inability of an ideology to persuade with finality. The skepticism the episode can at moments elicit concretizes that one man’s ideology—although it may mechanically corral the labor of his subjects—cannot properly and convincingly lay claim to their affective integration into its order. Their minds and desires are, to Odysseus self-professed sadness and chagrin, irredeemably their own.

### 3. Twelve Silenced Voices

In this section, I turn my attention to the execution of the twelve slave women in the *Odyssey*.<sup>78</sup> I extend my argument that the disposition of laboring bodies occasions a poetics of unease in the epic, and offer a further reparative reading that builds on a recent feminist return to the episode as a site of contestation, in which the values of the epic are most visibly thrown into question.

As part of the recent strand of feminist attention to the maids, Wilson supplemented her introduction to her translation of the *Odyssey* with a series of tweet threads, in which she often returned to the complex role that the maids play in the epic.<sup>79</sup> In one tweet she recalls a series of verses from Louis MacNeice’s *Autumn Journal* (1939).<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> I occasionally refer to the slave women as “maids,” following a convention that has rightly been critiqued in recent scholarship. In plain English, the term implies a degree of freedom that would not be afforded to slaves, and should not be confused with the realities of slavery. My use of the term as a shorthand should not be confused with a well-documented academic desire to avoid talking about the darker realities of the Homeric world, since these are very much the focus of my attention below. The *Odyssey* itself at times make explicit their servitude, and other moments clothes it in other terminologies. On this issue see Wilson 2018, 89, and Rankine 2011, 40.

<sup>79</sup> Wilson 2018, 1-79. See Wilson’s personal website (<https://www.emilyrcwilson.com/emilyrcwilson-scholia>) for archived threads.

<sup>80</sup> Wilson (@EmilyRCWilson), 7:46pm 11 June 2019.

and lastly  
I think of the slaves.  
And how one can imagine oneself among them  
I do not know;  
It was all so unimaginably different  
And all so long ago.<sup>81</sup>

The cognitive aporia articulated by MacNeice, and signaled by Wilson as applicable with particular force to the maids given their marked subalternity, has been met with a series of attempts to lend the maids a voice, or to otherwise make accessible the forms of structured violence in which their lives play out. When Margaret Atwood introduced her retelling of the maids' life, she wrote that *The Penelopiad* (2005) was born from the way the maids "haunted" her.<sup>82</sup> Consequently, she gives over a large portion of the novel to their voices, their thoughts, their songs. Her impulse to add to the *Odyssey* is echoed in other poems, by and Alicia Stallings and Rosanna Warren, for instance, who have probed at the affective contours of the episode in their own ways.

These accretive responses have found their scholarly parallels in nuanced reading of the *Odyssey*'s ideological profile, too. Leanne Hunnings draws our attention to the painful words with which Eurykleia identifies the disloyal slave women to Odysseus—a dozen girls singled out for execution.

τάων δώδεκα πᾶσαι ἀναιδείης ἐπέβησαν,  
οὔτ' ἐμὲ τίουσαι οὔτ' αὐτὴν Πηνελόπειαν.  
Τηλέμαχος δὲ νέον μὲν ἀέξετο, οὐδέ ἑ μήτηρ  
σημαίνειν εἶασκεν ἐπὶ δμῳῆσι γυναιξίν. (22.423-7)

[Of your fifty slave women] twelve in all have crossed into shamelessness,  
Listening neither to me nor to Penelope herself.  
Young Telemachus was still growing, and his mother would not  
Allow him to take command of these house-maids.

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<sup>81</sup> MacNeice 1939, 31

<sup>82</sup> Atwood 2005, xv

She hands them over, their sentencing a *fait accompli*. Sleeping with the suitors, they have controverted “the right of sexual access” that belonged to Odysseus alone, blurring the boundary between their sexual labor and their sexual pleasure, “they [had] not absorbed owning-class ideology sufficiently to remain ‘socially dead.’”<sup>83</sup> But the structures of feeling surrounding this episode are not so easy to access. Hunnings is exacting in her treatment of the maids’ “*apparent* autonomy” understanding this to be a specifically structured (sexual) unfreedom within a slave-owning society.<sup>84</sup> But there are affective components of the maids’ representation and their mistreatments in the epic that resist schematic ideological analysis.<sup>85</sup> These elements have no *ideo-logical* foundation—they are grounded instead in a perverse logic of affective excesses and of a masculine, dominant psychosexuality that accompanies the maids, as a kind of residue unto its own, through the poem and to the moment of their murder.

I have resisted the implication that the *Odyssey*’s poetics of unease renders the poem itself a straightforward reparative or emancipatory reading—and I continue to do so in this section. The reason for emphasizing this, is that I do in this instance see the *Odyssey* as offering up for critique elements of masculine psychology, and this critique indirectly offers a space for a reparative reading of the maids themselves, hence—as I understand it—the power of an accretive method in the incisive poetic and scholarly approaches sketched out above. Such readings affectively reframe the material—in so doing, they show us some minute components of the *Odyssey*’s structure of feeling that are otherwise commonly overlooked. In this section, I forward

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<sup>83</sup> Hunnings 2011, 60

<sup>84</sup> Hunnings 2011, 63

<sup>85</sup> Rankine has read into the passage above to suggest that the issue of the slave women bringing shame to household has been exposed by Eurykleia, who however does not imply that the slave women otherwise failed in completing their roles as part of the labor force of the household. Rankine 2011, 40.

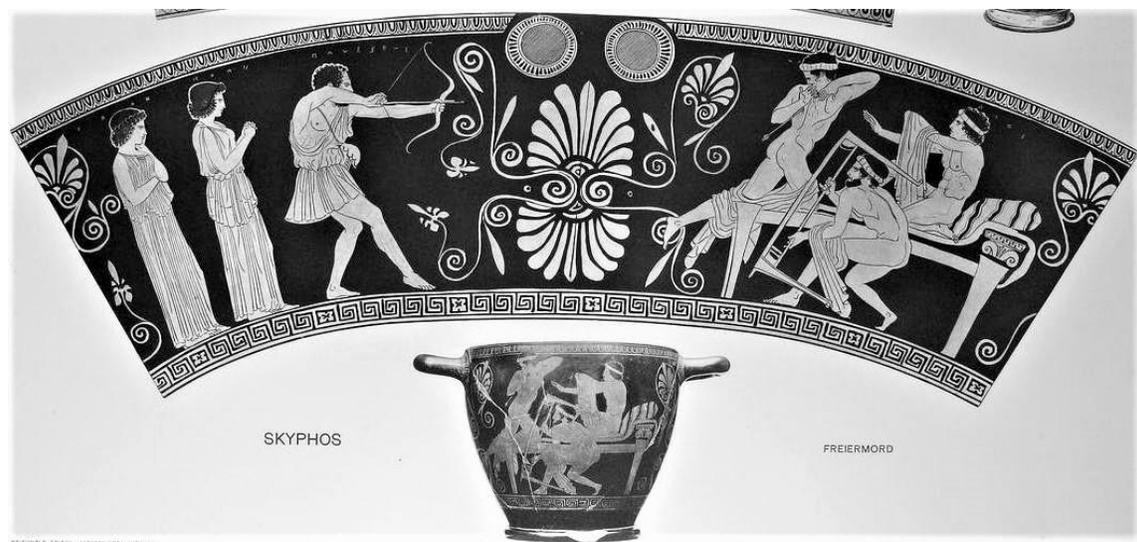
a mode of reading that is philologically more speculative than the one offered in previous sections and in chapter one. But by “speculative” I do not mean one that is less able to provide a rigorous account of the *Odyssey*’s residues. The speculation is necessary to get around the affective core of the poem (its negotiation of mainly masculine forms of power) to the marginalized networks of feminine labor (and the affects that they provoke). The speculative mode of reading is grounded by readings the poem has received (like those discussed above, and others) that allow for a rigorous appraisal of how the *Odyssey* appears to speak, in moments, nearly at cross purposes. In an etymological sense, the “speculation” rests on moments of later “reflection” understood as both a mirroring of minute aspects of the epic and as a ratiocination of its more localized implications.

The poetics of unease surrounding masculine agency thereby grants us an oblique window into elements of a marginalized reality in the *Odyssey*, that of feminine slave labor (both sexual and manual). The manner in which the feminine body is controlled, affectively and ideologically through patterns of masculine expectation, speech, and violence, provides an analogue for how tradition is conceived of as regulated, corralled body of material that paradigmatically pre-forms the present. For instance, to control women’s bodies is quite literally to control the reproduction of society and culture, and thus the forms of control imposed on those bodies can be read as a direct reflection of that which is perceived as unruly in tradition, since it resists the neatness of canonical order.

In other terms, my argument is that the maids’ bodies, like those of the Sirens and Agamemnon’s singer, encode potential other worlds, other narratives, other traditions—and as such they are dangerous *in potentia* as a site of narrative proliferations—ripples that would disrupt the ideological foundations of established order, a threat to Odysseus and his view of how

himself and his *oikos*.<sup>86</sup> By reading into these patterns of control, I show it is possible to elicit aspects of a reparative mode of reading from the poetics of unease in textual events that disclose such affective conflicts.

While the structures of feeling explored in Wilson and Atwood may appear to have a specifically modern tinge, it is telling that the *Odyssey* has occasioned at least one analogous restorative reflection in antiquity. This suggests that it is the *Odyssey* itself that offers us a space for thinking against the tradition of conservative values and the restoration of old orders espoused by the *Odyssey* as a whole. The maids afforded a fifth-century painter a powerful window into the *Odyssey*'s poetics of unease, urging him to restore a narrative and affective fullness to the maids.<sup>87</sup> Below is a fifth-century red-figure skyphos attributed to the so-called Penelope painter, depicting the slaughter of the suitors in remarkable and dynamic detail (see Figure 3).



**Figure 3** *The Slaughter of the Suitors: Odysseus and Maidservants, Attic red-figure Skyphos by the Penelope Painter, Antikensammlung Staatliche Museen zu Berlin-Preussischer, 440 BCE.*

<sup>86</sup> A similar argument is made about Dolios, the father of one of the maids, in Haller 2013. Discussed further, below.

<sup>87</sup> On reading vases as a form of reception, see Lowenstam 1992.

The Penelope painter is known for his narrative (and movement-oriented) compositions particularly suited to the skyphos shape, which he preferred.<sup>88</sup> His choice of themes, commonly mythological or Homeric, and his predilection for the skyphos as shape, allowed him to develop counterpoints between the two sides of the vase, in what Richard Neer (in reference to another skyphos by the Penelope painter) has called “programmatic contrast.”<sup>89</sup>

The horizontal arrangement of figures over both faces of this skyphos produces a “unified narrative” that “prompts the viewer to connect the two sides, but also the psychological states of the participants.”<sup>90</sup> While the narrative is “unified,” the object’s affective force rests on the dynamic interaction between the two faces of the skyphos, which must be interpreted one side at the time (given the shape of the *skyphos*). The implied movement of Odysseus’ arrow proposes a clear axis that connects the two faces of the vase, as do the invasive palmette-tendrils that spill into the frames on either side.<sup>91</sup> But the viewer could start from either side, since we have here a “continuous” narrative, i.e., an image that contains both the action in progress (Odysseus firing arrows) and its result (a suitor has an arrow stuck in him). If we take the suitors first, not knowing who they are and who is attacking them, then we move from confusion and disarray to the surprise of discovering that we are looking at nothing other than the climactic moment of the restoration of Ithaca. The surprise is similar to the one that the suitors themselves might have experienced when they were suddenly shot by the stranger who revealed himself to be Odysseus. On the other hand, if we first saw the women and Odysseus with his bow, several ideas of what the other side might depict could come to mind (among which the suitors, but also the row of axe-heads, or even an animal). Then, the way in which the second scene confirms the subject of

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<sup>88</sup> Stansbury-O’Donnell 2014

<sup>89</sup> Neer 1998, 29

<sup>90</sup> Stansbury-O’Donnell 376, citing Shapiro 1992

<sup>91</sup> On the tendril work of the Penelope painter elsewhere, see Neer 1998, 31

the first has different affective connotations, but both directional interpretations of the whole vase rest on the manipulation of the object in a specific set of directions suggested by the orientation of the figures, but with no clear front or reverse.<sup>92</sup>

The identity and role of the women in the depiction is clarified in the process of either interpretive strategy as it unfolds. The manner in which a viewer may reach the conclusion that the two women are maids reveals important details about their characterization and their sophisticated integration into the narrative program of the vase. The two women (see Figure 4) are identified with the generic label *KAAE* [“a beautiful woman”], complementing the three instances of *KAIOS* [“a beautiful man”] used to label the suitors.<sup>93</sup>



**Figure 4** *The Slaughter of the Suitors: Odysseus and Maidservants, Attic red-figure Skyphos by the Penelope Painter, Antikensammlung Staatliche Museen zu Berlin-Preussischer, 440 BCE. Detail*

<sup>92</sup> The affective landscape of the vase is perhaps designed on an aesthetic of looking around the corner, an aesthetic is highly appropriate to this scene in the *Odyssey*, which is placed on an analogous textual threshold bridging the end of book 21 and the opening of book 22.

<sup>93</sup> Odysseus is identified by his own name. Note that some of the etched names are not visible in photographs.

But in the Homeric poem, no women witness the slaughter, although the maids are called in to clean up the suitors' bodies directly after they are killed. As we cannot know what was in the painter's mind, the vase could represent Penelope and one maid, but this possibility is mitigated by the fact that we would expect Penelope to be labeled by name. In contrast, the addition of two maids to the scene is apposite, emphasizing their connection to the suitors and foreshadowing their involvement in the purification of the house.<sup>94</sup> But the vase preserves a potential of further characterization by purposefully depicting the maids through figure types that are also used to represent Penelope and Nausicaa.<sup>95</sup> This ennobles the slave women, and implies no inherent or implicit negative value to their station.<sup>96</sup> It has been argued that the maids' "gestures reveal their anxiety over the Suitors' fate."<sup>97</sup> This may be an overstatement, as any interpretation of their affect is complicated by the ambiguity of the facial features and depending on whether we interpret them as reacting to the violence itself, or to the death of their lovers (or both). Indeed, they may also not yet have recognized Odysseus, such that they may be wondering about the identity of the archer. But the use of generic figure types and the underdetermined reactions is reflective of the discerning painter's deferral of interpretation to the viewer, who needs to interpret the maids' reaction, and is thus skillfully invited into their minds.

The skyphos attests to an interest in the role of the maids with respect to parts of the *Odyssey's* fabula from which the Homeric texts excludes them.<sup>98</sup> The skyphos opens up the complexity of the maids' role as foils to or extensions of Penelope, and as affectively bound to

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<sup>94</sup> Perhaps even their own execution is foreshadowed here, as Odysseus' arrows could be read as eventually rounding another corner if the skyphos is rotated accordingly.

<sup>95</sup> Buitron-Oliver and Cohen 1995, 48. Neer discusses a "citational" logic, but I do not think the shared figure types can lead us to a directional supposition of that kind. See Neer 1998, 30.

<sup>96</sup> Frontisi-Ducroux 1998

<sup>97</sup> Buitron-Oliver and Cohen 1995, 48

<sup>98</sup> This is true even if the source for this skyphos is a text other than the *Odyssey*. The skyphos could be based on a lost textual tradition in which the maids played a more prominent role in the events at Ithaca.

the death of the suitors. The Penelope painter used the maids to create more than a mere representation of a Homeric moment, but to complicate it in several material, conceptual, and affective dimensions. He replicated tradition (the restoration of Odysseus' order, his might on display) but also shed a new light on what is left in the margins of the *Odyssey*.

I wrote "left in the margins" rather than, say, "left out," because one part of the reparative readings of the maids' life is contained, obliquely, in the *Odyssey* itself. Through its unease, the maids emerge in affectively loaded snippets as a threat to the order of the *oikos* and in more figured terms as threats to tradition and cultural reproduction. To see this, we need but consider that the restoration of Ithaca is explicitly structured around the reestablishment of an old order. Although Odysseus has wandered and learned about the cities and minds of many men, he is not at all interested in any kind of change at home. His restoration accordingly involves the execution and torture of known traitors: the suitors, maids, and Melanthius. The gods' intervention at the end of the poem entrenches Odysseus' restored rule in the face of justified unrest caused by his violence, putting an end to a violence that risked extending even further. Like many authoritarian and hegemonic systems, Odysseus and Telemachus (and to an extent Penelope) operate on a maximalist conception of loyalty that reduces the human behavior to a pattern of compliance or noncompliance with the prescribed order. This ensures the futurity of the *oikos* and of the *kleos* of Odysseus, in essence also securing the success of the *Odyssey* as the authoritative telling of Odysseus' *nostos*. But, in its treatment of the maids, the *Odyssey* occasionally shows us what a maximalist conception of loyalty erodes—the thickness of human experience that cannot quite be suppressed, although it is irrelevant to a systemized biopolitical logic, and that, through its persistence, raises doubts about the political system of Odysseus and *Odyssey* alike.

The maids have an idiosyncratic autonomy that allows them to engage obliquely with the suitors and also distinguishes them from Penelope, subtly, so that they can be seen as her foils but also as complementary figures, depending on one's perspective. Before they suffer for their actions, the *Odyssey* allows their affective complexity to shine through. For example, when the disguised Odysseus orders the δμῶαί Ὀδυσσεύς ["maids of Odysseus"] to leave the hall in which the suitors are sleeping in order to attend to Penelope, who is described as weaving forlornly (18.313-6), Odysseus recognizes their affective role in the economy of the household—a striking passage because he is later so reductive in the interpretation of their motives. In response to the command, the maids established their own affective autonomy as αἱ δ' ἐγέλασαν, ἐς ἀλλήλας δὲ ἴδοντο ["they laughed and looked at each other"], rebuffing the instructions of their disguised master. As the maid Melantho later makes clear, their ability to determine the outlines of their own (sexual) labor is potentially threatened by male presences that disrupt the hierarchy of the household—like the snooping beggar.

‘ξεῖν’, ἔτι καὶ νῦν ἐνθάδ’ ἀνήσεις διὰ νύκτα  
δινεύων κατὰ οἶκον, ὀπιπέυσεις δὲ γυναῖκας;’ (19.66-7)

Stranger! Will you continue to be a nuisance throughout the night,  
Roaming through the house, spying on the women?

For Odysseus, the manner in which they have transformed labor into the grounds of possible pleasure marks a clear and growing breach in the social order of the household, particularly as the maids are engaging in sexual relations with the suitors and thereby treating them as masters. In their assumption of such a role, the threat of the suitors to the *oikos*, and to Telemachus as a symbol of its future, is explicit and pronounced. But as these ideological dynamics play out, we are given small insights into the structures of feeling surrounding the maids—their emphatic enjoyment of a position of autonomy in the absence of their master.

Matters are not so simple when it comes to Penelope. Ancient authors and recent scholars alike have probed the question of Penelope's own affective reality at Ithaca, as it is displayed in the *Odyssey* but also in other, only partly known texts. Outside of the *Odyssey* it is clear that Penelope's interactions with the suitors may have had a life of their own, whether or not she remained faithful to Odysseus.<sup>99</sup> As a result of these findings, some Homeric scholarship has assessed whether the *Odyssey* contains latent characterizations of Penelope's fraught relationship to the suitors.<sup>100</sup> The consensus is that nothing conclusive can be said on the matter: Penelope keeps her own autonomy of will in the poem just as long as we don't conclusively know what she was thinking. Thus, the poem leaves open the possibility that Penelope might have felt some affection or enjoyed the attention of the suitors, in those twenty lonely years, even if she did not in any way desire to betray Odysseus—and, if she did, she repressed it.<sup>101</sup>

This ambiguity is not necessarily an accident in the structure of the evidence. The poem is designed to keep us focused on the central relationship of Odysseus and Penelope, but it also allows a much more complex world to be sketched out in the margins, in which the maids behave as alternative Penelopes might have behaved—more subtly and diffusely than in the way Helen and Clytemnestra are seen as alternatives to Penelope in the poem. In making this argument, I approach the *Odyssey* through what Doherty labeled a “feminist narratology” attentive to how gender dynamics (and class dynamics that intersect with them) are subordinated to narrative hierarchies within the *Odyssey*. As Doherty noted, such an approach can make us aware of the “the existence of ‘openings’, or indeterminacies in these patterns,” “formal ‘redundancies’ between narrative elements and between explicit judgments of different narrators.”<sup>102</sup> Doherty

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<sup>99</sup> Gilchrist 1997, Mactoux 1975

<sup>100</sup> Rozokoki 2001, Zeitlin 1995, Felson-Rubin 1994, Katz 1991, Marquardt 1985

<sup>101</sup> Goins 1987, Devereux 1957.

<sup>102</sup> Doherty 2001, 132

notes she has always erred on the side of a “a closed reading” that minimizes their ultimate impact.<sup>103</sup> But these residues frustrate total readings of the poem’s ideology that (even if accidentally) reinforce parts of Odysseus’ ideology. They provide reparative openings for appreciating the text’s muted but still present points of resistance.

The poetic asides through which the maids are characterized often contain fertile micronarratives in development that give the audience insight into Ithaca’s domestic interior, the affective lives of the maids, and the independent worlds they might inhabit. This serves to create a counterpoint, setting the stage for their horrifying execution, in which Odysseus forecloses their speculative promise. But the narrator’s attention to the maids gives them a much fuller presence than the one codified by that narrative arc. And while the narrator’s measurable distaste for their behavior is usually aligned with Odysseus’ perspective on their disloyalty, it is at other times tempered by the behavior of certain characters. This lability concretizes the poem’s unease with their role. Consider the characterization of Melanthe and Penelope’s implicit disappointment that her kindness toward her did not yield greater loyalty.

τὸν δ’ αἰσχρῶς ἐνέειπε Μελανθῶ καλλιπάρηος,  
τὴν Δολίος μὲν ἔτικτε, κόμισσε δὲ Πηνελόπεια,  
παῖδα δὲ ὡς ἀτίταλλε, δίδου δ’ ἄρ’ ἀθύρματα θυμῷ·  
ἀλλ’ οὐδ’ ὡς ἔχε πένθος ἐνὶ φρεσὶ Πηνελοπείης,  
ἀλλ’ ἦ γ’ Εὐρυμάχῳ μισγέσκετο καὶ φιλέσκεν. (18.321-5)

Fair-cheeked Melanthe spoke shamefully to him.  
Dolios fathered her, but Penelope cared for her  
Raising her as her own child, and even gave her *athurmata* to [delight] her heart.  
But she had not *penthos* in her mind for Penelope,  
Rather, she had sex with Eurymachos and entertained him.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Doherty 2001, 132

<sup>104</sup> On difficulties translating the two iterative forms, see below. While *μισγέσκετο* is unambiguously sexual, *φιλέσκεν* may be a close synonym or one that adds elements of affection to the relationship—but it is also a verb used to describe how one may attend to one’s guests, entertaining them. The precise meaning (and value) of that entertainment is in a sense that which is at stake.

Although speaking shamefully, she is characterized through an epithet that emphasizes her beauty and a patronym that humanizes her—connecting her to a father whose own ability to make narratives proliferate from the epic has long been noted.<sup>105</sup> Her relationship with Penelope is described with unusual tenderness, marking her as a favorite, to whom Penelope gave special gifts (*athurmata*).<sup>106</sup> Readings of the relationship of Melantho to Penelope tend to fold her into a neat binary, identifying Melantho as a character that “displaces the question of sexual misconduct from Penelope onto her faithless serving-woman and thus functions to absolve Penelope from the suspicion of wrongdoing.”<sup>107</sup> This argument is supported by a very plain reading of *penthos* in the passage above, understood as indicating that Melantho is not paying enough attention to Penelope’s suffering at the hands of the insistent suitors, in a sense betraying her affective mother as well as her mistress.<sup>108</sup> Instead of helping Penelope keep them at bay, Melantho enjoys their company, allowing the suitors’ appropriation of Odysseus’ goods (food, wine, etc.) to extend also to other forms of property (i.e., the slave women). Both Odysseus, in passages that I discuss below, and Eurykleia in her rebuke of the maids for sleeping with the men (19.370-373), confirm this reading. Melantho is thus subsumed into the program of loyalty dictated by the (sexual and material) economics of the *oikos*.<sup>109</sup>

But Penelope’s scathing comment to Melantho after she reviles the disguised Odysseus a second time (19.65-9) leaves open several other ways of reading their relationship.

πάντως, θαρσαλέη, κύον ἄδεές, οὐ τί με λήθεις  
ἔρδουσα μέγα ἔργον, ὃ σῆ κεφαλῆ ἀναμάξεις (19.91-2)

You haven’t fooled me at all, you bold, shameless dog,

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<sup>105</sup> See Haller 2013. Wender 1978

<sup>106</sup> See scholia *ad loc.* for a reading of ἀθύρματα as γλιδὰς καὶ παιδιὰς [“ornaments and toys”].

<sup>107</sup> Katz 1991, 132

<sup>108</sup> On the slave women and ties of “fictive kinship,” which Melantho may be resisting, see Hunnings 2011, 61-2.

<sup>109</sup> On a similar reading of the “mill woman” in *Odyssey* 20—a powerful parallel for how the labor of the maids is subjugated—see Christensen 2020, 151-4

Performing this great deed, which you will wipe on your own head.

Penelope's emphasis on Melantho as κύον ἄδεές [“shameless dog,” an insult used of Helen] and μέγα ἔργον [“great deed,” the same phrase used in reference to Aegisthus's seduction of Clytemnestra above] points clearly to a betrayal but also to a kind of narrative doubling.<sup>110</sup> But the specific act of betrayal is not specified. Usually, it is taken to be the betrayal of the strategy of the shroud.<sup>111</sup> The phrase that rounds out Penelope's exclamation is taken from the language of ritual and sacrifice—the knife used to slaughter the victim was wiped clean on the victim's head in an effort to stop the pollution of murder from spreading to the executioner.<sup>112</sup> The idea that she will not be able to wipe off her sin is clear, but this kind of language is unparalleled, and its affective excess has even led some scholars to posit that the two verses were interpolated into the *Odyssey*.<sup>113</sup> Overall, this “venomous assault so uncharacteristic of Penelope” draws attention to an important subtext, as the intensity of her response can be read as a kind of jealousy or enervation at a lack of comparable freedom. This is particularly relevant in the context of Melantho, her favorite, because Melantho is enjoying the attentions of Eurymachus, who is singled out as an especially worthy suitor.<sup>114</sup> This reading can also be supported by turning back to the use of *penthos* articulated above. Melantho's lack of *penthos* is not tied merely to her sexual activity, but also to the growing exclusivity of her interactions with Eurymachus (μισγέσκετο and φιλέεσκεν are iterative forms, and may underline how her movement away from Penelope is developing into its own, alternate order within the household). No longer mourning the (potential) bereavement of her absence, Melantho has opened herself up to new life in a way

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<sup>110</sup> On Helen, see Edmunds 2019, 33-6. The phrase μέγα ἔργον is put to ironic use in the descriptions of Epicaste (11.272) as well as in other parts of the *Odyssey*, see Heubeck et al., note to 3.261.

<sup>111</sup> Wilamowitz-Moellendorf 1884, 50

<sup>112</sup> Russo *et al.* 1992, 79

<sup>113</sup> Blass 1973, 187 and Merkelbach 1951, 89

<sup>114</sup> Goins 1987, 13

that Penelope cannot allow herself to do—doubling over the form of betrayal as both filial/slave insubordination, and adding onto that the appropriation of an affective future that Penelope cannot access. Thus, Penelope’s anger gives us a purchase on a dimension of the affective world of Ithaca that is otherwise obscured. Acting as a kind of Muse or Siren, Melanthe suggests to Penelope other versions of herself, that she must forego, but that could lead to other stories and other Ithacas. This remains the case if we read Penelope as afraid that Melanthe will usurp the entire household with Eurymachus’ help, or in other speculative possibilities offered up by the poem’s indeterminacy here.

In contrast, the dehumanization of the maids in the *Odyssey* works to foreclose the maids’ potential for other orders and affective realities to unfold, trivializing their bodies as mere instruments of masculine sexuality, or as objects to be manipulated and penetrated by masculine violence. Penelope’s ritual curse contains a thinly-veiled threat, as it compares Melanthe to an animal that will have its throat slit at sacrifice, perhaps presaging the maids’ impending execution.<sup>115</sup> A similar threat is made in Odysseus’ first response to Melanthe, where he invokes Telemachus to restore order in gruesomely violent terms through dismemberment—a literal objectification of the unified body.

ἦ τάχα Τηλεμάχῳ ἐρέω, κύον, οἷ’ ἀγορεύεις,  
κεῖσ’ ἐλθὼν, ἵνα σ’ αὖθι διὰ μελεῖστί τάμησιν. (18.338-9)

I will quickly tell Telemachus what you are saying, dog,  
Once he arrives here, so that he can cut you limb from limb on the spot.

I return later to these erratic, minatory prolepses. The dehumanizing trivialization of an affective (if also intimate) reality is most visible in Odysseus’ visceral reaction when he sees the maids who had been having sex with the suitors.

ἔνθ’ Ὀδυσσεὺς μνηστῆρσι κακὰ φρονέων ἐνὶ θυμῷ

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<sup>115</sup> On the prophetic quality of these utterances, see Thalmann 1998, 32, and Burliga 2011, 13.

κεῖτ' ἐγρηγορόων· ταὶ δ' ἐκ μεγάροιο γυναῖκες  
ἦϊσαν, αἶ μνηστῆρσιν ἐμισγέσκοντο πάρος περ,  
ἀλλήλησι γέλω τε καὶ εὐφροσύνην παρέχουσαι.  
τοῦ δ' ὠρίνετο θυμὸς ἐνὶ στήθεσσι φίλοισι·  
πολλὰ δὲ μερμήριζε κατὰ φρένα καὶ κατὰ θυμόν,  
ἦὲ μεταίξας θάνατον τεύξειεν ἑκάστη,  
ἦ ἔτ' ἐῷ μνηστῆρσιν ὑπερφιάλοισι μιγῆναι  
ὔστατα καὶ πύματα· κραδίη δέ οἱ ἔνδον ὑλάκτει.  
ὥς δὲ κύων ἀμαλῆσι περὶ σκυλάκεσσι βεβῶσα  
ἄνδρ' ἀγνοήσασ' ὑλάει μέμονέν τε μάχεσθαι,  
ὥς ῥα τοῦ ἔνδον ὑλάκτει ἀγαιομένου κακὰ ἔργα. (20.5-16)

There Odysseus lay, still awake, devising in his heart  
Evils for the suitors. And the women came out of the hall,  
The ones who had before been having sex with the suitors,  
Laughing amongst themselves and having a good time.  
And his heart stirred in his breast.  
He pondered repeatedly in his mind and his heart  
Whether, darting up, to wreak death on each one  
Or to allow them to sleep with the insolent suitors  
A last and final time. His heart growled within him.  
Like a dog standing over her young puppies  
Growling when she does not recognize someone and prepares to fight,  
Just so his heart growled within him enraged at the evil deeds.

The unusual intensity of this simile of the barking heart has long been recognized, as well as its coded emphasis on familial structures.<sup>116</sup> Odysseus' anger is explicitly a reaction to the affective world of the maids—their happiness and laughter makes him irate.<sup>117</sup> But instead of reproaching their enjoyment on its own terms, his mind turns to the specifically sexual dimension of their relation, obviating its other (and to him more visible) aspects. His obsession with their sexual life is so intense that he reconstitutes himself as in charge of their sexual transactions, allowing them to sleep one more time with the suitors—reconstituting it as the kind of sexual labor which only Odysseus has the right to control, and from which he feels alienated. Indeed, when Odysseus later rebukes the suitors, he indirectly raises the issue of the maids' consensual participation in

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<sup>116</sup> Russo 1968, Rose 1979

<sup>117</sup> For a more totalizing reading of the maids' laughter, see Levine 1987, 23

these relationships by claiming the suitors παρενάξεσθε βιαίως [“took them to bed by force”] (22.37), suggesting that they were therefore stolen from his control. The question is one of property: it does not occur to Odysseus that if any of them were raped that they might be excused of the perceived disloyalty. The transactional view of their bodies as property leads him to a farcical caricature of the events he is witnessing. In one breath he erodes the potentially different experiences of individual suitors and individual maids (perhaps some were forced and others weren’t, as Atwood explores in her novel), foreclosing the agency of both parties in the construction of interpersonal relationships.

Yet, the *Odyssey* does not merely represent Odysseus’ trivializing attitude, it also allows aspects of emotivity and affect to enter into the margins of the horrifying demise that Odysseus (only partly) engineers for the maids. The first important oscillation in the *Odyssey*’s perspectives takes place in the moments preceding their execution, in which they are tasked with cleaning the hall after the suitors have been slaughtered. For Odysseus, the maids’ role is here one that is clearly ideological. They are tasked with restoring the hall, an activity that is a symbol of the restoration of Ithaca. By cleaning it and erasing the clear rupture they help to (re)establish the continuity of Odysseus’ dominion, as if the suitors had never been there, and after the purification of the hall even as if the slaughter had never taken place. The irony that they, as perceived culprits, are forced to perform this labor is striking. Their initial punishment entails a participation in the erasure of their own lived experience: they are made to labor against themselves. In other terms, the scandalized rage induced in Odysseus by the realization that they had transmuted their labor into a source of possible pleasure identifies in these otherwise harmless figures a psychic threat to the order at Ithaca—evoking responses of growing

incommensurability. But while Odysseus trivializes their life by proposing it is a direct affront to him (and nothing more), the *Odyssey* gives their affective reality some moving dignity.

To Odysseus their labor is entirely negative. He tries to trivialize it when he refers to the maids as the women who had ἀεικέα μηχανόωντο [“vilely schemed”] by sleeping with suitors (22.432). Beyond its pejorative moral assessment, this phrase serves to alert a careful audience to the direction the narrative will be taking, as this is the third and final occurrence of that phrase, previously reserved to the suitors in two passages that foreshadow their imminent demise (20.169-71 and 20.390-4).<sup>118</sup> One implication is that Odysseus see them as complicit in the takeover of the *oikos*. The adjective ἀεικής is also a charged term in terms of gender. In the *Odyssey* it is only applied to the deeds of one other woman, Helen, who is also perceived as merely sexually unfaithful (23.222).<sup>119</sup> The language of political intrigue consistently gives way to gendered terms that bring the slave women’s sexual interactions with the suitors back into view.

But as they enter the scene, the *Odyssey* gives the description of their actual work unusual weight, making their labor uncomfortably and uncharacteristically visible. The narratological emphasis is not straightforward, as their labor is actually prefigured by Odysseus’ schematic instructions to Telemachus, which become redundant as Odysseus micromanages the labor himself. His obsession with the disposition of their bodies therefore comes to the fore in the same moment that the *Odyssey* gives their labor a very different coloring. The instructions for

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<sup>118</sup> More generally, but still within this book, the term foreshadows a “well-deserved bad end” at 22.317 and 22.416. See Russo *et al.* 295.

<sup>119</sup> Similarly, in the *Iliad*, it is applied to the work of only one (anonymous) woman, who appears in a simile for the raging battle (12.433-5). In this simile, the woman receives μισθὸς ἀεικής [“vile wages”] for her children, although her labor at the loom is described as skillful and careful.

their execution are contained within a ring composition that begins and ends with the activity of their sponges.

ἄρχετε νῦν νέκυας φορέειν καὶ ἄνωχθε γυναῖκας·  
αὐτὰρ ἔπειτα θρόνους περικαλλέας ἠδὲ τραπέζας  
ὔδατι καὶ σπόγγοισι πολυτρήτοισι καθαίρειν.  
αὐτὰρ ἐπὴν δὴ πάντα δόμον κατακοσμήσησθε,  
δμῶαξ ἐξαγαγόντες εὐσταθέος μεγάροιο,  
μεσσηγὺς τε θόλου καὶ ἀμύμονος ἔρκεος αὐλῆς,  
θεινέμεναι ξίφεσιν τανυήκεσιν, εἰς ὃ κε πασέων  
ψυχὰς ἐξαφέλησθε καὶ ἐκλεάθωντ' Ἀφροδίτης,  
τὴν ἄρ' ὑπὸ μνηστῆρσιν ἔχον μίσηγοντό τε λάθρη·  
ὥς ἔφαθ', αἱ δὲ γυναῖκες ἀολλέες ἦλθον ἅπασαι,  
αἶν' ὀλοφυρόμεναι, θαλερὸν κατὰ δάκρυ χέουσαι.  
πρῶτα μὲν οὖν νέκυας φόρεον κατατεθνηῶτας,  
κὰδ δ' ἄρ' ὑπ' αἰθούσῃ τίθεσαν εὐερκέος αὐλῆς,  
ἀλλήλοισιν ἐρείδουσαι· σήμαινε δ' Ὀδυσσεὺς  
αὐτὸς ἐπισπέρχων· ται δ' ἐκφόρεον καὶ ἀνάγκη.  
αὐτὰρ ἔπειτα θρόνους περικαλλέας ἠδὲ τραπέζας  
ὔδατι καὶ σπόγγοισι πολυτρήτοισι κάθαιρον. (22.437-53)

Begin now to carry out the corpses and order the women (to help)  
And next, clean the beautiful chairs and the tables  
With water and porous sponges.  
When everything is in order throughout the house,  
Lead the maids out from the well-built hall,  
Between the tholos and the immaculate fence of the court,  
Strike them with your long swords, until that moment in which  
You have extracted the soul from all of them and they utterly forget Aphrodite,  
Whom they had by command of the suitors as they slept with them secretly.  
So he spoke, and the women came in all huddled together  
Crying terribly, shedding tears in streams.  
First, they carried out the corpses of the dead  
And set them down by the portico of the well-fenced court  
Piling them upon each other: Odysseus gave instructions  
And himself urged them on: and they were forced to carry them out.  
Then they cleaned the beautiful chairs and tables  
With water and porous sponges.

When the maids enter, affect floods the scene. Their entrance is akin to that of a throng of mourners or suppliants, and the potential complexities of the affective reality behind their tears is highlighted through the ambivalence of the verb ὀλοφυρόμεναι [“to lament,” but also “to beg

while weeping”]. Perhaps they are aware of their impending fate, although they could not have heard Odysseus’ specific instructions. Perhaps their tears respond to different kinds of reactions to the traumatic scene before them. We cannot infer from the fact that they enter ἀολλέες [“huddled together”], as if forming one uniform bloc of mourners, and the expression of their emotions is uniform, that their emotions are also uniform.<sup>120</sup> They could be looking at and disposing of the remains of a lover who offered them some kind of alternative existence within the confines of their servitude. Alternatively, they may be looking at the corpses of their rapists. But the potential variety of their past experiences is here left undetermined.

The narrator confirms their reintegration into the uniform banausic servitude in an iconic verse, the syntax and structure of which mirrors its content, drawing a stark boundary between Odysseus who commands and the women who carry out the forced labor (22.451). While the schematic structure of the verse underscores the Odyssean ideology, there is some irony in the use of ἀνάγκη, essentially synonymous for Odysseus’ own earlier βιαίως [“by force”], which he had used to refer to how the suitors took the maids against their will (22.37). It is nearly as if the narrator were drawing attention to the fact that, as far as is made explicit, the only man to make the maids do anything by force is actually Odysseus himself. Here the *Odyssey*, as if preceding its scholarly assessment, places an emphasis on “class and gender in their reciprocal influence on one another and so as parts of a system that is not static but constantly being recreated.”<sup>121</sup> The internal layers of self-contradiction activate unease.

The repeated emphasis on the detail of the porous sponges provides an arresting excess in the poem, one that literalizes the metaphors of erasure (cleansing, restoration) and that points to the fragility of bodies as themselves porous and penetrable. The material trace of the activity of

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<sup>120</sup> Compare the behavior of the men at Patroclus’ funeral at *Iliad* 23.233.

<sup>121</sup> Thalmann 1998, 24

labor becomes a symbol of the broader dynamics at play in the poem, and the narrator's repetition of this detail serves to establish its significance.<sup>122</sup> Perhaps because of Telemachus' own unusual cruelty in the actual execution, the execution proposed by Odysseus is usually understood as relatively honorable and straightforward. This is a patent mistake. My translation emphasized its abject cruelty as the language of the *Odyssey* suggests temporal extension and emphasizes repetitive activity in starkly sexualized terms of penetration and extraction (ἐξἀφέλησθε).<sup>123</sup> Whether we understand θεινόμεναι as percussive or in terms of piercing the body is irrelevant, as the same metaphors are at stake. Odysseus does not mention the specifically gory consequences of what he described, but the description is indexed by the imagery of the sponges soaked in blood. In contrast, the duration of the imagined execution is given explicitly. The contrapasso for their sexual proclivities is so intently designed that the temporal end of their execution is not necessarily their death, but the moment in which they forget Aphrodite, in which their bodies are no longer able to experience the physical but also affective pleasures of love (or even sex). Rarely does the *Odyssey* so nakedly expose to us the realities of dying in its temporal extension as it does in this passage, or ask us to think of violence against women in such direct, affect-driven terms.

But this is not their actual execution, and it joins the two others mentioned above (throat slitting, dismemberment) in the *Odyssey*'s pageant of alternative but foreclosed futures for the maids. When the actual execution takes place, the narrator of the *Odyssey* first shows us Telemachus' climactic rush of anger and then the execution itself, through the dark glass of one of the *Odyssey*'s most complex similes. The devastating end to the lives of the maids provides

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<sup>122</sup> For a materialist reading of similar episodes of feminine labor, see Canevaro 2018.

<sup>123</sup> For a similar reading, see Hunnings 2011, 63-4

the occasion for a poetic event in which the poetic movement of the epic grinds to a sudden halt in the narrator's attempt to give words to an incommensurable image.

αὐτὰρ ἐπειδὴ πᾶν μέγαρον διεκοσμήσαντο,  
δμῶας δ' ἐξαγαγόντες εὖσταθέος μεγάροιο,  
μεσσηγύς τε θόλου καὶ ἀμύμονος ἔρκεος ἀλλῆς,  
εἴλειον ἐν στείνει, ὅθεν οὐ πῶς ἦεν ἀλύξαι.  
τοῖσι δὲ Τηλέμαχος πεπνυμένος ἦρχ' ἀγορεύειν·  
‘μὴ μὲν δὴ καθαρῶ θανάτῳ ἀπὸ θυμὸν ἐλοίμην  
τάων, αἱ δὲ ἐμῆ κεφαλῆ κατ' ὄνειδεα χεῦαν  
μητέρι θ' ἡμετέρῃ παρά τε μνηστῆρσιν ἴαυον.’  
ὥς ἄρ' ἔφη, καὶ πείσμα νεὸς κυανοπρώροιο  
κίονος ἐξάψας μεγάλης περιβάλλε θόλοιο,  
ὑψὸς' ἐπεντανύσας, μὴ τις ποσὶν οὐδ' ἴκοιτο.  
ὥς δ' ὅτ' ἂν ἦ κίχλαι τανυσίπτεροι ἢ ἐπέλαιαι  
ἔρκει ἐνιπλήξωσι, τό θ' ἐστήκη ἐνὶ θάμνῳ,  
αὐλὴν ἐσιέμεναι, στυγερὸς δ' ὑπεδέξατο κοῖτος,  
ὥς αἱ γ' ἐξείης κεφαλὰς ἔχον, ἀμφὶ δὲ πάσαις  
δειρῆσι βρόχοι ἦσαν, ὅπως οἴκτιστα θάνοιεν.  
ἦσπαιρον δὲ πόδεσσι μίνυνθά περ οὐ τι μάλα δὴν. (22.457-73)

And when they had set the entire hall thoroughly back in order,  
They led out the maids from the well-built hall  
To a space between the tholos and the immaculate fence of the court,  
And they penned them into a small space, from which there was no escape.  
And to them wise Telemachus began to speak.  
“Let it be that I take the life from their heart through no clean death  
From these who have poured shame onto my head  
And that of my mother, when they spent the night in the suitors' quarters.”  
So he spoke, and he fastened the cable of a dark-prowed ship  
To a large pillar and threw it around the tholos,  
Stretching it high so that no one might reach the ground with their feet.  
Like long-winged thrushes or doves  
Are caught in a snare that has been set in a thicket,  
As they were going to their resting place, but a dreadful bed receives them  
Even so the (maids) had their heads all lined up, and around all of their  
Necks were nooses, so that they might die most pitifully.  
Gasping for air they twitched their feet, but not for long.

While I think it is important to read through this episode as a whole, I will go through it looking as two intertwined strands, starting with Telemachus' mode of execution and its logic(s), and then turning to the complexity of the simile as a separate narratological question.

Telemachus' decision to execute by hanging is a marked one, but not for the reasons usually noted. The majority of scholars tends to argue over whether hanging is more or less honorable than death by sword, and they pick at the mechanics of the execution or look for historical and anthropological parallels.<sup>124</sup> A more fruitful set of approaches reads into the symbolism of the execution in response to Telemachus' claim that it will not be "clean," assessing Telemachus' discontent and the symbolism of the execution's mechanics with respect to his desires and the overarching framework of the restoration of Ithaca (for example, a public and monitory silencing of the slave's corrosive speech by closing their throat, or by employing a ship's cable Telemachus adopts a symbol of Odysseus' return).<sup>125</sup> I do not contest the acuity of many of these observations and the value of the research performed to establish certain symbolic connections, such as in fleshing out the sexual symbolism of birds named in the simile that describes the hanged women. But the neatness of these analyses and their nearly competitive one-upmanship bespeaks their "paranoid" approach to the text. As if seeking reassurance, the scholar glosses every element of the poetic image until it is no longer a source of surprise—no longer able to forcefully elicit an affective reorientation in the reader or listener.

But to emphasize masculine psychology and symbolic logic in all this can be its own kind of deflection. To justify every element in the description of the execution as a meaningful part of a cohesive whole is to insist on the execution's brilliance in a way that aligns the reader, perversely, with Telemachus. This is *in nuce* also a lesson in how we approach the text through the assumption of its cohesive wholeness, which in turn leads our attention away from aspects of the text that exist only in contingent, perhaps even only partly elaborated portions of the text.

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<sup>124</sup> Russo *et al.* 1992, 295-304, with bibliography

<sup>125</sup> Hunnings 2011, 64, Fulkerson 2002, with bibliography

Consider, instead, how quickly the execution takes place. Telemachus is acting *ad hoc*, improvising in real time, while in a heightened state of anger. His decisions even countermand a directive from his own father. If anything, we should expect his actions to present us with a break from an existing normative paradigm, or the establishment of a new one through a technologically whimsical inventiveness designed to concretize his affective disposition and to assert himself as a capable agent. The torture of Melanthius (that immediately follows this scene) also suggests that the future Telemachean order of Ithaca will be one in which cruelty is put on display as a monition to future traitors. The violence is an optional gesture, an imposition of sovereign will. The theatre of cruelty is effective precisely because those chosen gestures, terrifying and illegible, are then reinscribed by the panicked mind into a possible order—one that helps make sense of the violence and in turn ratifies the arbitrary exercise of force. The circularity of this process grants sovereign power its air of inevitability.<sup>126</sup> Their fluttering lasts only an instant. But a reparative reading of the text ought to resist the integrating persuasiveness of the ideological.

The *Odyssey* provides a few subtle cues for breaking free from the cycle. Although analyses of the execution tend to imply his dread genius, scholars have long recognized several tensions in Telemachus' short speech that point to the execution as the work of an imperfect actor. While he speaks out in "strongly asseverative terms," the hyperbole of his spiteful language evinces insecurity and "youthful immaturity," as Telemachus sees himself as the victim of the maids' behavior.<sup>127</sup> Wilson has noted how difficult it is to create space for Telemachus' "shame," because it is "easier to imagine murderers motivated by righteous rage."<sup>128</sup> But the

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<sup>126</sup> I go into greater detail concerning theatres of cruelty, with bibliography, in Chapter 3.

<sup>127</sup> Russo *et al.* 1992, 300-1

<sup>128</sup> Wilson (@EmilyRCWilson), 5:19pm 12 Dec 2018.

*Odyssey* gives us the opportunity to approach this episode also from that perspective, granting Telemachus a complexity—but one that does not excuse his actions in any way.

To create a space for an anger grounded in shame opens up several other elements of the affective landscape of the passage. The sense of shame is felt so intensely because of the closeness between Telemachus and the maids, who have after all grown up alongside him. We even saw above that Melantho, at least, received motherly affection and care from Penelope herself. A trace of that connection, if not a trace of affection, can be read into a peculiarity of Telemachus' phrasing, when he refers to Penelope as μητέρι ἡμετέρῃ ["my/our mother"] (2.464).<sup>129</sup> That Telemachus acknowledge his closeness to the women he is about to execute in these terms is not unrealistic, given what I have argued above, although it is possible to read this passage both ways. When the plural meaning of the pronoun is activated, a space is opened up in the *Odyssey* for the affective outlines of Telemachus' relationship to the maids to flash into the poem. Their closeness over the years, the quasi-tragic transition from their role as play mates to the young heir into his servants, the intimacy of their sexual betrayal from their position as near-siblings, all that floods for a second into the *Odyssey*, if we allow it to. The *Odyssey* makes heard a much more complex background for itself through Telemachus' subtle and perhaps unintended re-cognition, in the etymological sense, of the maids as his sisters.

When it comes to the narration of the execution itself, the initially procedural language quickly gives way to the simile, in which the narrator appears to react to and think through the tableau that Telemachus has produced. It is very difficult to accurately picture the underlying image because the procedural language remains opaque, and the simile (as similes often do)

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<sup>129</sup> The use of the plural possessive pronoun for the singular is not unusual in Homer, although this way of thinking about Homeric pronominal usage is misleading, suggesting that ἡμέτερος is synchronically a plural. The evidence actually suggests that ἡμέτερος was both plural and singular, and that any determination as to which is being used needs to be made on the basis of context. See Floyd 1969.

complicates the picture, rather than clarifying it. Telemachus ties one rope around all twelve necks, such that when the line is raised all twelve maids are simultaneously lifted off the ground. There is some movement before stillness, because in such a suspension (rather than drop) hanging the victims are killed through a compression of carotids, jugulars, and airway. Essentially, they suffocate, but while they can lose consciousness very quickly, they may not stop moving for several minutes. Even without the simile to bring out certain affective components of the execution, Telemachus' technique is particularly cruel in its torturous dimensions, which are neatly on display. As an audience struggles to visualize the simultaneous hanging of the twelve maids on one cable, each mental image reinforces the horror. Further, by keeping the maids partly out of direct sight, the poem complicates our affective investment.

The simile that follows explores the affective domain of the cruel pantomime by granting a series of symbolic values through which it becomes partly intelligible, in line with my view of the theatre of cruelty outlined above. But the *Odyssey's* narrator, unlike many critics, is shown to be imperfect in his attempt to rationalize the unthinkable. In this gesture a poetics of unease is most explicit, as the *Odyssey* discloses the cruelty of the maximalist order of the rule at Ithaca.

The narrator begins by comparing the women hanging from the cable (the tenor of the simile) to birds who are caught in a trap (the vehicle of the simile) (2.468-70). As is usually the case in Homeric similes, there is a gap between tenor and vehicle that pushes audiences to observe relevant similarities, but also salient differences. In the first verses, the birds are not yet strung up—they are being caught, unexpectedly, in a snare while trying to make their way home. The comparison is temporally displaced, as it refers to the maids penned in the corner of the courtyard, opening up the space for an analogical narrative that shines an oblique light on the inner life of the maids. By becoming characters with an incomplete *nostos*, their metapoetic

valence as figures who contain an alternative (and threatening) narrative possibility comes to the fore. When Eustathius comments on the execution, he speculates as to whether they were compared to κίχλαι [“thrushes”] in the simile because that word is connected to the word κίχλισμός [“giggling”], such that the narrator’s choice of words points us back to Odysseus’ anger when he saw them laughing.<sup>130</sup> Their subversive chatter among one another (as Odysseus perceived it) would thus be preserved indexically in the simile, as a marker of foreclosed affect.

The fragmentation of their narrative is captured by the simile’s expressive form: it provides only a fractured visual correlate of the maids. We saw that in the first three of its five verses, the simile emphasized affective aspects of the scene: the sense of captivity, the lack of rest, the foreclosed future, the sudden incompleteness of their life. Such a pastiche was possible because “similes do not happen to the characters” but “are *interpretations* of events,” and the narrator can modulate temporal and spatial boundaries in order to portray different moments within a single frame.<sup>131</sup> This kaleidoscopic movement through time helped to flesh out the affective reality behind the story of the birds, although the vehicle of the simile has, up to now, in no way clarified its tenor. The next two verses of the simile provide a direct and visual comparison, but by focusing on parts rather than wholes: necks, heads, nooses, etc. (22.471-2). These emphases are also explained by the narrator’s focus on the affect that motivates Telemachus, such as his sadistic intent in placing a single rope around each of the lined-up necks ὅπως οἴκτιστα θάνοιεν [“so that they might die most pitifully”] (22.472).

The discomforting effect of the simile’s haphazard visual frame, in a cinematic sense, picks up a strategy already present in the verse preceding the simile, and that extends into the

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<sup>130</sup> This portion is not yet included in the edition cited above. Rome Page 1934. Eustathius is unable to arrive conclusively at a determination of whether “giggling” is an action named after the bird’s call or if the bird’s call’s similarity to giggling led to their name, and devotes a great deal of space to this and related lexical questions.

<sup>131</sup> Ready 2011, 95, citing de Jong 2004 [1987], emphasis in original

verse immediately following the simile. Both verses describe the hanged women by referring merely to their feet. Indeed, when the narrator described that they were lifted up, he focuses not on them but on the distance between their feet and the ground (22.467). The final verse of the passage returns our attention to the maids' feet in a synecdoche that similarly avoids looking at the maids as a whole, but only through the movement expressive of their suffering (22.473). The verb ἤσπαιρον carries a range of simultaneously aural and physical meanings.<sup>132</sup> Hence, my translation “gasping for air they twitched,” emphasizes the onrush of sound and movement that accompanies the affect-driven, visually muted and generally static images of the similes (although the affect gives them its own kind of vibrant motion). The verb can also be applied both to humans and to animals, carrying the force of the simile beyond its formal bounds, for a moment collapsing the distinction between vehicle and tenor as if to bring the comparison to a close. Through the simile and the verses that bookend it, the narrator choreographs a very peculiar *danse macabre*, leaving the maids always slightly out of frame, but deftly capturing flashes of movement and affect.<sup>133</sup>

Through these techniques, the *Odyssey* presents an assessment of the maids' fate that stands in stark contrast to that of the characters within the text, as if the *Odyssey* were reading itself against itself. Extensive scholarship on Homeric similes has demonstrated that they can be used to create ruptures between narratological frames, developing different degrees of intimacy between narrator and audience that allow the poem to reflect upon itself.<sup>134</sup> But we ought to eschew the impulse to strictly codify a simile as a poetic event with a consummately determined structure. Even within this paradigm, “the uncomplicated hypothesis that Homer may at times

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<sup>132</sup> Russo *et al.* 1992, 303-4

<sup>133</sup> On simile and narrative choreography, see Lonsdale 1990.

<sup>134</sup> See *inter alia* Martin 2020, Ready 2017, Ready 2011, Minchin 2001, Ben-Porat 1992, and Foley 1978.

have seen the obvious logical tension in a simile as meaningful *qua* tension and not always as a means to some less obvious end,” explains why a simile might end “by contradicting the effect [of clarity through comparison] which it was introduced to achieve.”<sup>135</sup> Similes are not always artistic loci of riddle-like association, but sites of potentially disturbing surprise. As such, a simile can be used to arrest the mimetic flow of the diegesis precisely in order to heighten and broaden the affective experience of the text.<sup>136</sup> It may even achieve this in formal terms that we cannot fully describe, since it has been established that Homeric simile is a device uniquely suited to such shifts in register because the language of similes has affinities with lyric verse, and acts as (a potentially sung) aside in oral performance.<sup>137</sup> The simile of the maids is therefore a privileged site in which to observe how the text can read itself, against itself—how the poem’s poetics of unease comes to the fore.

If there was any doubt about the limited and momentary character of a poetics of unease and the quick reintegration of the general flow of the narrative into substantial alignment with the poem’s central ideological tenets, then we need but turn to the next verses of the poem for proof. The execution of the maids, treated with such complex narrative attention, is followed by the torture (and potentially the execution) of Melanthius.<sup>138</sup>

ἐκ δὲ Μελάνθιον ἦγον ἀνὰ πρόθυρόν τε καὶ ἀυλήν·  
 τοῦ δ’ ἀπὸ μὲν ῥῖνάς τε καὶ οὐατα νηλεῖ χαλκῷ  
 τάμινον, μήδεά τ’ ἐξέρυσαν, κυσὶν ὠμὰ δάσασθαι,  
 χειράς τ’ ἠδὲ πόδας κόπτον κεκοτηότι θυμῷ.  
 οἱ μὲν ἔπειτ’ ἀπονισάμενοι χειράς τε πόδας τε  
 εἰς Ὀδυσῆα δόμονδε κίον, τετέλεστο δὲ ἔργον. (22.474-9)

<sup>135</sup> Damon 1961, 266, citing Lattimore 1951, xliii

<sup>136</sup> This not unlike the modulation described in Plato’s *Ion*, in which the titular character discusses the problem of retelling horrific scenes: ἐγὼ γὰρ ὅταν ἐλεινὸν τι λέγω, δακρύων ἐμπίμπλανταί μου οἱ ὀφθαλμοί: ὅταν τε φοβερὸν ἢ δεινόν, ὀρθαὶ αἱ τρίχες ἴστανται ὑπὸ φόβου καὶ ἡ καρδία πηδᾷ. [“whenever I tell of something deserving of pity, my eyes fill with tears, but when I describe something scary or terrible, my hair stands son end and my heart throbs because I am afraid”] (535c). See Burliga 2011, 23-4.

<sup>137</sup> Martin 2020, 22, citing Ready 2011

<sup>138</sup> On the ambiguity of his fate, see Davies 1994.

Then they led out Melanthius through the doorway and court  
They cut off his nose and ears with a pitiless bronze  
And ripped off his genitals for the dogs to eat raw  
And chopped off his hands and feet in their fervent ire.  
And then they washed their hands and feet,  
And they went into the house of Odysseus, having completed the deed.

This unprompted and sordid execution is presented in clear and unfeeling detail (except for the negative affect of the attackers in κεκοτηότι θυμῷ [“fervent ire”]). The ruthlessness of the act is compounded by the Iliadic phrase νηλεῖ χαλκῷ [“pitiless bronze”] that is characterized by a marked lack of positive affect—that it is “pitiless” is more salient than, say, its material shape.<sup>139</sup> As with the specific mode of execution used to kill the maids, there may be a specific (even ritual) symbolism explanation that can be given as an account of the treatment of Melanthius. But to give the passage such a reading is to obliquely justify what is another instance of the arbitrary theatre of cruelty through which the ruling family expends its ire as it constructs a clear signal for future traitors. The closing formula dispassionately summarizes the completion of the deed, offering it up as a packaged ἔργον that is not fragmented by subsequent narratorial comment like in the simile of the maids.<sup>140</sup>

I conclude by thinking through the threat to the reproduction of a social order posed by the maids, i.e., what normative question underpins the theatre of cruelty that establishes a precedent for how certain forms of behavior will be punished. What was their actual threat, apart from a lack of (sufficient) loyalty? Fulkerson sees a distinctly sexual meaning to the maids’ suffocation in addition to gendered notions of hanging and silencing, which she discusses in terms of the literal and figurative closure of the στόματα [“mouths,” but also “genitals”].<sup>141</sup> Indeed, Telemachus accomplishes part of his father’s desire as the maids will no longer be able

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<sup>139</sup> Similar phrases in the Homeric epics refer to knives and axes without clear distinction.

<sup>140</sup> Burliga 2011, 17

<sup>141</sup> Fulkerson 2002, 343 contrasted by Hunnings 2011, 64.

to partake in Aphrodite’s pleasures—and none of the maids will ever speak back to their masters again. But there is also a broader significance to their sexual activity and its potentially disruptive qualities.

The maids threaten the linearity of both the reproduction of social order and of cultural reproduction. We saw in the Sirens episode that Odysseus insists on the linearity of his own self-identity, how only he (the Odysseus of this poem) shall be the Odysseus that will receive songs in the future—“no other Odysseus” will come home to Ithaca. The story of Agamemnon’s singer also neatly schematized the importance of disallowing alternative narratives. This theme is reprised in the generally conservative return to order that is the restoration of Ithaca. But perhaps most specifically, the linearity of Odysseus’ *oikos* is also at stake as a result of the maids’ sexual activity. Reproduction in the *oikos* is predicated on a nearly obsessive sense of linearity and order, a reasoned “sexual ideology” that “invests the rule of Odysseus in Ithaca with an air of inevitability, the naturalness of an ideology,” such that “the power structure established at the end of the poem is shown to be the best one, the inevitable one, since the narrative itself has demonstrated the undesirability of the alternatives.”<sup>142</sup> Consider merely two aspects of the *Odyssey*’s insistence on solidity and linearity in these terms: the bed of Odysseus, literally grounded into the earth and around which the house is ordered, and the fact that Odysseus is part of a line of single sons. The latter fact is clearly stated by Telemachus himself in a passage that ends on an iconic, verse-initial repetition of μούνον [“single, alone”], after the peculiar verb (in this context) μούνωσε [“singlified”].<sup>143</sup>

τοιγὰρ ἐγὼ τοι, ξεῖνε, μάλ’ ἀτρεκέως ἀγορεύσω.  
οὔτε τί μοι πᾶς δῆμος ἀπεχθόμενος χαλεπαίνει,  
οὔτε κασιγνήτοις ἐπιμέμφομαι, οἷσί περ ἄνῆρ  
μαρναμένοισι πέποιθε, καὶ εἰ μέγα νεῖκος ὄρηται.

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<sup>142</sup> Wohl 1993, 19

<sup>143</sup> Goldhill 2010, 117

ὦδε γὰρ ἡμετέρην γενεὴν μούνωσε Κρονίων·  
μοῦνον Λαέρτην Ἄρκεισιος υἱὸν ἔτικτε,  
μοῦνον δ' αὐτ' Ὀδυσῆα πατὴρ τέκεν· αὐτὰρ Ὀδυσσεὺς  
μοῦνον ἔμ' ἐν μεγάροισι τεκὼν λίπεν οὐδ' ἀπόνητο. (16.113-20)

I will tell you, stranger, with great precision,  
Neither does the demos overall harbor hatred for me,  
Nor do I blame any brothers, in whom a man  
Lays his trust in conflicts, if a great quarrel were to arise.  
For in this way has the son of Kronos singlified our family.  
Arkesios fathered a single son, Laertes.  
And he in turn was father to Odysseus alone. And Odysseus,  
After fathering me alone, left me in the house, and did not enjoy me.

Importantly, sisters do not count: we learn of Odysseus' sister in the *Odyssey*, although she plays no part in the narrative (15.361-370). The emphatic repetition of the adjective serves to mark out the precarity of the situation: “in the *Odyssey*, then, *mounos* regularly implies an individual under threat, where being alone means to be without support or to be in danger.”<sup>144</sup>

The function of such a genealogy is multifold, but one key aspect is its description of an uninterrupted line that cannot be corrupted by sibling rivalry (as we saw in Agamemnon's line in chapter one, for example). The *Odyssey* is deliberate in its choice of genealogy, as elsewhere Odysseus has multiple children.<sup>145</sup> If the maids can be seen as sisters to Telemachus, even loosely, then their own potential offspring with the suitors might introduce the possibility of interference with the line.<sup>146</sup> The notion of an unacknowledged child haunting a family is extremely common in Greek myth—heightened here by the slaughter of the potential father—as in the story of Telegonus, the son of Odysseus and Circe (or Calypso), who accidentally kills his father. Should the slave women be pregnant, their death secures the line of Odysseus by eliminating the possibility of tension or even revenge plots, ultimately foreclosing alternative

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<sup>144</sup> Goldhill 2010, 120

<sup>145</sup> Christensen 2015

<sup>146</sup> However, the men of the household may be allowed to sleep with the maids, see Laertes' speech at 1.428-33.

narratives. This reading finds support in the fact that the maids, or, better, μία μούνη “one of the maids alone” (23.227), knows the secrets of Penelope’s shroud-weaving and of the marriage bed.<sup>147</sup> Thus, the threat to the marital order of the household is clear, and couched in similar terms to the precarity of the lines. The control of the maids’ bodies and their knowledge is thus directly related to the mastery of not only the *oikos* but also of the secrets and mystery that underwrite the uniqueness of Odysseus, his relationships, and his *Odyssey*.

The *Odyssey* is not a poem that defends the maids. It gives us access to a discourse that allows us to flesh out other views of them, but only by bringing ourselves to the text. Goldhill ends his reading of genealogical passage above by stating that “the fantasy of perfection [implicit in the line of single sons], the precarious knife-edge along which the *oikos* walks to survive—is only one voice in the *Odyssey*.”<sup>148</sup> To him, the opening up of normative paradigms, and the expression of ideologies occurs thanks to the “hiccup of the verb [μούνωσε],” which opens up the *Odyssey* to a potential humanistic appreciation of different ways of thinking through and around questions of the family.<sup>149</sup> In the same moment that the *Odyssey* has one of its characters outline the importance of a coherent and uninterrupted narrative of successions as the basis for dynastic power, it trips up on the term which it applies to the creation of such a narrative. And behind that word can be heard the murmuring described by Foucault, of other narratives that might lead one to suspect the motivation behind this specific narrative. By thematizing the importance of controlling the narrative, it exposes the fragility of any specific narrative’s poetic order.

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<sup>147</sup> Goldhill 2010, 120

<sup>148</sup> Goldhill 2010, 127. See also the discussion of this passage in Barker and Christensen 2019.

<sup>149</sup> Goldhill 2010, 127

Over the course of its treatment of the slave women, the *Odyssey* repeatedly provides us opportunities for questioning the motivation of the status quo—whether in terms of how Eurykleia accounts for their disloyalty, in Odysseus’ anger at the maids, in Telemachus’ explosive shame in the moments before their execution, and finally in the narrator’s own arresting simile. The maids thereby grant us insight into the poem’s poetics of unease as it attempts to “singlify” its own narrative in the face of several others that threaten to make transparent the ultimate arbitrariness behind Odysseus’ hegemony.

#### 4. Redirection

The three examples in this chapter are all characterized by the risk implicit in the proliferation of narratives—whether in terms of hearing what Agamemnon’s singer might have to say, learning uncomfortable truths from the Sirens who know all, or by attending to the maids as characters who reveal the possibilities for thinking in different terms about the kinds of narratives that structure authority. The *Odyssey*’s poetics of unease exposes the risk implicit in the way that articulating one story also gives voices to potential others, including ones that can be potentially disruptive to the values of the poem as an ideological whole. This aesthetics of murmuring emerges with particular intensity in the passages I discussed, but as Foucault noted more broadly characterizes the poem’s narrative strategies throughout—such as in the Cretan tales or even in its closing verses when civil war is forestalled by the intervention of the gods who rush in to impose an artificial order and draw the narrative to a close.

Ultimately, the poetics of unease is a poetics that offers up alternatives only to then subtract them. Therefore, I also emphasized the importance of thinking against the movement of

the poem as it progresses, the way it interpellates readers and audiences that may be persuaded to find ways to lend coherence to Odysseus' retelling of the Sirens episode or to the symbolism of Telemachus' mode of executing the maids. I elicited the possibility for fundamental tension created by a supposed ideological and narrative coherence in a long-elaborated, multi-authored, inherently dialogical poem, and I argued for how parts of the poem can be read reparatively. In my next chapter, on several Near Eastern poems about Gilgamesh, I use the stratigraphy of that evidence to examine how unease develops diachronically in an imperfectly analogous context—showing how recasting unease over time leads to different strategies for provoking affective discomfort.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Submerged Labor in Gilgamesh

Humanity originates in the murder of a laborer. The story of the god Kingu (or Qingu), whose name derives from the Sumerian word **kiġ** [“work, labor”] and also puns on the word for “Sumer” itself, **ki-en-gi**<sup>ki</sup> [“the land of Sumer”], is only told in any detail in the Akkadian theogony *Enūma Eliš* (EE).<sup>1</sup> In that poem, Marduk seizes divine kingship from the older generations of gods, represented initially by Apsu and Tiamat (the parents of the gods).<sup>2</sup> After Marduk kills Apsu, Tiamat takes Kingu as her lover, sets him on the throne, appoints him to the head of her army, and entrusts him with the *tuppi šīmāti*<sup>meš</sup> [“Tablet of Destinies”] (EE I 149ff.).<sup>3</sup> Through no direct action of his own, Kingu comes to occupy the highest position among the gods, a divine embodiment of labor, the land of Sumer itself (as yet unformed), and of the universe’s foundational documents.<sup>4</sup>

Marduk’s argument that Kingu must be deposed rewrites history. Without explanation, he claims that Kingu undercuts Tiamat to take command of the army and tablets, and that it was

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<sup>1</sup> On the parallel etymologies, see Jacobsen 1984, 17. I cite text and line numbers of the *Enūma Eliš* following Lambert 2013.

<sup>2</sup> On the *Enūma Eliš* generally, as an allegorical political narrative and its narratological issues, and with discussions of Kingu, see Foster 2012, Sonik 2008, Machinist 2005, Vanstiphout 1992a.

<sup>3</sup> For clarity, the Kingu narrative is spread out across the text, with some repeated episodes. I do not treat these repetitions here as they relate to the portion of the story leading up to Marduk’s murder of Kingu.

<sup>4</sup> For the sake of clarity, I have adopted bold font for citations and words from Sumerian, and the regular use of italics for Akkadian. Within each language, unitalicized in the case of Akkadian, determinatives and the like are given as superscripts. Conventions for transcribing logograms (and providing readings for them) follow the formats in the relevant editions, as cited.

Kingu that had initiated the war against the younger gods (EE VI 23ff.).<sup>5</sup> He is tried *in absentia* and found guilty, then Marduk kills him (not without struggle), takes the tablets, and hands Kingu's corpse to the god Ea.<sup>6</sup> Ea gathers his blood and mixes it with clay to form mankind. The explicit conclusion: mankind will now labor in the service of the gods, releasing the divine from the necessity of labor (EE VI 33-6). As Kingu's blood is the blood of mortals, so is labor their allotted function. The vitality of the dead gods persists, but only in the subjugation of humanity to the new gods.<sup>7</sup>

Part of this process are two instances of textual self-authentication. The first, when he takes the Tablet of Destinies from Kingu and applies to it his own seal (EE IV 121-2), making himself the guardian of the textual basis of the cosmos. The second, at the end of the text, when Marduk oversees the composition of the epic, "meaning that the poem itself becomes part of its own narration."<sup>8</sup> Marduk's revisionism, although readily apparent in the poem, is justified along with his actions through a circular and transcendental logic. But the poem falters on one point.

*ina da-me-šú ib-[na]-a a-me-lu-tú  
i-mid dul-li ilāni-ma ilāni um-taš-šîr  
ul-tu a-me-lu-tu in-nu-u<sup>d</sup>é-a er-šú  
dul-lu šá ilāni i-mi-du-ni šá-a-šú  
šip-ru šu-ú la na-tu-ú ḥa-sa-siš*

From his blood, he (Ea) made mankind  
The labor of the gods imposed (on mankind), he freed the gods.<sup>9</sup>  
Then, when wise Ea had created mankind,  
The labor of the gods they imposed on them.  
That deed is impossible to understand. (EE VI 33-7)

<sup>5</sup> A brief but very lucid summary of this "glaring inconsistency" in the EE is presented in Foster 2011, 146-7.

<sup>6</sup> Marduk attains, among his many epithets, the title of *dir-qin-gu* ["Ir-Kingu," which is glossed "subduer of Kingu"] (EE VII.105).

<sup>7</sup> Jacobsen 1984, 17-18

<sup>8</sup> Foster 2012, 19

<sup>9</sup> The term for labor is here *dullu*, which combines notions of "misery, hardship" with "forced labor" in the service of others.

The narrator concedes to a clear difficulty when describing how Ea, on Marduk's orders, imposed the labor of the gods on mankind. He repeats twice in a row that Ea imposed labor on mankind after creating them, but then says *šip-ru šu-ú la na-tu-ú ha-sa-siš* ["that deed is impossible to understand/beyond comprehension"] (EE VI 37).<sup>10</sup> In a context in which declarative statements are used to define why the world is a certain way over another, the narrator here admits that, after all, things just are as they are—a striking statement given that the text not only accounts for the existence of gods but also for the structure of the final pantheon on the basis of its internecine struggles.

On one level, the poetic unease of this text can be explained simply through an ideological lens: divine kingship and command over labor were not easy to accept as a matter of fact, so the ancient texts identified them as problems requiring both explanation and justification.<sup>11</sup> The concerted deliberation over Kingu's status earlier in the poem highlights Marduk's own anxiety in the production of a suitable origin story that will support his current position. His view that labor (Kingu) should not rank highly among the gods but that it should be the basis of mankind's existence is presented nearly as an afterthought, buried in the footnotes of the text. But the narrator's pause at this juncture—addressing his aporia to the poem's audience as if in a *recusatio*—acts as a residue. A recognition of the fundamental arbitrariness of labor's assignation to mankind so that the gods may have their leisure becomes possible in a detail that not only threatens the ideological order proposed by Marduk, but also the poem's ability to act as a textualization of origin—its ability to explain and establish the foundations of society without leaving any ambiguity as to who is right and who is unimpeachably now the sovereign.

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<sup>10</sup> The phrase *la na-tu-ú ha-sa-siš* is difficult to render—literally, it can be even be translated as “not suitable/appropriate for understanding.” Lambert settles on “beyond comprehension,” as does Foster.

<sup>11</sup> The EE is only one of several creation stories from Mesopotamia. See Lambert 2013.

In all of this, Kingu has barely spoken a word.<sup>12</sup> First he was constituted by Tiamat as a supreme deity. Then he was labeled a traitor and killed. His importance in this poem is disproportionate to his role in the extant tradition, where he appears in just a few ritual and astrological texts—as a form of offering in the former, representing the sacrifice of his body for the replenishment of mankind, and as a constellation representing the dead gods in the latter.<sup>13</sup> He lingered in view, whether in the night sky or as a goat to be sacrificed or, in one ritual, to be thrown off a roof—but his connection to labor was forgotten. In the “Flood Story” *Atram-ḫasīs*, the origin of mankind in blood and clay is repeated, but Kingu is not mentioned.<sup>14</sup> Whether he haunts such narratives is an open question. Certainly, scribes and priests like those who saw him in the night sky tried to locate him here or there in the cosmic order. A peculiar piece of evidence is one of the “Birdcall Texts,” in which “compilers sought to find evidence of current theology in the physical universe, which, viewed dispassionately, had only little relevant to show.”<sup>15</sup> There we hear that the duck, the bird of the grain deity Kusu, makes the following call: <sup>d</sup>*qin-gu* <sup>d</sup>*qin-gu* [“quack, quack,” but, as the divine determinatives show, “Kingu, Kingu!"].<sup>16</sup> Tantalizing evidence suggests each bird’s call was modeled on a literary trope or citing a verse from mythological texts including *Enūma Eliš*, but the text is broken after the word *pu-uh-ra-a-ma* [“assemble...”], so we cannot know whether the duck was chanting a verse from that epic.<sup>17</sup>

Whatever happened to Kingu and the associations he carried in the mostly unattested social imaginary is likely to remain unknown, although Mesopotamian tablets are discovered and edited often enough that yield surprising information. But the Mesopotamian literary discourse

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<sup>12</sup> Foster 2011, 147

<sup>13</sup> Pomponio 1997, van Dijk 1983, 26-27

<sup>14</sup> I discuss the importance of clay with respect to human life and tablets further, below

<sup>15</sup> Lambert 1970, 111

<sup>16</sup> Lambert 1970, 114

<sup>17</sup> Lambert 1970, 112

around labor and its role in the establishment of a textual tradition of originary mythology shows a remarkable consistency in its poetics of unease, showing that the official ideology never saturated the facts of life and the feelings of individuals. Even the *Enūma Eliš* highlights, rather than neutralizes, the arbitrariness and cruelty of inequality. The imperfect coverage creates the opportunity for discrepant writing and reading—often in ways much less fanciful than in the reappearance of the god of labor in a duck’s call.

In this chapter, I examine the poetics of unease in the Gilgamesh texts from Mesopotamia. As I explain in a preliminary section before presenting my close readings, I do not look just at the better known “epic” of Gilgamesh, but also at parts of its earlier recension (the Middle Babylonian Version) and one of its even older, Sumerian source texts (the “Death of Gilgamesh”). As I move from the more recent evidence to the older material, I explore how the Gilgamesh poems are haunted by different conceptions of labor, human and heroic. I focus on certain acts of labor described in the poems that provoke unease, since they work with and against the construction of a coherent ideology of kingship and its concomitant logics of cultural reproduction. As in my excursus above, I do not merely identify figures that are intimately tied to questions of labor, but also analyze the poetics that surround the description of labor—or that sublimate labor in other terms—whether through the use of arresting imagery, metapoetics, or other literary devices. By looking at labor and its residues in the poems, we will see that the texts reflect on its importance in ambivalent terms often presenting labor in a positive light, but in a manner that is haunted by much more negative considerations of its effects on mortals.

For many readers, the Gilgamesh poems are far removed from discussions of labor or, if labor is discussed, it is understood in terms of the hero's heroic labors only.<sup>18</sup> Gilgamesh's friendship with Enkidu, their adventures together, and Gilgamesh's quest for immortality make up the large majority of the extant texts.<sup>19</sup> These plot lines do not appear to relate to labor in the more practical senses of making and crafting things, except in the ways in which we might see the journey to the Cedar Forest as a search for material resources, or the attempt to gain immortality as a kind of labor that will have eternal life as its potential product.<sup>20</sup> In other situations, as in Gilgamesh's confrontation with the Bull of Heaven and his challenge to the gods, the kind of heroic labors that Gilgamesh undergoes are ones that earn him a kind of prestige and that mark him out as able and powerful. But the epic clues us into the importance of even the more commonplace kinds of labor and industry when it emphasizes Gilgamesh's work restoring the city's walls and its temples—monumental activities that imply, beyond the work of Gilgamesh, also broader patterns of implicit labor that are described only marginally.

In the chapter, I therefore focus reparatively on these last kinds of labors more than on the broader narrative arcs or key scenes in which heroic labor is singled out. My objective is to elicit the discourse surrounding the labor that supports such activities, much as I read the Sirens episode as a portion of the *Odyssey* in which the labor of Odysseus' men enabled him to perform his own kind of labor of self-discovery that was later transformed (in the representation of himself to Phaeacians) into an ideological self-definition of both himself and the *Odyssey*. I work with the same paradigm in mind for the Gilgamesh texts, understanding the heroic labors of the

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<sup>18</sup> The reference text for receptions of Gilgamesh in the last one hundred and fifty years is Ziolkowski 2012. I discuss some exceptions to my generalization, below.

<sup>19</sup> An excellent and in some ways paradigmatic reading of the epic in terms of these central "romantic" and "tragic" narrative arcs is Jacobsen 1990. Others are Wolff 1969 and Furlani 1946. More recently, on love and friendship in the epic, see Ackerman 2005.

<sup>20</sup> On the former, see Davenport 2007.

hero to chart an ideology that is troubled by underlying residues in the description of more human labors. In the conclusion to the chapter, I will return to the broadest implications of my close readings—but it is worth stating up front that the Gilgamesh poems' unease is directly tied to the validity of certain kinds of labors over others. Gilgamesh's labors do not merely cast a shadow on those of his subordinates; they are themselves sometimes sidelined by divine imperatives or thwarted by the course of events. In ideological terms, I take this paradigmatic hierarchization of labor to imply—much as it did in my reading of *Enūma Eliš* above—that the labor of the elite classes in their acts of self-assertation are more deliberately centered in the poems, pushing the labor of workers to the fringes of the narrative representation. I therefore hold back from reading too sympathetically into Gilgamesh's labors, his disappointments, and his affects—except when these seem to reflect the labor of his subjects, or when they are directly tied to the establishment of a textual tradition through which to understand the ideology that the text espouses, as a heroic legend that justifies the kingship of Gilgamesh in spite of his many and often readily apparent imperfections. What I am interested in bringing out is the kinds of labor that can provoke unease, precisely because they throw into question the metaphysical importance of heroic labor through an unforgiving emphasis on the material aspect of laboring as a human activity.

## 1. Gilgamesh on the Holodeck<sup>21</sup>

For readers who are unfamiliar with the structure of the corpus relating to Gilgamesh, the following section contextualizes the poems with respect to periodization. It then provides a sketch of two other forms of temporality relevant to thinking about the Gilgamesh texts. First, the time of the flood as a temporal horizon in Near Eastern myth and history, fusing them into a “mythical history.” Second, the methodological problem of close reading texts that are keenly aware of their own self-constructed historicity, and that in some ways even predicted their own loss and rediscovery, resulting in metapoetic figures throughout the Gilgamesh texts that trouble both their actual and conceptual periodization. In brief, these are the two main features of the poetics of unease that I discuss in this chapter, since the labor that goes into the texts’ ideologies of memorialization—through both monuments and texts—is often described in inordinate flashes of detail, including the dense use of imagery and suggestive plays on words that, as they demonstrate the grandeur of the achievements, also indirectly turn our attention to the kinds of labor necessary for their completion.

There is no one epic or poem of Gilgamesh. The material we have belongs to several historically distinct stages that precede and include multiple recensions of the epic. Conventionally, the Sumerian texts about Gilgamesh are considered to be the oldest. They do not form a cohesive master narrative, although it has been argued that they operate loosely as a “cycle.”<sup>22</sup> The later Akkadian texts were formed into several recensions, which scholars refer to

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<sup>21</sup> A “holodeck” is a virtual reality simulator that appears in the Star Trek series, in which a reality is projected in the holodeck that users can explore as if it were real life. Murray and Jenkins used this term in connection to works of literature, discussing Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and the Homeric poems respectively. See Murray 1997, Jenkins 1998.

<sup>22</sup> Gadotti 2014

as the Old Babylonian Version (OBV), Middle Babylonian Version (MBV), and the Standard Babylonian Version (SBV), the last of which is known to us sometimes only through the earlier versions because only partial evidence of each is extant. It is important to clarify that the labels “old,” “middle,” and “standard” refer to the language, not the text—that is, the SBV uses a standard(ized) literary dialect, but that does not automatically mean that the SBV is a standard form of the Gilgamesh story, or epic. The SBV does appear to make that claim about itself, and some aspects of its history do point in the direction of an attempt to standardize the epics content (discussed below), but that is a separate matter. For the purposes of my analysis, the label “standard” is merely descriptive of a specific set of (later) manuscripts, and should not be taken to imply a fixed version with a discrete, “final” ideological and narrative profile. It is however true to an extent that, over time, some formal aspects of the texts came to be standardized by the time of the SBV, such as the general sequence of the plot, and the distribution of plot over twelve tablets. But many critical and substantive differences between manuscripts remain.

One advantage, for our investigation, of this complex textual stratigraphy is that the Gilgamesh materials afford us an opportunity to look more closely at the diachronic processes involved in the production of something like an authorized, “canonical” version. Significantly, this is a process mostly closed off to us in the case of the Homeric epics or the *Rigveda*. Assessments of the meaning of “canon” in terms of the Near Eastern evidence have pointed to a difficulty in establishing the validity of such a concept in native terms.<sup>23</sup> That being said, some text(s) certainly came to be seen as “foundational,” not least because they explicitly articulated

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<sup>23</sup> See Lieberman 1990, with bibliography.

themselves as such—also comparing themselves, as we will see, to literal architectural foundations.<sup>24</sup>

Within Assyriology, the history of the epic of Gilgamesh has already been studied extensively. Critical editions cover the material in Sumerian through to the extant evidence of Akkadian recensions, and also material in other languages such as Hittite.<sup>25</sup> The collecting and assembling of versions of the Gilgamesh texts was an ancient and multilingual practice. Because of this, the text-internal and contextual evidence for the process of forging an epic from disparate components is similarly well-documented, although not every aspect has received close scrutiny.<sup>26</sup>

In addition to the processes of recension spanning hundreds of years, there are also forms of paratextual evidence that speak to an ancient mythic conception of the text's status as a palimpsest of tradition. For example, we have the names of alleged author-figures, like the scholar priest *Sîn-lēqi-unninni*.<sup>27</sup> We also have myths that narrativize the actual processes of cultural reproduction, such as the lore surrounding Assurbanipal's own literacy and the stories about how he sent scribes to collect tablets from the far reaches of the empire, having ordered his scribes to produce a version of the epic of Gilgamesh that matched his view of himself as Gilgamesh's heir.<sup>28</sup> In terms of sublimated communal labor, the texts themselves resemble the building projects that we will see described within them. Writing and literacy formed important technologies of kingship and its self-representation across Mesopotamian history.<sup>29</sup> The literary

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<sup>24</sup> Helle 2019b

<sup>25</sup> For Akkadian, see George 2003a. For Hittite, see Beckman 2019.

<sup>26</sup> Abusch 2001, Tigay 1982, Fleming and Milstein 2010

<sup>27</sup> On authorship and Gilgamesh, see Helle 2019a, Helle 2019b, Helle 2018, and Vanstiphout 1990.

<sup>28</sup> Frame and George 2005

<sup>29</sup> Russell 1999, Tadmor 1997

evidence can be supplemented by our knowledge of vast intellectual and physical labor (scribes, schools, builders, libraries) mobilized in order to produce things like epics and inscriptions.

While such laboring is mostly inscrutable from within the texts themselves, the historiographic “myths,” non-literary textual evidence, and archaeological evidence unambiguously attest to its existence. Further, the complexity of such labor and the shifting relations of scribes to sovereigns allow us to imagine several historical positions from which to offer a reparative reading by occupying a counterdiscursive or countercultural position.<sup>30</sup>

This archaeological and archival periodization is complemented by a conceptual, literary notion of periodization that is anxiously articulated in the texts themselves. While it is not possible to speak of any single literary imaginary for the periods that gave us the Gilgameshes, if there is one constant, it is the myth of the flood.

The flood organizes mythical and historical time in more ways than is usually realized, as it does more than demarcate the past from the plupast, history from an *in illo tempore*. It is also the source of a specifically bibliographic and archival anxiety—and one couched in terms of labor and the body. When Bēlēt-ilī laments that *u4-mu ul-lú-u a-na ʕi-iʕ-ʕi lu-ú i-tur-ma* [“all the past has turned to clay!”] (SBV XI 119), she points to the crisis as one that is at once archival and also deeply human, since humans write on clay but they also originate from clay and can return to clay, as we see when Utnapishtim echoes Bēlēt-ilī’s sentiment and exclaims *ù kul-lat te-né-še-e-ti i-tu-ra a-na ʕi-iʕ-ʕi* [“all the people have turned to clay!”] (SBV XI 135). The emotional connotations of these verses have been noticed by previous scholars, not least because it is a recasting of a verse from the Old Babylonian *Atram-ḫasīs* that is “radically adapted” for its uses

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<sup>30</sup> Finn 2017

here so as to emphasize its exclamatory dimensions.<sup>31</sup> The implicit connection to *Enūma Eliš* and *Atram-ḫasīs* in their descriptions of man's origins in blood and clay are also examples of this trope. The SBV's tones of desperation are thereby rooted in a literary tradition through which antlophobia becomes a correlate of social panic and the risk of civilization coming to an end as water melts the clay of humans and tablets alike.

The lead-up to the flood is described in palpable detail by the SBV, particularly in terms of the labor of the men who help build the complex ark-submarine-cosmos-ziggurat but who do not then get to ride in it because the flood arrives a day earlier than expected, due to Enlil's guile (SBV XI 48-96).<sup>32</sup> We hear that Utnapishtim gave the men plentiful meats and lots to drink as they labored, and that he organized carnivals, perhaps so as to secure his building project from the ill omens of an unhappy workforce.<sup>33</sup> But his benevolence (as he reports it) does not explicitly mention such an anxiety. Instead, the poem creates a contrast between Utnapishtim's positive attitude to his subjects' labor and Gilgamesh's treatment of his own subjects in the opening parts of the poem (SBV I 67-72, discussed further below). In the time before the flood, it seems at least possible that people might have enjoyed and drawn sustenance from the work they performed in a way that was not perceived as oppressive. It is convenient that powers that be could ultimately attribute the deprivation of the laborers to Enlil's trick, rather than to any lack of foresight on the part of their ruler.

The above suffices to suggest that such a vision of labor contributed to the depiction of the times before the flood as a kind of golden age. As such, the manner in which the old king

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<sup>31</sup> George 2003a, 886. The original (OB *Atram-ḫasīs* III.iii.34-5) is a depressive reflection on the eschatological effects of the flood, a request for darkness and gloom to dim the sight of the living.

<sup>32</sup> On how the labor and payment is motivated, see Worthington 2020, 276-8. On the "ark" see Holloway 1991, with technical rejoinders in Hendel 1995, finding their own response in Holloway 1998.

<sup>33</sup> George 2003a, 513

Utnapishtim represents himself and his exceptional survival could come under scrutiny as being a dissimulating, motivated narrative, designed to impress Gilgamesh and to establish Utnapishtim’s superiority.<sup>34</sup> I will return later to the specific question of voluntary communal labor versus corvée labor. But accepting for now Utnapishtim’s narrative at face value, the detailed emphasis on individual laborers with their different tools, skills, and abilities remains striking. There is a fullness to the recognition of their individual roles and its importance in the greater whole. This seeming excess of detail that precedes their tragic demise in the flood acts as a poignant residue in the poem. The plan was to save the laborers, but gods make the flood arrive earlier than expected. That idyllic world, in which labor is recognized, compensated, and rewarded with carnivals, comes to an abrupt end, shunted into a remote past by the flood. The last act of labor before the flood is the sealing of the ship, from the outside.

*a-na pe-ḫi šá<sup>giš</sup> eleppi(má) m<sup>m</sup>pu-zu-ur-<sup>d</sup>enlil(kur.gal) lú<sup>lu</sup>malāḫi(ma.laḫ4)  
ēkalla(é.gal) at-ta-din a-di bu-še-e-šú (SBV XI 95-6)*

To the caulker of the boat, the shipwright Puzur-Enlil,  
I gave (my) palace with all its goods.

Puzur-Enlil’s final gesture secures the safety of his king, at his own expense.<sup>35</sup> Utnapishtim does not overlook the weight of this gesture and the poem revels for a moment in the caulk that seals the boat’s hatch, as if creating a hermetic seal between present and future. But there is also an activation of unease in the poem as it lingers briefly on this figure, giving him a name and personality. While Puzur-Enlil’s recompense may seem grandiose, we know that in just a few

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<sup>34</sup> On the gods’ duplicity and “conspicuous silences” generally, throughout the flood story in Gilgamesh, see Worthington 2020, 255-6.

<sup>35</sup> An indirect parallel may be drawn here between the role of Puzur-Enlil’s labor in sealing off the ship and the labor of the men in the Sirens episode of the Odyssey, whose ears are sealed off so that they can labor for their king’s safety and freedom—allowing him to survive his heroic labor, although they do not ultimately make it home safely. See chapter two.

moments he will meet the fate of all humans and turn to clay, with the palace and all its goods.<sup>36</sup> Whether or not he realized this is left unanswered, a touching marginal question in the text—one that haunts the appearance of unnamed but analogous figures. The unease emerges also from trace of this ambiguity in his name, a “nomen omen,” as Puzur-Enlil can be etymologized both as “protection of (the god) Amurru” and “protection of (the god) Enlil,” where the latter suggests that “his fate was inscribed ironically in his name” since, in the epic but not always elsewhere, Enlil is the god who brings down the flood.<sup>37</sup>

It is through these interwoven concerns on human frailty, the brittleness of textual records, and the status of labor that the epic of Gilgamesh articulates the horizon of the flood, the ancient division of cosmic time into the *lam abubi* [“before the flood”] and the *arki abubi* [“after the flood”].<sup>38</sup> Once all of time is divided into these two eras, the work of the second era can be understood as an attempt to avoid the (possible repetition of the) catastrophe of the first or of analogous civilization-ending occurrences. It is this second articulation of this horizon, which reaches also into the future, that complicates the narratives surrounding Gilgamesh, for he is neither the hero of the flood, nor will he ever be truly comparable to Utnapishtim (as this chapter will show). Instead, Gilgamesh represents a future that will attempt to shore up its institutions from ruin in very different terms from those of the past.

Even if in only brief moments, the texts leave open a radically different future by retaining an imagined past as a script for undoing the ideology of the present—as Utnapishtim’s success could always be seen as a potential critique of any impending crisis that emerges on

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<sup>36</sup> On this and potential word plays in the passage that emphasize this point, see Worthington 2020, 358-64. I mention the most salient on immediately below, the others are less emphatic.

<sup>37</sup> Michalowski 1991, 189. See also Helle (forthcoming) and George 2003a, 514.

<sup>38</sup> On flood narratives generally, see Chen 2013.

Gilgamesh's watch or in those of his successors. This countercultural tendency can partly be explained through a reference to known historical information and even an approximate periodization of the texts—combined with the unique position occupied by Gilgamesh in the “mythical history” of Mesopotamia. He is the ruler who embodies the “transition from the original form of kingship, as it was practiced by the rulers of Uruk, such as En-merkar, to a more secular and autocratic form of rule.”<sup>39</sup> But when it comes to defining that “original,” now superseded, form of kingship, the Gilgamesh texts are less historical analyses than literary negotiations of tradition that imagine different configurations of how labor is (or is not) valued by sovereigns. Beyond their historiographic value, when we turn to the labor described in passing or in remainder, the texts also offer us a vantage from which to observe the thinness of ideological constructs and their reliance on affect.

Ultimately, the Gilgamesh texts produce their own cohesive ideologies of kingship, predicated on Gilgamesh's difference from his putative predecessors and his similarity to the (partly) already historical lessons of the Sargonic period.<sup>40</sup> However, the residues of the older orders produce a curiously charged poetics of unease in the mythic textures of the Gilgamesh poems. While the older order is often more mysterious, and at times has a minatory, spectral presence, it also offers readers several possible routes for undoing the ideology of divine kingship and for beginning to imagine alternative worlds. This is not to say it ultimately becomes incorporated into the overarching ideology, or that it is an idyllic past without its own problems. But it is because of these facts that its persistent presence can be seen as a marker of unease.

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<sup>39</sup> Steinkeller 2018, 169

<sup>40</sup> Steinkeller 2018, 169-70

In order to illustrate this poetics, my readings below turn to specific passages in the texts in which the poem concretizes a difference between past and present in terms of labor. While the poems appear to argue for kinds of continuity, I bring out evidence for a lingering sense of discontinuity—one that can also be read as a kind of dissatisfaction at the status quo. In that sense, my brief discussion of Utnapishtim’s ship and its doomed caulker, above, serves as a guide to the kinds of readings possible when a reparative position is assumed with respect to the epic. The granular emergence of figures like Puzur-Enlil is a contingent event in the text, as he is swept away by the rest of the narrative just as much as he erased from existence by the flood. But by his very presence we are alerted to an awareness of the thinness of the discourse produced by even a most benevolent sovereign like Utnapishtim.

A final methodological proviso before delving into the examples. The folding temporalities of the Gilgamesh poems make them extremely peculiar, and their plays on temporal thresholds are complicated by the actual history of the texts, which were lost and then found. We will see that “we” are the epic’s audience—it calls to us in several ways, inviting future readerships(s) to save text and king from future floods, and to perform gestures of quasi-archaeological recovery and repair. Chance would have it that the sands of time have granted their trajectory a unique fullness, grating them their explicit desires.<sup>41</sup> We must remain cognizant of this trajectory if we want to attend to their ideology and to observe its residues without in turn reifying its ideology, as if congratulating the poem for its success. The plan of the authors of these texts was precisely to secure their past—in a specific configuration favorable to their view

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<sup>41</sup> For accounts of the rediscovery and aftermath, see Schmidt 2019, Damrosch 2006.

of tradition—from accidental oblivion and to ensure that any endurance would be seen as the manifestation of destiny, rather than happenstance.

Because the text's claims about itself as text are so similar to the ideological underpinnings of kingship and tradition, the survival of the text comes to have its own narratological and metapolitical implications—political inferences of continuity are suggested through the literary discourse of loss and recovery. Like the ancient readers, “we” are literally invited to “[confirm] the rightness of the narration’s, and [Gilgamesh’s own] conclusion...through an almost eerie sense of participation,” that commands our “emotional adherence” to his (and the poem’s) “ethical insight.”<sup>42</sup> As participants in the experience proposed by the Gilgamesh “holodeck,” we enter a virtual reality in which we participate in the temporalities of antiquity and become invested with some of the anxieties of these past kings as they project their own visions of themselves through the texts and onto reality. The risk of reducing the dead to “fixed forms,” in Williams’ terms, is therefore particularly pronounced.

Following the lessons of micro-history, I urge us to instead pay attention to the sometimes still visible labor of those disempowered others that permit Gilgamesh the luxury of his wanderings, the perpetuation of his political order, and the concretization of his memory in textual and monumental form.<sup>43</sup> To shift our emphasis in this way is not to produce “anachronistic” readings, since discussions of class, gender, ecology, and ideology “are not exactly determined, but [they are] ... enabled on a more general level by the ancient text itself.”<sup>44</sup> By beginning readings from residues that undermine the stability of ideological and traditional

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<sup>42</sup> Altes 2007, 193

<sup>43</sup> On similar approaches to “history from below” in Assyriology, see Arbøll 2021 (with extensive bibliography), Liverani 2004, Van de Mieroop 1999.

<sup>44</sup> Helle 2019b, 36, 37-8

orders from within the poem, we can assume a reparative position. Thus, we can reject total readings of the Gilgamesh texts as foundationally “subversive.” Although they offer a sympathetic portrait of a king who is one-third mortal and therefore susceptible to experiences with which it is easier to empathize than, say, some of the kings who represent themselves as gods in their self-flattering inscribed *res gestae*, that too is one of their ideological strategies.

For not dissimilar reasons, we ought to resist integrating all identifiable residues into an imagined, coherent critique of kingship and labor. Not all moments of unease resolve themselves into a critical moment. The practices exposed in residues are themselves varied across time and space. It follows that the micro-critiques put forward give different voices their respective minute and momentary platforms to address a panoply of idiosyncratic issues, without a unified program. But, each residue does in its own manner challenge us to pose the following question: why do we often insist on reading a poem (or poems) about the establishment of an imperialist cultural framework, written and preserved for and by the ruling and oppressing elites, merely as a generalizing, beautiful, and deeply humane meditation on mortality?<sup>45</sup> Alternatives exist, and they flicker in and out of the worlds that the texts build.

## 2. The Epic that Was Already Written

In this section I look at the extant proems of the MBV and SBV (and parts of Tablet I more generally) as a source of several remainders that problematize the sense of canonicity and continuity that the texts assert for themselves, alongside the kind of labor that makes such texts

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<sup>45</sup> On the imperialist bent in Gilgamesh, see Davenport 2007 and Damrosch 2006.

possible. We will see that Gilgamesh's own status as king, author, and narrator is woven into the imputed materiality of the poem and its survival. The diachronic changes from MBV to SBV also show a concerted attempt to develop a relation to tradition that exceeds that of continuity and verges on that of identity. In closing, I turn briefly to Utnapishtim's interaction with Gilgamesh to highlight the fundamental mismatch that the text preserves, through which we can see that Gilgamesh's desire to establish a "new normal" is not as deeply rooted in tradition as the poem suggests.

The difference between the poems of the SBV and MBV tells an unambiguous story: the SBV is trying to outdo its rivals and predecessors, establishing itself as the standard against which everything is measured. A contrastive assessment of two forms of the Akkadian epic's poem is possible due to relatively recent excavations at Ugarit (modern Ras Shamra) that have provided us with our only version of a MBV incipit.<sup>46</sup> The text has been interpreted by some scholars as a jumbled variant (or predecessor) to the Standard Babylonian Version (SBV) incipit, but a set of key divergences points to a rather different conceptualization of kingship and textuality, and suggests we have an earlier or contemporary but alternative stage/strand in the history of the poem.<sup>47</sup> For readers of the SBV (and of many popular translations available today) the general coordinates of the narrative in the opening of the MBV are not particularly unusual or surprising. What does make a difference are the rhetorical gestures that surround the presentation of Gilgamesh as a "knower" of the past and that give shape to the poems' metapoetic reflections on its own status with respect to tradition.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> George 2007

<sup>47</sup> Sasson 2013, 270, responding to an assessment in George 2007.

<sup>48</sup> In my readings below, I am indebted to Milstein 2016. Because my emphases are slightly different, and the material still unfamiliar to non-specialists, I have rehearsed parts of her argument below.

In both versions, the poem opens with its mysterious description of Gilgamesh as “he who saw the *nagbu*,” immediately signaling several ways in which Gilgamesh’s epistemic advantage as one who has seen “the deep” or “the foundations of the land” or even “all things” (MBV I 1; SBV I 1).<sup>49</sup> The MBV, like the SBV, emphasizes the source of Gilgamesh’s knowledge is his travels, exploring other kingdoms and seeking out Utnapishtim, emphasizing that he brought back stories or news from the *lam abubi* [“time before the flood”] (MBV I 5-9). As in the SBV, Gilgamesh’s rule in the first few tablets of the poem is described in unpleasant terms as wrongful and arrogant: he sexually dominates the women keeping them from their husbands (MBV I 12-13; SBV I 72-4, although fragmentary) and he physically dominates the men (MBV I 29-30; 67-9). Interestingly, the two versions present these gendered forms of oppression in a different order, although the implications are the same. Gilgamesh’s penchant for exploitation is directly tied to his achievements by these proems, and coded in terms of the literal reproduction of culture through his oppression of the younger generations (although the question of Gilgamesh’s *droit du seigneur* or *ius primae noctis* is a vexed one, and it more likely that we have here a reference to another kind of gendered, and potentially sexual, oppression of the women).<sup>50</sup>

One crucial difference in the MBV is that Gilgamesh’s epistemic mastery does not rest directly on his control of the production of textual records. The apostrophe that opens the MBV invites Gilgamesh to behave as a reader of ancient texts—he is invited to survey the city’s walls and to open the tablet box at its foundation in order to read about the city’s past.

*e-li* <sup>d</sup>bil.ga.mes *muh̄hi*(ugu) *du-ri ša ʿuruk*(unug)<sup>ʿki</sup> *i-tal-lak*  
*te-me-na hi-iṭ libitta*(sig4) *šu-up-pi*  
*pi-te-ma tu-up-ni-in-na ša* <sup>giš</sup>*erēni*(eren)

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<sup>49</sup> Castillo 1998

<sup>50</sup> Lanoue 2016, Rubio 2014

*pu-uṭ-ṭe-er ḥar-gal-li-šú ša siparri(zabar)*  
*i-šam-ma ṭup-pi<sup>na</sup><sub>4</sub>uqñî(za.gìn.na) ti-ša-<sup>r</sup>as<sup>r</sup>-si*  
*um-ma libitta(sig<sub>4</sub>)-ša la a-gur-rat*  
*uš-ši-šú la id-du-ú 7 mu-un-tal-ku (MBV I 20-26)*

Go up, Gilgameš, on to the wall of Uruk, walk it,  
survey the foundation (deposit), inspect the brickwork!  
Open the cedar wood box,  
release its bronze clasps!  
Pick up the tablet of lapis lazuli and read out,  
thus: “Is not its brickwork kiln-fired brick,  
did the seven sages not lay its foundations?”<sup>51</sup>

That the walls of Uruk act as a kind of text on their own has been argued by several scholars that note their particularly metapoetic quality, as well as the manner in which they act as icons of heroic glory but also of the epic itself as the walls and tablet are “nested chiastically within one another.”<sup>52</sup> As Dickson notes, thinking of similar moments in the SBV, the invocation also invites our own “embodied movement” and an attention to the grandeur of both walls and textual record.<sup>53</sup> In the MBV we stand with Gilgamesh, as if discovering the walls and its foundations through his eyes—“nowhere in the [MBV] is Gilgamesh said to have built the wall, accordingly, there is no emphasis on its inimitability.”<sup>54</sup> The walls are monuments of past glory and the text is a technology that demonstrates the glory of the past and through which Gilgamesh can “proclaim the known achievements of his illustrious ancestors,” pointing only by proxy to the value of text as commemoration (in writing) for later kings.<sup>55</sup> In and of themselves, the tablet and the walls are not directly a praise of Gilgamesh, but rather of the legacy he now commands. As the poem unfolds, they will become—peculiarly—his greatest and most enduring achievements.

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<sup>51</sup> My translations of the Akkadian Gilgamesh rely on the relevant editions of George and include suggestions from Helle’s forthcoming translation and commentary.

<sup>52</sup> Helle 2019b, with reference to Zgoll 2010. Helle’s point is more appropriate to the MBV than the SBV, although for his purposes the analogy holds for both.

<sup>53</sup> Dickson 2009, 27

<sup>54</sup> Milstein 2016, 131

<sup>55</sup> Sasson 2013, 270. The practice of placing tablets in boxes for posterity is a literary trope of no small importance, cf. Machinist 2018. Foundation deposits are the clear cultural model.

“Peculiarly,” because his main undertaking was the pursuit of immortality—failing in that quest, fame and the city are his consolation prizes, which he ably recasts as his primary goals.

The obliqueness of the praise is significant in the MBV because it allows for an indirect praise of the power of the technology of textuality (and of textual agents) to authenticate and preserve, to make the mortal and contingent become immortal and unending. Indeed, a few lines later we learn that some such agents commemorate Gilgamesh through analogous writings.

*ḥar-ra-na ru-uq-ta illik(gin)-ma a-ni-iḥ ù šup-šu-uq  
gar-nu-šu-ma na-ru-⟨ú⟩ ka-lu ma-⟨na⟩-aḥ-⟨ras.⟩-ti (MBV I 10-11)*

He went on a journey to a distant land and so was tired and in pain;  
steles were set up for him (in order to relate) all the labors.

The MBV may be obscuring the fact that Gilgamesh has the right to request that his labors be memorialized and can order scribes to act to that end. But it does not obscure that labor and the fact that Gilgamesh is someone who reads and is in turn written about, rather than an author. The glue that binds history and hero is text, which thus becomes nearly more important than the sovereign himself as the temporal extension of that sovereign’s labor. The use of a tablet of lapis lazuli only emphasizes the precious quality of the material vehicle for textuality, just as the solidity of the walls is emphasized by crediting the brickwork to the Seven Sages.<sup>56</sup>

The SBV departs from the model of the MBV in a sophisticated manner, emphasizing a different economy of textual production that more forcefully erases the scribes’ labor, as if it might undermine the authority of the king. The dynamics change so as to make clear that the sovereign is in full control of textual production—to the extent that Gilgamesh essentially becomes the overarching narrator of his own epic, not unlike Odysseus as discussed in chapter two.<sup>57</sup> As mentioned, the SBV follows the MBV in reminding readers that Gilgamesh brought

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<sup>56</sup> See Milstein 2016, 133 n. 40.

<sup>57</sup> Helle (forthcoming)

back a report from before the flood, but it subtly expands on his interpretive ability by developing the affective aura that surrounds this gesture. Gilgamesh did not merely recover a lost story, *ni-šir-ta i-mur-ma ka-tim-ti ip-tu* [“he discovered a secret, revealed the hidden”] (SBV I 7). Then the story changes through subtle differences in the language that reorganize his agency.

When the SBV discusses the stele that commemorates Gilgamesh’s labors, the now wise Gilgamesh does his own writing and it is he that prepares the stele: [*šá-k*] *in i-na* <sup>na</sup> *anarê* (na.rú.a) *ka-lu ma-na-ah-ti* [“he set down all his labors on a stele”] (SBV I 10). The line is nearly a direct reproduction of MBV I 11 (discussed just above), but the *-šu* of the passive is no longer present and the directionality of the writing is altered by the preposition *ina*. This results in a double emphasis—he did the writing, he did the inscribing—giving full weight to the range of meanings encompassed by *sakin* [i.e., “set down, erect” a stele and “set down (some writing)” on a stele]. Interestingly, this change is not necessarily a one-way diachronic transition—it seems that both ways of seeing these deeds existed even in the Sumerian sources. In the “Death of Gilgamesh” text, discussed below, we see that one tradition (Meturan) has **na-dù-a ud ul-lá-šè me-gub-gub-bu-uš me-da ud-šè** [“they set up steles for future days, for days to come”], but the other (Nippur) reads, [**na-dù-a mu-gu**] **b-bu-nam ud-da ud-ul-lí-aš** [“you (=Gilgamesh) will set up steles for future days, for days to come”].<sup>58</sup> The co-presence of both traditions at different stages of the history of the Gilgamesh poems does not lessen the significance of the SBV’s choice—it highlights how the SBV is navigating a series of living possibilities and choosing one mode of narrating another. Namely, it tells the story with an affective investment, as heightened as possible, into Gilgamesh’s own agency.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Gadotti 2014, 105 n. 296

<sup>59</sup> The distinctive emphasis on his agency remains even if we assume that Gilgamesh ordered for steles to be put up for him, or for them to be inscribed by others with his version of events. Overall, the SBV maximizes the agency that the other versions afford to Gilgamesh is smaller, more contingent units.

The SBV goes on to add new dimensions of sovereign activity, claiming that it was Gilgamesh himself that built the walls and the monumental architecture of the city, including its magnificent treasury (SBV I 11-12). At every available opportunity, the SBV emphasizes Gilgamesh's agency, and his far-reaching capacity as an active maker of the world—always through his labor, through his suffering. The violence against the young men and women of the city remains a feature of Gilgamesh's youthful career. For many readers of the SBV, a common assumption is that these gestures can be written off as the whims of an inexperienced ruler, and upon his return the wise Gilgamesh rules peacefully. When he surveys his walls at the end of the epic, he has become a wiser, better-behaved king. Ideologically, the pay-off for such a narrative arc is clear, as it encourages subjects to accept the whimsical “bad” behavior of kings as youthful immaturity. The audience is invited to feel relief because Gilgamesh is not as bad as he might have been—a rather pessimistic form of optimism. But the simplicity of this trajectory and the manner it sublates unease ultimately belies how Gilgamesh's labor and suffering comes to matter more than the work of the ancestors.

But I would pause for another reason when remembering this detail of the text, as it does more than predispose readers to a certain kind of complicit subjectivity—it also structures how Gilgamesh is shown interacting with certain forms of organized labor. Plainly put, the youth of the city represent its potentially disenfranchised workforce, since his whimsy and his absence leave them in charge of the maintenance of the city—and presumably the walls of the city—for which he claims great credit. Such a reading was forwarded in Wilhelm Wendlandt's 1927 “adaptation” of the epic, in which

the citizens of Uruk become dissatisfied with Gilgamesh's rule, “they sat down in the conspirator's corner and founded first of all a party” that agreed on a single point: “We're going to take the government in hand!” But the idea of a unified fatherland soon gives

way to partisan goals, whereupon the chief agitator becomes its president and demands an oath of loyalty from all his followers.<sup>60</sup>

While the contemporary concerns of Wendlandt certainly overdetermine the text, transforming it into a pessimistic portrait of unionized industrial labor, his emphasis on the imagined society as one in crisis is cogent. The SBV maintains and heightens a premise of the Gilgamesh narratives (the tension between king and both youthful and older generations) by way of emphasizing his transitional position. But the sense of a disenfranchisement connected to labor only grows as Gilgamesh's agency is consistently more and more the central preoccupation of the text.

This shift in agency is also tracked through a modulation in the structure of the apostrophe. We saw the MBV address Gilgamesh as relatively humble in comparison to the legacy of tradition. Instead, the SBV calls on the reader—and the narrator presents the story of the walls and the seven sages *obiter dictum*, abstracting the lapis lazuli tablet from its context.

*e-li-ma ina muḫḫi(ugu) dūri(bàd) šá uruk<sup>ki</sup> i (IM)-tal-lak*  
*te-me-en-nu ḫi-iṭ-ma libitta(sig<sub>4</sub>) ṣu-ub-bu*  
*šum-ma libitta(sig<sub>4</sub>)-šú la a-gur-rat*  
*u uš-šú-šú la id-du-ú 7 mun-tal-ku (SBV I 18-21)*

Climb upon the wall of Uruk, walk it,  
Survey the foundation (deposit), inspect the brickwork!  
(There, see—)is its brickwork not made of kiln-fired bricks?  
Did the Seven Sages not set its cornerstone?

By addressing the reader rather than Gilgamesh, the SBV recasts the mutual authentication found in the MBV, where the text, i.e. the tablet in the deposit, corroborates the structure and *vice versa*. The relation posited between text and monument is complicated by the stratigraphy of the structure. Even hypothetically, a tablet buried under the walls that contains the dedicatory records could not be read, let alone modified, without removing the walls themselves. But the embodied experience of the reader is also transformed, and in some ways heightened, in this

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<sup>60</sup> Ziolkowski 2012, 36

proem, in ways that alter how that impossible deed of archaeology acts as an authenticating device for the walls and the epic itself. For who could contradict the narrative by verifying the original?

No longer framed through the eyes of Gilgamesh, the proem of the SBV challenges the readers to enact the epic's self-legitimizing device.<sup>61</sup> This shift then allows the box to contain another text, one more encompassing and canonical in its restructuring of tradition—the epic itself.<sup>62</sup> Indeed, in the SBV it is again the reader (and not Gilgamesh) that is instructed to open the tablet box and read the words inscribed on the tablet of lapis lazuli.<sup>63</sup>

[*a-mur?*] <sup>giš</sup>*tup-šen-na šá* <sup>giš</sup>*erēni*(erin)  
 [*pu-uṭ-ṭe*]r? *ḥar-gal-li-šu šá siparri*(zabar)  
 [*pi-te-m*]a? *bāba*(ká) *šá ni-ṣir-ti-šú*  
 [*i-š*]ī? *ma tup-pi* <sup>na4</sup>*uqnî*(za.gìn) *ši-tas-si*  
 [*mim-m*]-*u-ú* <sup>d</sup>GIŠ-*gím-maš ittallaku*(DU.DU)<sup>ku</sup> *ka-lu mar-ša-at-i* (SBV I 24-8)

[Find] the cedar tablet-box,  
 [Unlatch] its bronze clasps!  
 [Open] the door to its secret  
 [Lift] up the tablet of lapis lazuli and read out  
 All that Gilgamesh endured, all of his suffering!

The text is no longer about the remote past and its myths, but about Gilgamesh himself, completing the circular self-canonization. As the poem folds in on itself it asseverates its own traditionality. The symbolic value of the lapis lazuli comes into sharp relief as a medium appropriate to the labors of Gilgamesh, marking his suffering as particularly precious, and establishing him as deserving of a full epic inscribed on precious stone.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>61</sup> Note, for instance, that the myth of the Seven Sages is for the external audience to consider, and not explicitly one to which Gilgamesh must attend in this version. The subtle shifts in focalization have dramatic metaleptic consequences.

<sup>62</sup> Milstein 2016, 132

<sup>63</sup> The partly fragmentary evidence is supplemented cogently by other texts, given the broad use of the trope of the tablet box across Akkadian literature, often in imitation of the epic.

<sup>64</sup> While some texts are occasionally inscribed on small lapis lazuli objects and there are a few gold dedicatory tablets that have been excavated, such extensive writing on precious stone is very rare. See Fuchs 1994, 51 for an edition of Louvre AO 19933, a Sargonic inscription/dedication on a gold tablet that describes other tablets in other

Further, every performance of the epic is then reconceptualized as an instantiation of an original that has been deposited under the foundations of the walls of Uruk—an unchangeable, official version, and one that could only be verified through an impossible archaeological feat. This gambit makes use of the affective force of the myth. It channels imaginative attention so as to support the city’s magnificence in the same breath that it erodes the rather real labor that it might have taken to build and maintain the walls, replacing that labor with the teleological literary labor of the epic and the myth of the Seven Sages. As such, the SBV argues also for its own uniqueness, and forcefully relegates competitors and predecessors to the margins of relevance. Once the epic becomes a simulacrum, a copy without original, its utility as a tool that can articulate sovereign ideology expands considerably.<sup>65</sup> In becoming canonical, it challenges other views of tradition and seeks to maintain its textual hegemony. Helle put this in similar terms when he argued that the SBV’s announcement that tradition is buried (and inaccessible) beneath the walls of Uruk amounts to an act of “subversive foundation” that grants the text a form of self-designed canonicity.<sup>66</sup> The text transforms the precarity of traditional precedent into a form of stability by metaphorically cutting themselves off from other parts of the tradition.

Gilgamesh’s control of knowledge relies on an analogous pattern of recognition and disavowal. For example, before he leaves on his journey he consults with the council of young men and the council of elders. However, he does not really attend to their deliberations. While he listens to the assemblies of his people, seemingly accepting their grievances, his course of action is ultimately deeply individualistic and ignores their conclusions without even an

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precious materials used as foundation deposits. I would like to thank Shana Zaia for suggesting this comparison. See also Milstein 2016, 133 n. 40, cited above.

<sup>65</sup> On the notion of simulacrum, see Baudrillard 1981.

<sup>66</sup> Helle 2019b, 34

acknowledgement of their cogency.<sup>67</sup> As I discussed above with reference to Wendlandt's adaptation, this can also be seen as part of an erasure of the labor on which the king's independence relies, materially speaking. The performative gestures of disavowal through which he established the primacy of his own tale and the means for establishing his autocratic rule are ultimately isomorphic: constituting himself as author Gilgamesh pushes aside the labor that went into the text (like many later kings did) and by then establishing his heroic labors as primary he sidelines the labor of minor characters in the poem.

The central premise of Gilgamesh's epistemic advantage over others is that he brought home that which was impossible to recover, knowledge from before the flood. But what exactly does that mean? The peculiarity of this claim exposes several useful remainders in the text.

Firstly, it is not clear what that knowledge actually entails. The only pre-flood knowledge in the epic seems to concern the flood itself—i.e., the time “before” the flood is the flood's own etiology. From that perspective, Gilgamesh's signature achievement would amount to uncovering precisely the kind of etiological narrative that explains and ratifies his own status as sovereign, by writing himself into a specific juncture of cosmic time. Locating Gilgamesh on both sides of that divide grants him a series of advantages as he comes to represent both the old and the new—a paradigm for both, based on a retroactive assertion of his primordial, non-mortal nature through his quest for immortality (even though we will see that Utnapishtim is skeptical that Gilgamesh has really achieved very much at all), as well as acting as the paragon and origin of mortal kingship. This view of Gilgamesh on the threshold of epochs is confirmed by several other kinds of texts, most prominently the Sumerian King Lists in which Gilgamesh occupies a

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<sup>67</sup> On these assemblies and the thorny issues of early forms of “democratic” government, with “directive” or “deliberative” force, see Ridley 2000, with bibliography.

position at just such a mythic and historical juncture.<sup>68</sup> He is usually described as the last of the mythic kings, in the sense that he is the last ruler named who is given an improbably long regnal period. Looking at just one text by way of example, we see that the following rulers, including Gilgamesh's (likely just as mythic) son, have regnal periods suited in length to human, mortal life spans (the son reigns 30 years). Gilgamesh's predecessors have regnal years that span into several centuries or millennia (starting at 28,800 years); Gilgamesh's regnal period is not quite as implausible (126 years), albeit hardly believable.<sup>69</sup> Thus, Gilgamesh's position on the verge of the epochal thresholds is itself etiological, marking the shift in divine kingship from its more mythical personages to the more historical ones. Importantly, he is on the other side of history—but barely so.<sup>70</sup> The “knowledge” of the flood serves to produce a similar mirage of positioning, using Gilgamesh to tie together the two epochal margins: that of kingship's transition into living memory and that of the flood.

This self-positioning helps us see the value of establishing immediate precedents to history, as opposed to necessarily dealing in terms of absolute origins (a topic that was popular in other Akkadian and Sumerian texts). What matters to Gilgamesh in the epic, and his value more abstractly as predecessor for kings, is his position as a summation of the *in illo tempore*, one that charts a clean break and, in a sense, begins history, anew. Once Gilgamesh is understood in these terms as teetering on a conceptual horizon, the past assumes its own importance as kind of ideological vacuum that can be filled, as needed, to match the ends and needs of different ideological system. Every version of Gilgamesh the king responds to different ways of thinking about the past as past, depending on the ideological presuppositions that inform the rewriting of

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<sup>68</sup> See Michalowski 1983. A reading of the King List with respect to the tradition of flood narratives is available in Davila 1995.

<sup>69</sup> See Jacobsen 1939.

<sup>70</sup> On this see Steinkeller 2018, discussed below.

the epic. Overall, then, the epic seems to hedge its bets by establishing multiple possible moments of societal origin, since it has been noted that it is not even clear that the flood marks the beginning of human mortality, although so much of Gilgamesh's quest seems coded through the desire to gain immortality.<sup>71</sup> The scale of the ambition masks the emptiness of the claim.

Similar arguments could be made about Utnapishtim himself. Yet, in general, the epic provides a concrete residue that points to the vacuums at the center of Gilgamesh's ideological program while leaving Utnapishtim's status unquestioned. One result is that there are several instances of tension between the two figures. As Stephanie Dalley has argued by looking closely at several textual and grammatical issues that suggest a new reading of SBV X 198-91, Utnapishtim struggles to recognize Gilgamesh as a man, he is "no mere man" or even "no man whatever," because Gilgamesh is acting as the sails to his own boat and uses no poles to propel the vehicle.<sup>72</sup> Gilgamesh is literally and mechanically a means of transport. But Utnapishtim is ultimately not very impressed. He closes his narration of the flood by finally giving concrete form to his discomfort, by way of addressing Gilgamesh's question about how he received an audience with the gods and gained immortality. Having established his own epoch-initial position, Utnapishtim "cynically" answers Gilgamesh's question with his own, loaded question.<sup>73</sup>

*e-nin-na-ma ana ka-a-ša man-nu ilī(dingir)<sup>meš</sup> ú-paḥ-ḥa-rak-kúm-ma  
ba-la-ṭa šá tu-ba-'ú tu-ut-ta-a at-ta (SBV XI 207-8)*

But who will bring the gods to assembly for *you*  
So that you can find the life for which you search?

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<sup>71</sup> Katz 2015, 66

<sup>72</sup> Dalley 2012

<sup>73</sup> Katz 2015, 67

The metrical profile of the first of these two verses is particularly suggestive, as the regularity of the trochees in the first half-line is complicated by the amphibrachs of the second.<sup>74</sup> The effect is such that the contrastive shift in focus from the “you” (Gilgamesh) to whomever may help him is accompanied by a change in tone—hence my emphasis in translation. Through subtle word play, Utnapishtim’s question actually draws a stark distinction between himself and the hero—including a skepticism of his ability to complete his heroic labor.<sup>75</sup>

Countering Gilgamesh’s request with this rhetorical question, Utnapishtim draws a stark distinction between himself and Gilgamesh, who he already suspects will fail the upcoming challenges to gain immortality. In thus challenging Gilgamesh to narrativize himself, and to create his own etiology more suited to the kind of sovereignty that he embodies, Utnapishtim is at once perpetuating and exposing the ideological artifice behind different forms of kingship—the ease with which even a narrative of failure can be transformed into a narrative of continued greatness, grounded in an unimpeachable (because impossible to analyze) past. As a fixed myth-historical horizon, the flood was to Utnapishtim what the walls of Uruk and the buried tablet are now to Gilgamesh, not because they emphasize the same ideology of kingship, but because they materially embody the sovereign prerogative to establish his canonical myths, his “ideology in narrative form.”<sup>76</sup>

Accordingly, the poem accounts for the failure of his quest by building momentum in this different direction, returning the dejected Gilgamesh to the walls of Uruk in the closing part of Tablet XI. The narrative moves rapidly from his failed challenge to stay awake for a week, during which bread is baked to measure out the passing of time, to the story of the snake that

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<sup>74</sup> Helle 2014

<sup>75</sup> Hurowitz, 2007, 69-70

<sup>76</sup> Lincoln 1999, 147

stole the plant that confers immortality (SBV XI 209-310). The second quest is something of a consolation prize—Gilgamesh “exerted” himself for nothing, so Utnapishtim gives him a second chance (SBV XI 274). When this second opportunity also comes to naught, Gilgamesh again assesses his failure in terms of wasted labor (SBV XI 311-8). Finally, he returns to Uruk and invites the boatman to gaze upon the walls, himself repeating the language of the apostrophe in the proem (SBV XI 323-6). In this instance, the myth of the Seven Sages is quoted explicitly by Gilgamesh, who therefore grounds his achievements explicitly in that mythic past—appropriating their labor into his lineage. Notionally, the maintenance of mud-brick walls, which require fresh plaster to keep them dry and strong, is itself an achievement worthy of a king. But at no point does the organization of such communal labor enter the epic, as it did in the narrative told by Utnapishtim with respect to building the boat that saved him from the flood.

Therefore, Gilgamesh ends his narrative through a final gesture of ideological appropriation. The argument is that the city is maintained by the autocratic will of the sovereign, who deserves praise for the labor undertaken in the past and present by predecessors and subjects alike. What the poem establishes is the logic of expropriation, couched in the pathos produced by the king’s vain labor and suffering. What Gilgamesh brought back from before the flood is hardly continuous with Utnapishtim’s narration, where such labor is exalted (if ultimately doomed to an unhappy fate because of the gods’ whim).

We have seen that the narrative episodes that expose this difference and their concomitant ideological implications sit awkwardly within the framework of the SBV, particularly in contrast to the MBV (as pertains to the prologue). Although the poem moves forward as if these tensions had been resolved, they persist as residues. Now that the epic’s poetic of unease has been established, I will delve further into the text’s history by turning to a

Sumerian text in which these same tensions can be seen, although differently articulated. We will see that the unease of the Gilgamesh epic has its own complex history grounded in the distinction between the actual labor involved in cultural reproduction and the reified, heroic labors of the king.

### 3. The “Death of Gilgamesh”: Bureaucratic Dream(s)

In this section and the next, I begin a close reading of a relatively brief Sumerian text that has come to be labeled the “Death of Gilgamesh” (DOG).<sup>77</sup> Overall, the Sumerian Gilgamesh texts stage ideological maneuvers similar to those I described in the SBV and MBV, although coded in slightly different terms. Because the DOG is generally less studied than the other Sumerian narratives, there are several previously unremarked connecting threads that I aim to bring out in order to describe the diachronic aspects of the poetics of unease discussed above. The DOG is also unique in several ways that allow us to observe remainders that do not reappear in the later versions, because certain episodes are not repeated and because the DOG may speak to a mentality that is in some ways distant from the thread that leads to epics—for instance, in the literary conceptualization of monumental funerary practices for kings and state officials (themselves only attested archaeologically centuries before the Sumerian texts).

The complex context of the Sumerian evidence requires some framing. The Sumerian stories about Gilgamesh are individual stand-alone texts, although it has been argued that they form a literary network tied together through intertextuality and shared poetic language.<sup>78</sup> The DOG stands out as the only story in any language that narrates the final moments of Gilgamesh’s

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<sup>77</sup> First published edition (partial), 1944. Text edition used here, Cavigneaux and Al-Rawi 2000a.

<sup>78</sup> Gadotti 2014

life.<sup>79</sup> But it also a text that is in several ways in excess of the other narratives, and was not listed as part of the ancient curricula upon which our notion of the “cycle” is usually based. I discuss this displacement further below, but it is worth noting its status as something of a remainder unto itself. This produces several oblique openings into the text—pushing us to ask why it was copied and survived although it does not, in several ways, fit into the picture of Gilgamesh produced by other Sumerian texts and the later Akkadian ones.

The DOG has only recently received a critical edition, partly because only one part of the text was known until recent excavations.<sup>80</sup> It exists primarily in two recensions, one from Meturan and one from Nippur, with the major differences to be found in the repetition of Gilgamesh’s dream of an assembly with the gods (discussed in this section) in one version, and in the two different endings (discussed in the next section along with the construction of Gilgamesh’s tomb).<sup>81</sup> There are other small but important differences, like the one discussed above with respect to the MBV and SBV, that there is not the space to address here.

Because the dream/assembly appears twice in one version and only once in the other, its status of remainder is particularly pronounced. Repetition has long been acknowledged as an essential but rather difficult to theorize feature of Ancient Near Eastern poetics, and specifically Sumerian poetics.<sup>82</sup> But the question of whether one or two repetitions of this scene in the narrative is more apposite is not one that I will tackle here in detail.<sup>83</sup> In both cases the episode

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<sup>79</sup> Cavigneaux and Al-Rawi 2000a. English translations available in Foster 2019, George 2003b, Veldhuis 2001.

<sup>80</sup> The first portion was made widely available half a century ago. See Kramer 1944.

<sup>81</sup> In order to cite the text efficiently, a diplomatic version of the text was edited. Thus, my line references to the text follow the diplomatic version of the Meturan fragments in Cavigneaux and Al-Rawi and are supplemented by references to the fragments from Nippur, which they edit separately. I determine my own preferences for rendering Sumerian phrases or lines that I then translate. I refer to the Meturan text as DOG and the Nippur text as DOGN<sub>#</sub> in my parenthetical notes that provide line numbers, where the subscript # is the number assigned to the relevant Nippur fragment by the editors of the critical edition. In the next section, I refer to one Meturan fragment that I mention, and which contains one of the closing portions of the poem, as DOGM<sub>4</sub>.

<sup>82</sup> See Black 1998, Vogelzang 1996, Black 1992, Vanstiphout 1992b, Cooper 1977, and Limet 1976.

<sup>83</sup> Veldhuis 2001, 134

ought to receive careful attention, and the repetition of the episode serves perhaps to urge a rethinking or rereading that is already a possibility, if more latent, in the version with just one telling of the assembly. That is to say, the repetition may serve precisely to open up a doubled reading that sees the text from the two perspectives that it offers on its protagonist.

By focusing first on the assembly scene and Gilgamesh's petition for immortality, I open up what might be termed the text's double perspective, in which its unease can be activated by careful reading. Similar to the opposition of Utnapishtim and Gilgamesh in the SBV, the DOG presents Gilgamesh as at once a glorious hero and as a frustrated petitioner who does not get exactly what he wants. Playing on this double status, the DOG establishes a bureaucratic order of kingship by giving an institutional structure to the disavowal and disappointment experienced by Gilgamesh *qua* petitioner.

My approach to bureaucracy is predicated on Herzfeld's sociological study on "the social production of indifference" within bureaucratic systems at the heart of Western political thought.<sup>84</sup> The study of bureaucracy in the Ancient Near East, particularly in the periods relevant to the composition of the Gilgamesh texts discussed here, has established that court life was saturated by textuality on this level—and formed the bulk of the work even for scribes working on literary compositions, whether copying texts for archives or as part of their schooling.<sup>85</sup> But by turning to Herzfeld, I locate in the DOG some of the more affective dimensions surrounding the processes of expropriated labor and deferred responsibility that he describes as the hallmark of "the bureaucratic" as a system of government, predicated on formulaic languages of refused desires and deferred action. We will see that frustration and other affective dynamics related to

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<sup>84</sup> Herzfeld 1993

<sup>85</sup> See Postgate 2013, Garfinkle 2008, Michalowski 2008, Gibson and Biggs 1987. On the role of the "intellectual" specifically, see Oppenheim 1975. On the king's position, see Frahm 2011.

the encounter with the bureaucratic create an opening in the DOG for appreciating the ideological nuances of the text, whilst also registering an inchoate dissatisfaction with the deliberative practices of those in power.<sup>86</sup>

As the text opens, Gilgamesh is presented as mortally sick. The pathos is emphasized through a series of epithets, such as **am-gal-e** [“the great wild bull”] and **ur-saġ** [“the hero”], that contrast with his condition, which is so extreme that **hur nu-mu-un-da-an-zi-zi** [“he will never be able to rise”] again (DOG 1-12, the phrase is repeated in each of the text’s twelve opening verses), **ú kú nu-ub-si-ga a naġ nu-ub-si-ga** [“he is not able to eat, he is not able to drink”] (DOG 14), and so forth, covering several other quotidian tasks.<sup>87</sup> Incapacitated and on his deathbed, Gilgamesh experiences his fever dream(s), in which he sits at an assembly of the gods where a petition is made to grant him immortality.

The logic of the arguments made at the assembly are rich in detail and contain a copious use of metaphoric language that emphasizes the gravity of the topics being discussed. I delve into the logic of the arguments first, before reassessing the logic as part of the poetic fabric of the text, because my argument is that the incessant recourse to affect in the grandiloquence of the metaphors is in part designed to soften the sharp edges of the intransigent divine logic through which Gilgamesh is denied immortality and offered an intriguing compromise. The two perspectives of the DOG rest on this tension between seeing in the assembly a eulogistic, funerary grandiloquence alongside a shameful admission of sovereign indifference. The residue in the passage might therefore be summarized as one that clarifies for the reader, as it does to Gilgamesh in the poem, the haunting arbitrariness of the ideological system that they inhabit—the gods are merely a reflection of the bureaucratic forces that shape society.

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<sup>86</sup> On counterdiscursive patterns in literature see Frahm 2010 (further bibliography discussed below).

<sup>87</sup> On **nu-ub-si-ga**, see Cavigneaux and Al-Rawi 2000a, 38.



issue in terms of relevance and sufficient cause: <sup>d</sup>GIŠ.BÍL-**ga-mes nam-zu nam-lugal-šè mu-túm** / [x t]i **da-rí-šè nu-mu-un-túm** [“Gilgamesh, while your destiny is fit for kingship, it is not sufficient for an eternal life”] (DOGN<sub>1,2</sub> col. v. 14). Therefore, the issue is not Gilgamesh’s credentials in terms of birth or heroic stature, but something else.

Enki’s counter-argument finds its gravamen in a contractual or legalistic technicality. Plainly put, at the time of the flood it was decided by the gods, specifically by Enki, that Ziusudra could have (or keep) his immortality, but that no one after him would be accorded that privilege (DOG 75-7 = 165-7). Enki strengthens his position by recalling that an oath was sworn to that effect: **u4-bi-ta nam-lú-ùlu-úr nu-mu-un-ti-àm mu-ni-pà** [“from that day I swore that mankind will not have immortal life”] (DOG 77 = 167, trans. Veldhuis).<sup>91</sup> Therefore, as Enki puts it, the petition is rejected, although there is a hint of reluctance in the god’s speech. Nonetheless, the oath is still binding and the motivation behind the oath still holds. (It is apparent that the life of Gilgamesh has no bearing on the gods’ desires to curtail the race of humans for their own peace of mind.) Enki’s reluctance to grant the petition does lead to a unilaterally proposed compromise, a sort of consolation prize: Gilgamesh will be the **šagina kur-ra** [“governor in the land (of the underworld)”] and **IGL.DU gidim-bi** [“the foremost of spirits”] (DOG 82 = 171), with virtually divine and unchecked power in his limited domain (DOG 83 = 172). Such a progression from mortal king to lord of the underworld provides a template for later kings to make the same claims, and became a model of royal self-understanding.<sup>92</sup> Therefore, one way to read this assembly is as an ideological mechanism through which to present the claim of ontological difference between sovereigns and subjects, a difference that commands great

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<sup>91</sup> I have taken Veldhuis’ translation because the Sumerian is particularly enigmatic in this section, see Cavigneaux and Al-Rawi 2000a, 41.

<sup>92</sup> Most saliently, see “The Death of Ur-Nammu and His Descent to the Netherworld” in Kramer 1967.

respect as it is shown to extend into the afterlife. By projecting such a distinction into the afterlife, it is in turn presented as unimpeachable in the realm of the living.

That being said, the logic I have extrapolated from the assembly is not presented quite so schematically. As mentioned above, it is couched in extensive metaphoric and euphemistic language that describes Gilgamesh’s resentment at his denied petition (DOG 84-9 = 174-9), his impending death (DOG 92-9 = 180-2), and his future career as lord of the underworld (DOG 100-19 = 190-19). The litanies in particular suit the funerary context and may be derived from the genre of funerary lament.<sup>93</sup> The appeal of the compromise is especially heightened through fatalistic references of this sort to the common lot of mankind, masking the agency of the gods’ choices and blurring the affective contours of their consequences. Indeed, some of the metaphors (spoken by Enki) are explicitly geared towards abating Gilgamesh’s resentment, including the promise of a reunion with his friend Enkidu in the underworld (DOG 111 = 201). By way of illustration, this couplet shows the transition from euphemistic views of death as inevitable to an encouragement to abandon resentment.

**hul-e šu nu-kar-kar-re sá me-ri-ib-tu**  
**eri-gal šà zú kéš-da nam-ba-an-è-dè** (DOG 99-100 = 189-90)

The evil that spares no one [= death] has seized you.  
Your uneasy heart should not go down to the Great City [= underworld].<sup>94</sup>

Throughout the dream, then, the poetic language masks the directive quality of the assembly by emphasizing its deliberative aspects, as if Enki were a helpless participant rather than a god with explicit agency (although he explicitly recognizes his role in the decision). Enki’s strategy is to assert that, in spite of even his own desires (and agency), his hands are tied (by himself?)—

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<sup>93</sup> Cavigneaux and Al-Rawi 2000a, 4, 9

<sup>94</sup> For the translation of **šà zú kéš-da** as “uneasy heart,” which has otherwise been rendered “angry heart” or “anguished heart,” see the discussion of the phrase in Cavigneaux et Al-Rawi 2000a, 46.

Gilgamesh must die, and he must not bring resentment into the afterlife. The lyrical tenor of the dream episode(s) fills this logic with grandeur and the air of inevitability. It asks us to see Gilgamesh in a decidedly sympathetic light—strikingly, this is the only text in which he is ever labeled with an epithet like **en-tur** [“poor little ruler”] (DOG 84 = 174).<sup>95</sup>

If we read the whole passage against the grain, what emerges most forcefully is the ultimate bureaucratic indifference of the gods, and specifically that of Enki. While they recognized Gilgamesh’s long list of achievements, agreeing that it might make him worthy of immortality, they ultimately refuse to treat him as an exception, although the story of Ziusudra suggests that they have the ability to design precisely such exceptions when they so desire. The fatalistic logic is connected to the rigidity of prior deliberations in a deferral of agency that asks us to see also Enki as a kind of victim of the same fate that he might otherwise have averted.

From this perspective, there are several ways we might read the passage as a revealing residue. As I alluded to above, we can see the entire assembly as providing certain foundational coordinates for understanding how kingship can be articulated as more than human, although not quite divine. The limitations imposed on the king, that no amount of labor, suffering, or even glory can overcome, might seem to lessen the importance of the king. But it also marks the king as special in kind, *sui generis*, insofar as the station afforded to Gilgamesh in the underworld represents its own kind of immortality. The text obliquely empowers kings, more than it reveals their lack of ultimate power. By asserting that they are not omnipotent, it argues that they fall just shy of that mark.

The deliberation of the gods also provides an implicit model for elite deliberation in which subjects are asked to appreciate the whim of the powerful as a limitation of their power

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<sup>95</sup> Cavigneaux and Al-Rawi 2000a, 5 n. 11

rather than a withdrawal of their willingness to act in ways that are logically both reasonable and possible. Here we have an inversion that is the hallmark of the bureaucratic, as the roles of the empowered and disempowered are blurred through an overriding sense of fate as that which has agency over the whole. The trope of a god who cannot undo his own previous oaths or actions can be read as an explicitly dissimulative discursive strategy, predicated on a mythic logic that naturalizes the previously artificial establishment of boundaries between the possible and impossible. Tellingly, it is the very story of the flood that is used as an unbreakable charter, and thus naturalized as historic precedent, even though it is in relation to that very event that exceptional decision-making led to the re-creation of the world and civilization. Thereby, the assembly becomes a paradigm for unilateral sovereign decision making, through which the values of petitions and compromises are decided arbitrarily but are made to seem as if they are in accordance with the higher power—fate—to which all agency is deferred.

From this perspective, Enki acts as model for all rulers (his name means literally, “the lord of the land”) and indirectly does Gilgamesh an ideological favor by establishing an autocratic institutional structure, masked as a complex bureaucratic meritocracy, that can be used by his heirs. In such a system, deliberative “acts of interpretation” are also constant “deferrals of responsibility” that assume a life of their own, “a heavy implacability, a resistance to any amendment of questioning.”<sup>96</sup> The momentum of the bureaucratic overrides its own logics, allowing for the perpetuation of inequalities that keep the elite in power.

But the inversion of ruler and ruled in this passage sheds light on the manner in which divine institutions are predicated on human ones, and not vice versa. Imaginative in scope, the shift from the possibility of exception to the impossibility of exception is an ideological strategy

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<sup>96</sup> Fisher 2009, 49-50

designed to naturalize the status quo—i.e., granting those in power with the ability to stake the claim that exceptions are not possible. One objective is to naturalize mortality by suggesting something akin to a “fall” from a previous state of (at least potential) immortality—as we saw in Marduk’s arguments about Kingu, in which the (in Marduk’s opinion) refused subservience of the god of labor led to the creation of mankind as the gods’ labor force. Obliquely, then, the DOG establishes an autocratic system that is limited by the power of the bureaucratic described above, such that it cannot further be altered—the myth of the bureaucratic is that its dispensations cannot be overturned, its precedents are taken to be ferrous even when transparently arbitrary or *ad hoc*. An intriguing aspect of this argument is that, as I discuss further below, there may have been historical reasons for this shift in mentality as the role of the divine in sovereign decision making was weakened over the centuries. The upshot is that the old gods, who make exceptions, are gone. Now we have gods who deny them—and precisely because the old rulers are gone, the new kind of intransigent king has arrived.

This depressive outlook is actually a signature of the Gilgamesh texts, in which he rarely gets what he wants—although he always emerges as a kind of victor over fate. The mentality serves to forge a specific kind of subjectivity. If even the (fictional) king must be satisfied with the realization of only a small portion of his ambitions, what does that say about the everyday person? Intensifying the pathos surrounding Gilgamesh as a kind of victim of a broader (fictional) system serves to humanize him at the same time as it entrenches an affective disposition that is compliant with greater powers that be.

For Herzfeld, the corrosive, grinding force of the bureaucratic is forged precisely in the possibility of a mirrored response, a complicity in which both parties can enact fabricated deferrals of their own authority and agency through recourse to fate. Indifference is then born

partly out of the simple fact that a power differential does exist. Real kings may point to Gilgamesh as a model and announce that their powers are limited by the gods and by fate, but this by no means erodes their actual power (in its own way masking how the real king's powers may be limited by relationships to other members of the court hierarchy, for instance). The DOG thereby deploys the bureaucratic to explain the limits of the king's supposedly autocratic power, whether curtailed by physical impossibilities, personal whim, or the expediencies of his political situation. Through this mechanism, the king need not make recourse to anything other than fate to explain his inability to act as he so desires. Thus, the establishment of a distant (fictional) precedent for exceptions (Ziusudra and Utnapishtim) becomes the immediate (real) precedent for the denial of exceptions. Tradition is of use precisely because it can be manipulated nearly at will into an established canon, allowing for those in power to make decisions that are expedient to their interests. But when tradition is invoked in these gestures, its artificiality is most patently available for scrutiny, activating affects of enervation and desperation, and from those affects, a sense of unease with the fundamentally arbitrary decision making of those in power.

But it must also be clarified that this unease is in some ways pushed to the side by another part of the bureaucratic process—emphasizing for the purposes of my broader theory how important it is not to generalize unease as a form of effective counter-ideological discourse. For the petitioner, as cypher for a general reader of the texts, the bureaucratic also provides something of an affective balm that encourages him to externalize his hopelessness. This is the “mirroring” effect described by Herzfeld. At the same time that the agent of the state can claim ineffectuality due to a higher power, the petitioner can also go home and equally lay the blame on fate for his failure to achieve his objectives, saving him from social disgrace upon his return to his community. Thus, “the invocation of fate can serve highly calculated ends,” integrating the

arbitrary decisions of the powerful into a projected continuum for which even disempowered subjects develop an affective affinity.<sup>97</sup> This subjectivity emerges not from the existence of actual constraints—except in matters of death, reasonable exceptions could usually be allowed—but from the desire to shed the unease generated by the ideological simulation of constraints. By making a recourse to fate, the petitioner shifts the basis of his reasonable claim into the transcendental realm of impossibility, following a pattern already displayed by Enki when he couched his dodgy legalistic argument about denying Gilgamesh’s petition in the language of metaphor that is also used by everyday people to lament the deaths of their dear ones.

While the DOG does not offer an emancipatory position from which to escape the fatalism that is used to mask inequality, it offers the possibility of a reparative position with respect to its depressive attitude. It exposes the manner in which ideologies pre-form individuals, throwing those ideologies into question, although it does not offer a clear alternative. In doing so, it registers the real (historical) presence of keenly felt unease with the corrosive and grinding systems of government.

#### 4. The Invisible Memorial

In this section, I turn to Gilgamesh’s tomb in the DOG as an imagined monumental building project that concretizes the notion that certain forms of labor can momentarily subvert the depressive logics described above. We will see that the specific monumental memorial comes to be erased, because the tomb is covered over by the waters of the Euphrates, and that the text ultimately resolves itself in an unexceptional view of memorialization and posterity as a product

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<sup>97</sup> Herzfeld 1993, 8

of statue building and having children who will remember your name. After close reading the text, I turn to some archaeological comparanda that can also help situate the DOG as the kind of text in which a complex dissenting voice can be heard. We will see that the process of building and erasing the tomb of Gilgamesh activates a series of tensions that I have already addressed above, not least the epochal threshold represented by the flood, as the text's closing image is of the tomb becoming submerged under the waters of the Euphrates.

The premise for Gilgamesh's tomb is a clearly exceptional one. Although the assembly scene establishes that Gilgamesh is very much like every other mortal, his experience of impending death is unequivocally different from any imaginable norm. This difference is produced by the gods themselves, who devise a monumental funeral and then instruct Gilgamesh's heir as to how to construct his impressive tomb in the river bed of the Euphrates. Given these emphases, it is important to steer away from seeing this part of the DOG, at least, as a lesson in mortality in general—not least because we will see that the DOG creates an opposition between the exceptional burial and other, more commonplace forms of commemoration, in its closing verses. At the same time, to overly romanticize Gilgamesh's death is to fall under the text's affective spell. We ought to be careful not to perpetuate the valorization of the king's suffering over that of the other people to whom he is compared and who accompany him into his tomb.

Indeed, it is the text itself that times makes the disanalogy crystal clear. It shows us that Gilgamesh does not approach the **a-ġi6-a gaba nu-úr-gu** [“the flood-wave that cannot be breasted”] (DOG 96 = 186, Veldhuis trans.) just like any other man.<sup>98</sup> When Urukagina receives instructions from Enki as to how to construct the tomb, these instructions are given to him in an

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<sup>98</sup> Veldhuis' idiomatic translation is strikingly close to the original here, so I have given his version.

enigmatic form (DOG 235-7). Curiously, Enki **ma-mu-da ki-búr-[x]-ni igi-bi ba-ni-ib-dus** [“revealed to him his solution of the dream”] (DOG 237) but then, immediately after, **maš-ġi<sub>6</sub>-bi ur lugal-la bi-in-búr lú n[a]-me nu-búr-búr** [“Urlugal solved this nocturnal vision, which no man was able to solve”] (DOG 238). Here we have a series of residues, centered on the question of the agency behind the ultimate design of the tomb. While the logic of personal revelation from the god explains Urlugal’s exceptional feat, the shift from “dream” to “nocturnal vision” (Veldhuis renders it, “nightmare”) speaks to a conflicting affective engagement with the instructions. These phrases emphasize Urlugal’s personal (and non-divine) bravery at the same time as it claims that the instructions are not his mere invention (even in a dream) but received instructions. That what he does follows the instructions of the gods is defined circularly, and we should leave open the possibility that Urlugal is here represented in a manner that affords him agency and authority at a critical moment in the transition of power.

Indeed, we find a shift from communal to individual labor (Urlugal’s) in the description of the construction of the tomb that suggests the monumental tomb is very much a human project—and this shift is marked by a rapid shift in emphases and affects. Initially, we learn that the tomb requires an enormous quantity of labor. Urlugal explicitly organizes a workforce.

**en-e eri<sup>ki</sup>-na-a zi-ga ba-ni-dus**  
**niġir-e kur-kur-ra si ġù ba-ni-ra**

The lord raised a levy in his city,  
 The herald sounded a horn throughout the lands. (DOG 239-40)

The verbal phrase **zi-ga ba-ni-du** is unusual, as has been noted before, although the couplet’s basic meaning is clear.<sup>99</sup> Separately, the verb **zi-(g)**, from which the noun **zi-ga** derives, is the most common verb for describing a conscription of workers, and it is part of the “native

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<sup>99</sup> Cavigneaux and Al-Rawi 2000a, 52

terminology for *corvée*.”<sup>100</sup> Because such building projects are a common enough trope of Mesopotamian epic, there is no doubt here that Urlugal is organizing such a workforce by “making” or “building” a **zi-ga**. However, it is also the case that they are building a levee (or set of levees to control the course of the Euphrates). These too are often labeled with the word **zi-ga**, since the base meaning of the verb is “to raise, extract” and only then “to expend, to conscript, etc.” Sumerian is able to play on these two meanings, one literal, one metaphorical, just as we might in English. The word appears in the following four lines of the text, shifting between meanings “a raised, conscripted workforce” and “a raised mound of earth, i.e., a levee.”<sup>101</sup> Therefore, while these verses feel familiar and simple as a trope of epic, they can also be read as developing a polyvalent pun, one through which the effort behind large-scale labor projects is concretized in the image of raising the earth so as to control the course of the water—a levy is called in order for a levee to be built that will temporarily divert the course of the Euphrates during the construction of the tomb, leaving the bed of the Euphrates dry and exposed.

The iconic relation established between labor and product persists into the next four verses, the syntactic simplicity of which allows for the different meanings to seep into each other, shifting like the waters themselves.

**unu<sup>ki</sup> zi-ga<sup>id</sup> KIB.NUN.NA ḡal bí-in-taka<sub>4</sub>**  
**kul-aba<sub>4</sub><sup>ki</sup> zi-ga<sup>id</sup> KIB.NUN.NA a è-a**  
**unu<sup>ki</sup> zi-ga-a-bi a-ma-ru-kam**  
**kul-aba<sub>4</sub><sup>ki</sup> zi-ga-bi dungu mu-un-ḡar-ra** (DOG 241-4)

O Uruk, arise! Breach open the river Euphrates!  
 O Kullab, arise! Empty the Euphrates of water!  
 The levee of Uruk was a flood,  
 The levee of Kullab was a thick-settled fog!

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<sup>100</sup> Steinkeller 2015b, 138

<sup>101</sup> Consider the French phrase of a *levée en masse* of soldiers or workers, or the English phrase “a levy on each household,” as well.

The underlined words in the translation all correspond to a use of **zi-ga** in the original. This emphasizes the apostrophe to the workforce (the levy) and its correspondence to the modification and construction of levees. The antanaclastic repetition of the word structures the semantic lability for the audience. The description of the waters as **amaru** [“flood”] recalls both the flood as cosmic moment and metaphor cited above of death as a flood that no one can escape, tying the labor of the masses into the cosmic worldview discussed earlier and into the temporality of mortal life. The passage is couched in a context as fear-inducing as it is wondrous, not least because such levees were, for several important cities, often “the only protection from the devastating floods” of the Euphrates.<sup>102</sup> Further, corvée labor of this sort has its own antediluvian connotations as humans were, in some narratives, invented precisely to perform the hard labor of the gods (cf. the Sumerian tale “Enki and Ninmah”).

Connecting Gilgamesh’s burial to the real threat of floods and to the notion of the flood as a metaphysical moment in the mythic history of Mesopotamia signals the importance of the kinds of labor at stake. Organizing the flow of rivers was not merely a monumental enterprise in Mesopotamia, it was a necessary not only to keep cities safe but also to render the land fertile and to support agriculture. As such the activity of canal engineering was deeply connected to the role of the sovereign in his proximity to the divine (kings and gods are often described as great because of their ability to control, dig, or maintain canals).<sup>103</sup> The use of corvée labor in such contexts is documented and unambiguous. Consequently, the DOG provides an oblique window into the constellation of cultural constructs surrounding water management, emphasizing the

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<sup>102</sup> Woods 2005, 39

<sup>103</sup>See *inter alia* Tamburrino 2010, Liverani 1995, and the first two papers in Downing and Gibson 1974 (for an early anthropological approach to Mesopotamian irrigation). More generally, on “hydraulic societies,” see Wittfogel 1957 and 1956. It is possible to read the (failed) engineering of a well into the failed quest for immortality in the SBV, on which see Castillo 1998, 220.

grandeur of a moment in time in which human technology causes a contraction of the geological and the cosmic, a miniaturized Anthropocene.<sup>104</sup>

The text richly describes the resulting transformation of nature as the waters of the Euphrates dissipate. The product of the human labor is wonder.

**<sup>id</sup>KIB.NUN.NA ḡal bi-in-taka<sub>4</sub> a-ú-bi ba-an-è  
iškila<sup>la</sup>-bi <sup>d</sup>utu u<sub>6</sub> DAG di-dè (DOG 247-8)**

The Euphrates was opened, its high waters flowed out  
Its pebbles/shells gazed on the Sun God in wonder  
[or: The Sun God gazed in wonder at the pebbles/shells of (the river's) bed]

The high waters, as if on the verge of terrible flooding, are suddenly emptied.<sup>105</sup> The sense of surprise felt by the pebbles or the Sun God momentarily arrests the flow of the poem, creating a space for the reader to participate in the affects described in the text.<sup>106</sup>

The Sun God's encounter with the pebbles or shells in the bed of the Euphrates is an unparalleled image through which human mastery over the elements is concretized, and the right to give shape to nature is assumed by king (and laboring subjects) in a move that approximates or even appropriates divine agency. In both possible ways of understanding the verse, the affects at play are pronounced. If the Sun God is gazing in wonder, one way to read the passage is that the wonder is emphasized by the fact that it was the gods who instructed Urlugal to perform this task—even in the context of divine foreknowledge, it is still impressive. On the other hand, the surprise of the pebbles at seeing the Sun God provide a haunting anthropomorphizing of the river

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<sup>104</sup> This view is reflected in ecocriticism that sees the coming of Near Eastern land management in terms of the loss of more open, participation-based forms of labor (of the hunter-gatherer type) that come to be disciplined into the routinized agricultural tasks. See, for instance, Scott 2017 and Morton 2016.

<sup>105</sup> On the mix of dread and surprise implied by this phrasing, see Cavigneaux and Al-Rawi 2000a, 53.

<sup>106</sup> On an allegorical or symbolic level, the conjunction of the Sun God and the Euphrates (itself divinized as river god, particularly through the orthography present here) speaks to their “common judicial aspect” as both Sun and River gods are connected with passing final judgement on mortals, particularly through the practice of river ordeal or trial by river. See Woods 2005, 32. The connection here is twofold, as the figures preempt Gilgamesh's own assumption of a judicial role in the underworld, but also because Gilgamesh's burial amounts to a spectacular river ordeal of its own.

bed’s minute features, which plays on the trope of seeing the sun as a metaphor for (new) life as much as it underscores the confusion of nature at the power of human technology—a power so strong that it inverts the cosmic logic of creation and shows the divine to nature.

In the immediately following verses, the communal labor that led to such wonder is sublimated. The DOG describes in schematic detail the construction of Gilgamesh’s tomb in the river bed of the Euphrates (DOG 250-60). But our attention is trained on Urlugal as an agent of the building, and on the prestigious materials from which the tomb is made.

**ki-maḥ-bi na<sub>4</sub> ba-da-an-du**  
**ki é-gar<sub>8</sub>-bi na<sub>4</sub> ba-da-an-du**  
<sup>ḡi<sub>8</sub></sup>**ig na<sub>4</sub> kan<sub>4</sub> ba-da-an-du**  
<sup>ḡi<sub>8</sub></sup>**saḡ-kul i-dib-ba na<sub>4</sub> kalag-ga-àm**  
<sup>ḡi<sub>8</sub></sup>**nu-uk-ku-iš-bi na<sub>4</sub> kalag-ga-àm**  
<sup>ḡi<sub>8</sub></sup>**ùr kù-sig<sub>17</sub> im-dù-a-ne**

He built the tomb of stone,  
 He built its walls of stone,  
 He built the gate’s doors of stone.  
 The crossbar and threshold were hard stone,  
 The bolts were hard stone.  
 The roof beams were cast in gold. (DOG 250-5)

After the construction of this impressive structure, the DOG foreshadows its imminent disappearance, as the tomb will be covered by a mound of earth and the restored course of the Euphrates will bury the tomb in water, rendering it inaccessible to whoever may search for it in the future (DOG 256-60). As the editors noted, this is *une forme de sépulture particulièrement spectaculaire, et qui a toutes les apparences d'un thème de légende* [“a particularly spectacular form of burial, and one that appears to be the stuff of legend”].<sup>107</sup>

The finality with which this monument will be written out of existence is emphasized on multiple levels. The tomb will be sealed, it will be covered in earth and water (DOG 256-70). On

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<sup>107</sup> Cavigneaux and Al-Rawi 2000a, 5

one level, the DOG provides a negative etiology that explains why the tomb has not survived into the present, should anyone go looking for it. But more broadly, to uncover the invisible tomb would be to invert the ecological miracle—a task that cannot be replicated—and to enter into the realm of myth that precedes history and that is separated from history by the human-engineered flood of the Euphrates. This second flood develops a second epochal threshold, in line with my discussion of the flood above. This grants the DOG a unique status as an (indirect) witness to its own set of moments “before” the flood, a privileged knowledge of the solution to the enigma that Urlugal receives from the gods. In this respect, the poem assumes the kind of epistemic vantage that Gilgamesh is later (in the SBV) described as possessing, since he knows the text that is buried under the foundations of the walls of Uruk.

It is worth pausing to accentuate the sensuous and material description of the tomb and the wonder that it inspires from this perspective. The world built by the poem in these verses carries a clear set of affective contours, even a nostalgic sense for a human achievement that carries a cosmic significance. The ideological connotations of this labor, for example in the symbolism behind the prestigious materials used by Urlugal, rests on the general tone of the passage more than on the specific connotations of any one material. The labor is otherworldly, and takes place in the literal space of wonder in the bed of the Euphrates. This suspension of realism is extended in a further sense by the fact the monument was designed to become invisible and inaccessible—it is a kind of monumental labor that seems to come with no clear material benefit for the future and that is centered on the present of process or event and not on its product *per se*. The expenditure rises in importance when we consider how the tomb will not be a lasting monument. While the products of such labor can accrue enormous symbolic value for religious purposes (as well as acting as a kind of conspicuous consumption), the labor that goes into

constructing such a tomb provides several possibilities for critique—both deconstructive and reparative—as the temporalities of labor and production are momentarily thrown into question.

The ostentatious quality of this labor is emphasized by the inclusion of a tableau within the tomb, or what might be described as a funerary pageant. Between the foreshadowing of the tomb’s disappearance and the actual restoration of the Euphrates’ course, Gilgamesh (still not dead) is carried into the tomb and accompanied by a long list of court members and staff (DOG 262-6 = DOGN<sub>3</sub> 1-5). These include Gilgamesh’s wives and children, as well as his singer and steward, and his absolutely essential **kindagal ki áġ-ġá-ni** [“beloved chief barber”] (DOG 265 = DOGN<sub>3</sub> 4). Because this pageant amounts to a kind of show-burial known to Ancient Near Eastern archaeologists, it has attracted considerable attention from a comparative perspective.

At least since Kramer’s tentative edition of the DOG, scholars have seen in these verses a reference to the burial practices described by Sir Leonard Woolley and the excavators of the so-called Royal Burials at Ur, containing ostentatious burials with large numbers of sacrificial victims arranged in various tableaux.<sup>108</sup> These burials antedate the composition of the DOG by many centuries, although the precise gap is difficult to establish. Given the shocking grandeur and brutality of the burials, one way to posit even an indirect connection from the DOG to such burials is make recourse to *des traces dans la mémoire collective* [“some traces in the collective memory”] of the people.<sup>109</sup> This view finds support in a more recent dating of the burials at Ur that suggests they may have been in use in a period closer to that in which the DOG was composed, so that it would be more realistic to think of such burials as part of the living memory of this text’s composers and possible audiences.<sup>110</sup> But I am inclined to reject the notion that

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<sup>108</sup> Kramer 1944, 6

<sup>109</sup> Cavigneaux and Al-Rawi 2000a, 7

<sup>110</sup> Moorey 1984, cited in Cavigneaux and Al-Rawi 2000a, 7

there is here a “citation” of that past, except in the vaguest terms, partly on the grounds of the chronological gap, but more significantly due to differences between the DOG and those burials, as I will argue below.<sup>111</sup>

That being said, the comparison of the DOG to the burials at Ur is instructive because it raises an important question about the identity of the sacrificial victims, and helps us build a model for the kind of structures of feeling surrounding the DOG. Leonard Woolley’s sentimental reading of the tombs was to imagine that the victims sacrificed themselves voluntarily at the death of a member of the royal family (or of a comparable elite). This is an unlikely interpretation. The sacrificial victims were likely “actors” (even more likely slaves) dressed as members of the court, whose bodies were arranged into the various tableaux discovered in the different tombs.<sup>112</sup> Many of the bodies recovered had died from blunt trauma to the head, caused by an axe-like tool (a specimen of which has also been recovered), although they presented few other signs of violence or struggle. On the basis of such evidence, D. Bruce Dickson has more recently contextualized the burials at Ur as “public transcripts expressed in theatres of cruelty.”<sup>113</sup> His view is that the weaknesses and contradictions inherent in any articulation of divine kingship “obliged [the] rulers ceaselessly to practice theatrical rites of public mystification, including acts of calculated cruelty.”<sup>114</sup> The DOG acts, on my reading, as a literary exploration of these same trends—working, in this regard, not dissimilarly to Telemachus’

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<sup>111</sup> On the gap: the practice of human sacrifice is restricted, in both textual and archaeological evidence, to the specific burials of Ur and Kiš from this early period—*non hanno più seguito nella storia culturale mesopotamica, ponendosi come espediente eccezionale ed unico, che contrassegna un’epoca in crisi dalle caratteristiche irripetibili, e di fatto non più ripetutesi* [“they do not reappear in the cultural history of Mesopotamia, and appear as a unique and exceptional occurrence that marks an era of crisis whose characteristics were not repeatable, and were in fact not repeated”]. Xella 1976, 196

<sup>112</sup> For the system of executing these slave “actors” see Baadsgaard *et al.* 2011 and Vidale 2011. Hypotheses of this kind are not new, see *inter alia* Moortgat 1945.

<sup>113</sup> Dickson 2006, 123

<sup>114</sup> Dickson 2006, 124

execution of the maids in the *Odyssey*. It represents gestures of violence that serve to generate compliance where persuasion fails.

There are more than merely superficial similarities between the cruel pantomimes of the tomb and the labor and cruelty represented in the DOG. The dramatic quality of the court's entrance into the tomb as tableau is partly visible in how the bodies seem to be disposed in a careful arrangement, as if at court in the palace (DOG 267 = DOGN<sub>3</sub> 7). There may be further evidence of the arrangement of slave-actors in particular contained in the DOG, since the term **kindagal**—that I translated as “barber” above, following the convention of other translators—can also mean “inspector of slaves.” Further still, Thorkild Jacobsen has suggested that “his beloved servants” explicitly accompanied Gilgamesh into his tomb in the text (DOG 267 = DOGN<sub>3</sub> 7).<sup>115</sup> This points to a clear metaphoric of recreating the household in the tomb under the Euphrates, as in the tombs. Susan Pollock has argued that, in reproducing the family unit beyond the grave, such burials rely on the process of producing “docile bodies” (Foucault's term), extending the entrenched practices of family life seamlessly into the realm of the dead, such that the burial is seen as an extension of already encoded practices and not as a momentous rupture. Hence, they achieve the “the consent of the state subjects to their own subordination.”<sup>116</sup> Maximum brutality in the Ur burials therefore uses its “actors” (whether slaves or actual members of the household, like some family members, guards, and attendants) to enact an intensification of normative, expected paradigms of behavior, asserting the absolute importance

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<sup>115</sup> Jacobsen 1991, 85. He is echoed in this reading of DU.DU by George 2003b. Veldhuis 2001 and Cavigneaux and Al-Rawi disagree, reading the verse differently and preferring “the attendants at the palace” *vel. sim.* Either way, the point remains cogent.

<sup>116</sup> Pollock 2007, 90 (responding to Moorey 1991). The bibliography is extensive, as is the theoretical reflection on ideology and its functions. See also Scott 1990.

of loyalty to one's kin-group.<sup>117</sup> On the basis of the similarities, the DOG could be read as proposing a similar structure of feeling.

However, the DOG's representation is in excess of the anthropological and archaeological paradigm in several ways. Pollock's demographic analysis of the victims at real burials has shown that children and skilled laborers are hardly present (and the essential tools of household economies were not deposited among the goods), speaking to a selective metaphoric of the household that will allow the unmetaphorical household to continue to prosper, thanks to its heirs and supply of labor.<sup>118</sup> In contrast, the DOG imagines a total burial of the court, family, and entourage of the king—including, at least implicitly, Urukagina, the tomb's architect and the heir apparent. The exaggerated metaphor of the death of the household in the DOG therefore speaks most explicitly to an ideation and not a practice, since the annihilation of the entire royal household hardly ensures the kinds of continuity that the Mesopotamian kings otherwise sought to establish through their practices of cultural reproduction. Fiction can veer into fanciful exaggeration even more readily than the agents behind the burials at Ur.

The unease emerges when we see how the DOG negotiates the embarrassing practical problems that its monumental burial can cause both to everyday life and to the specific political theology of the system that it imagines. On one level, it has painted its stunning portrait of Gilgamesh's burial. The waters of the Euphrates are restored, running over the tomb like a flood that, as mentioned, symbolically repeats the divine deluge that separated the mythic epoch from the present one. The syncretism is particularly needed because, as we saw also in the SBV and with reference to the Sumerian King List, Gilgamesh himself acts as a new threshold between epochs, creating the necessity for a rearticulation of the temporal boundaries. Accordingly, the

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<sup>117</sup> Pollock 2007, 100

<sup>118</sup> Pollock 2007, 100. See also Dickson 2006, 141 n.2.

DOG stages the king as someone who has at once mastered the water of the Euphrates but who also allows it to consign him to a special kind of oblivion. In a notional pre-figuring or parallelism of the role of Puzur-Enlil in the SBV, Gilgamesh's men seal the tomb, in which the still living Gilgamesh (and court members) entered, and then restore the course of the river.

**[... a]n-ku<sub>4</sub>-ku<sub>4</sub> ká-ba ba-da-[x]  
 [<sup>d</sup>KIB.NU]N-na ġál bi-taka<sub>4</sub> a-bi ba-da-[an-ùr]  
 [...]x]-a-ni a bi-bar-bar-re (DOG 289ff.<sup>?</sup> = DOGM<sub>4</sub> 5-7 = DOGN<sub>1</sub> viii 3-5)**

They entered (the tomb/riverbed), they sealed its gate.  
 They opened the Euphrates, its waters swept over.  
 The waters kept [his tomb] out (of view).<sup>119</sup>

Once this task is accomplished, the city erupts in lament and is filled with distress at the loss of their king.

But then, immediately after the waters have erased the paradigmatic burial, the DOG itself sublimates the entire discussion of Gilgamesh's tomb and turns instead to a model of commemoration that is much simpler, more commonly attested. In the closing verses of the Meturan version, the DOG highlights the importance of the practice of making statues with inscribed names as commemorative markers, explaining how “men past and present live on after death in the memories of those alive.”<sup>120</sup>

**nam-lú-ùlu níġ ġá-a mu-un-sa<sub>4</sub>-a-ba  
 alan-bi u<sub>4</sub>-ul-a-ta ba-dím-dím  
 é diġir-re-e-ne zag-šè ġar-ġar-ra  
 mu-bi du<sub>11</sub>-du<sub>11</sub>-ga [x] nam-ba-e-da-ħa-la-me-eš  
<sup>d</sup>a-ru-ru nin-gal <sup>d</sup>en-líl-lá  
 nam-mu (NUMUN)-šè ísimu<sup>sar</sup> mu-un-na-an-sum  
 alan-bi u<sub>4</sub>-ul-li-ta ba-dím-dím kalam-ma / bí-íb-du<sub>11</sub>-ga**

Men, as many are given names,  
 their statues have been fashioned since distant days  
 and set up in the niches of temples  
 (or: set up in the temples, at the sides of the statues of the gods)

<sup>119</sup> The restorations are based on George 2003b.

<sup>120</sup> George 2003b, 197

how their names, read aloud, will never be forgotten  
Aruru (=mother goddess), the older/great sister of Enlil,  
For the sake of his name/descendance, gave to him offspring (for men),  
Their statues have been fashioned since distant days  
/ and their names still spoken in the land. (DOG 298-304)

The text is tricky but the sense is clear: the generations of men and human memory will grant the kind of immortality and continuity that death irreparably severs, and it is through such a concept of descendance that continuity can be imputed where, on the surface, it fails due to the inevitability of death. By emphasizing that it is culture that overcomes death in these terms, the DOG also returns its attention to the statues that are “fashioned” and the importance of texts (the “names”). Through this comparatively lukewarm reformulation of commemoration, following directly on the striking monumental tomb of Gilgamesh, the DOG appears to pull the reins on its own ideological program and creates a distance between actual and imagined practices, leaving its theatre of cruelty as a lingering threat on the threshold of the *in illo tempore*—as the gesture that Urlugal, as the first king on this side of history, uses to seal off the mythical past.<sup>121</sup>

Ultimately, the ideological rearticulation of a real or imagined past practice allows for a transition to a simpler claim about remembrance that concretizes its view of contemporary kingship, creating its own kinds of docile bodies in the process, configuring them differently through an emphasis on regular remembrance through human labor, heteronormative orders of descendance, and also the power of textuality, which will not allow the names of (some of) the dead to be forgotten. By subtracting its most refulgent image from its audience, burying Gilgamesh invisibly beneath the Euphrates, and by replacing that ambition of sovereign right and might with the more commonplace forms of commemoration, the DOG—as a document of the king’s circles—hedges its bets. It tries to persuade its audience to participate in certain forms of

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<sup>121</sup> It also provides such mortal kings with an answer to the question: what happened to the old kings’ tombs?

labor by arguing that they will be spared a monumentally worse kind of labor. But in drawing attention to the fraught logic of monumental commemoration, it also activates a reader's unease.

## 5. Uneasy Writing in Mesopotamia

The literary evidence discussed in this chapter belongs to a context very different from that of the Homeric epics, for which abundant source texts and recensions leading up to something like a “canonical” or official form of the text are not extant to a comparable degree. I have shown how the Gilgamesh texts negotiate the role of labor with respect to the ideology of kingship at several historical reprises, although there are residues that seem to defy an orderly sequence across the stratigraphy—such as the fact that in the two versions of the DOG we find both Gilgamesh being written about and Gilgamesh writing about his own labors (as occurs respectively in the MBV and the SBV). But most saliently, the labor of kings constantly supersedes the labor that allows them their status, whether the labor of Utnapishtim's caulker or that of Gilgamesh's men who restored the city's walls or diverted the course of a river to provide him his deathbed. The poetics of unease in the text consistently draws the reader's attention to the ideological underpinnings of these episode, which the DOG reflects on more abstractly in its depiction of the bureaucratic.

One way to account for this admixture and its frustrated progression has been to think more granularly (and sometimes speculatively) about the respective texts in their historical as well as geographic context. The DOG manuscripts (if not the tale), for instance, emerged from an Old Babylonian cultural milieu in which Sumerian literature experienced a “*post mortem* golden age” and “an ancient phenomenon of textual canonization.”<sup>122</sup> By this period, the Sumerian

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<sup>122</sup> Rubio 2016, 246

language was explicitly a tool for crafting continuity out of discontinuity, tradition out of a fragmented memory of a distant past—“in order to insert themselves into a Sumerian cultural and literary tradition, the priests, scribes, and scholars at Nippur had to first create such a tradition, not simply as a cultural product but particularly as an ideological device.”<sup>123</sup> This manipulation of temporal horizons is amplified by geographic ones, as “the core versus periphery dynamic often causes the latter to suffer from a heightened anxiety to tie itself to the former’s traditions.”<sup>124</sup> Because the DOG emerges from Nippur and Meturan as peripheral archives, then, its tendency to innovate may be read as the concerted effort to impose its view of the archaic past as the basis of present societal organization, at the same time that it offers a critique of shifts in practices on a synchronic level.<sup>125</sup>

In his study of Gilgamesh’s interstitial ideological position in Mesopotamian “mythical history,” Piotr Steinkeller argued that the hero king helps chart a historical transition from a government run by ritual officials organized in families to secular officials who commanded a broader bureaucratic structure and consolidated hereditary, dynastic lines.<sup>126</sup> Accordingly, in the Sumerian sources already, Gilgamesh is characterized more by secular objectives of military expansionism than he is by monumental building projects of a religious kind. But through its emphasis on temple building and the **mes** [“divine secrets”] of Sumer, the DOG partly contradicts this secularizing tradition.<sup>127</sup> Indeed, the description that **é diġir-re-e-ne ki ġar-ġar-**

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<sup>123</sup> Rubio 2016, 251. For a more general example, the kings at Ur proposed their own Sumerian roots as vehemently as the Akkadian literary tradition seemed to propose its connection to distant antiquity through back-formations of Sumerian-ness. See Michalowski 2008 and Klein 2006.

<sup>124</sup> Rubio 2016, 250

<sup>125</sup> On Meturan see Cavigneaux 1999 (as well as Cavigneaux and Al-Rawi 2000a, 2000b), On Nippur, Rubio 2016, 248.

<sup>126</sup> Steinkeller 2008 149, 151. See also Steinkeller 2015a; on Utnapishtim, Steinkeller 2015b, 201 n. 227.

<sup>127</sup> On Sumerian **me**, see Klein 1997, with bibliography. One understanding of the word is that it derives from the verb “to be,” and therefore could even be understood as “divinely ordained essence” or “what a thing should be,” although other, more concrete, meanings seem to obtain as well.

**ra-a-ba** [“he established houses of the gods (=temples)”] (DOG 56 = 147) is not only unambiguous, it is given the force of a definitional epithet. Steinkeller calls this act of service to the gods an “insignificant exception,” in the overall description of Gilgamesh in the Sumerian sources.<sup>128</sup> But this same passage was noted by Alhena Gadotti in her assessment of the DOG’s position in the Sumerian “cycle” of Gilgamesh poems. She argued (against previous scholars) that the DOG belongs squarely in the cycle, although it does not appear in literary catalogues alongside the other tales, because the DOG participates fully in the shared literary language of the other tales, and the elements of its plot—specifically the catalogue of Gilgamesh’s heroic labors—fits well with the events narrated in the cycle.<sup>129</sup> That being said, there are indeed “episodes that are otherwise unknown in connection with Gilgameš, such as the founding of temples and the activities connected with the **mes** of Sumer.”<sup>130</sup> The Gilgamesh involved in the religious building projects and the protection of divine secrets might therefore be better understood not merely as archaizing tendency, but as a peripheral resistance to the center’s secularization of the office of kingship. As the world becomes more bureaucratic, Gilgamesh starts to suddenly assume an intense interest in preserving religious functions.

Such models for historicizing the text’s unease have a clear appeal, but they ultimately stretch the available evidence in order to explain away inconsistency and unease as an artifact of discrete ideological tensions, rather than recognizing the dissatisfaction with ideology itself as a core of the affective experience of unease. In other terms, one reason Gilgamesh as a character in all the texts discussed provokes sympathy—as well as unease—is that the gods agree that his labors are great but those are not sufficient grounds for appropriate recompense. The invitation to

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<sup>128</sup> Steinkeller 2018, 154

<sup>129</sup> On this debate, see Gadotti 2014, 104-8. For a contrasting position, see Cavigneaux and Al-Rawi 2000a, 10.

<sup>130</sup> Gadotti 2014, 105-6

identify with him (as part fellow-mortal) thereby entails also an interpellation into an ideological order fundamentally characterized by underappreciated labor. To see him as engaged in propitiating the gods through temple building does not address that aspect of unease provoked by the identification and sympathy with the protagonist as alienated laborer—just like the promise a wonderful career in the underworld does nothing to abate Gilgamesh’s own resentment at his predicament. So, one answer for why so many readers have seen in Gilgamesh the life-affirming struggle of a man constrained by his own mortality is rather simple—his disappointment is one with which it is easy to identify, since it already conditions our own lives. But the unease that we can read into the poem and that unsettles that paradigm itself offers us an opportunity to refuse the interpellation at the moment that the fiction stages it.

Across their complex history, then, the Gilgamesh texts can be seen as iterative attempts to negotiate the initial gesture of ideological interpellation that was already impossible to justify in the *Enūma Eliš*, Marduk’s own epic theology. Returning through Gilgamesh to the epochal threshold at which mankind is severed from the golden age, these texts reflect uneasily on the existence of hierarchies of exploitation at the same time as they can serve to reinforce them. It is a characteristic of the epic, but also of the DOG, to move away or move on from these smaller moments of nearly refulgent possibility: we see it in the shift away from Utnapishtim’s order, the shift away from a moment in which pebbles confront the Sun God in wonder, the shift away from forms of labor that are not merely rewarded but, it seems, themselves rewarding. But by focusing reparatively on these moments of unease we can see in them the disavowal of divine kingship’s self-asserted right to appropriate the labor its subjects, and even a disavowal of the gods’ right to impose their labor on humans.

There is ultimately a displaced and disintegrated intentionality behind these texts, due to the work of scribes in different schools at different times copying and elaborating on myths and tropes that they themselves may see in different ways at different times. But the indirect hope offered by a poetics of unease can help account for the work of iterative re-elaboration and dissemination of stories about Gilgamesh, and similar ones connected to questions of labor in similar terms. In my next chapter, on the *Rigveda*, I turn to a context of composition that is in some ways as complicated as that can be gleaned in the study of the Gilgamesh texts, if not more so. There will see that figures who negotiate the division between mortal and immortal realms—like dying gods and laborers who attain immortality through their work—elicit similar forms of unease.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Vedic Disrepair

In her collection *Mountains and Molehills* (1934), Frances Cornford included a poem “Yama and Yami” subtitled “from the Veda.”<sup>1</sup>

The first created pair possessed a world  
Where darkness was unknown;  
Till Yama died, and left in endless light  
Yami, his twin, alone.

The high Gods tried to comfort her distress,  
But all in vain they tried.  
She would not listen to their wisest words;  
She said: “To-day he died.”

Then were the Gods confounded, for her grief  
Troubled their equal sight;  
They said: “In this way she will not forget.  
We must create the Night.”

So they created Night. And after Night  
Came into being Morrow;  
And she forgot him. Thus it is they say:—  
‘The days and nights make men forget their sorrow.’<sup>2</sup>

Yama and Yamī are here represented as an idealized primordial couple, and the sorrow of Yamī at the loss of her husband assumes the clear foreground. Cornford’s emphasis falls squarely on

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<sup>1</sup> Frances Cornford was, incidentally, granddaughter of Charles Darwin and wife of Francis Cornford (the Cambridge Ritualist). The context in which she wrote this poem speaks to her selection of material, as I will discuss below, and I plan to write further on this elsewhere.

<sup>2</sup> Cornford 1934, 35. In the *Collected Poems* she herself authorized, “To-day” in verse eight is simplified to “Today.” I have retained the older edition for the purposes of this chapter, including more minor changes in punctuation.

the affective contours surrounding the primordial union of the two gods that led to the beginning of the human race, a story that is used to provide a moving etiology for the birth of anthropocentric forms of temporality. The narrative in the background is that Yama renounced his immortality in order to father the human race with Yamī. But she, still immortal, is faced with perennial mourning upon his inevitable death. The gods are portrayed in their striking reaction to her immeasurable loss and the day in which the first death occurs in the cosmos (the death of one who was once a god, no less). They pity her and institute the progression of days and nights, establishing a cyclical pattern that alleviates grief by cutting it short rather than allowing it to persist without end.

The same narrative appears in William Ellery Leonard's "The Creation of the Morrow" in his *Sonnets and Poems* (1906).

Yama was gone. The gods consoling said:  
"O weep not, Yami," and they raised her head;  
But "Yama is gone, he will not come again,"  
She murmured nor would yet be comforted.

Then mused the gods: "She weeps, remembering still  
Their sleeps and kisses on the purple hill —  
Let us create the night." — The night was born  
With starry shades and winds invisible.

So came the morrow that ere then was not,  
And many morrows — Yami left her cot,  
And played with flowers on the mead in mirth;  
Tossing them idly. Yama was forgot.<sup>3</sup>

Leonard's version delves even more deeply into an exploration of Yami's mourning and nostalgia, drawing to a close through a pathetic pastoral image that captures Yami newfound "mirth," tinged with idleness. The pair's role as originators of mankind is left unspoken to create

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<sup>3</sup> Leonard 1906, 55

room for the more psychologized intertwinement of emotions surrounding her recollection of a specifically romantic past and her post-nostalgic future.

The common source on which both poets drew is a passage from the Maitrāyaṇī-Saṃhitā, one of the branches of the four Vedas known as the *Yajurveda*. This text, accompanied by a literal translation, was available in Charles Lanman's *A Sanskrit Reader* (first published in 1883).<sup>4</sup>

*yamó vā amriyata. té devā yamyā yamám ápābruvan. tām yád aprchant sābravīt. adyāmr̥tēti. tē 'bruvan. ná vā iyám imám itthám mṛṣyate. rātrīm̐ sṛjāmahā <íti>. áhar vāvá tárhy āsīn ná rātriḥ. té devā rātrim̐ asṛjanta. tátaḥ śvástanam abhavad. tátaḥ sá tám amṛṣyata. tásmād āhur ahorātrāṇi vāvāghám̐ marṣayantīti.* (Maitrāyaṇī-Saṃhitā I.5.12)

Now, Yama died. The gods spoke to keep Yama from Yamī's mind. When they asked her, she said: "He died to-day." They said, "now, at this rate she can't forget him. Let us create night!" At that time day alone existed, there was no night. The gods brought forth the night. Therefore, there was a tomorrow. Consequently, she forgot him. For this reason, they say that "only cycles of day and night make one forget misfortune."

Cornford and Leonard produced relatively faithful creative translations of this text, providing English audiences with a small portion of the structures of feeling that surrounded Yama and Yamī in the Vedic sources. Their poems show us two aspects of Yama and Yamī's mythology that captured the imagination of audiences across centuries (including the time of the Maitrāyaṇī-Saṃhitā): the tragedy of their love story and the etiological explanation of the invention of days and nights.

A similar passage in another branch of the *Yajurveda* makes explicit the unease-inducing fact that Yama and Yamī are siblings.

*áhar vāvāsīn na rātrī. sā yamī bhrātaram̐ mṛtam̐ nāmṛṣyata. tām yad aprcchan yami karhi te bhrātāmṛtēti. adyety evābravīt. te devā abruvann antardadhāmedam̐ rātrīm̐ karavāmeti. te rātrīm̐ akurvan.* (Kāthaka-Saṃhitā VII.10)

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<sup>4</sup> Lanman 1963 [1883], 93. His translation reads: "Yama died. The gods sought to console Yamī for the loss of Yama. – When they asked her, she said To-day hath he died. They said, In this way she will never forget him. Night let us create. Only day in those times existed – not night. Then came into being the morrow. Then she forgot him. Therefore, they say, 'Tis days and nights make men forget sorrow.'"

Day alone existed—there was no night. When her brother died, Yamī did not forget him. When (the Gods) asked her, “Yamī, when did your brother die?” she would say only, “today.” The gods said, “let us interrupt the day! Let us create night!” They created night.

The tragic love story of mankind’s parents is predicated on an incestuous union. That the nature of this union was not forgotten is shown, for instance, in two much later texts, the *Narasimha Purāṇa* and *Skanda Purāṇa*, where incest is thematized in relation to the figures of Yama and Yamī (or Yamunā).<sup>5</sup>

Cornford subtly alerts her readers to this residual background by noting, offhand, that the two are “twins.” To any Sanskrit speaker, however, their relationship as siblings was literally spelled out for them on the page. That Yama and Yamī are twins would have been obvious because their very names are the masculine and feminine forms of the word *yama*, meaning “twin.”<sup>6</sup> There is no way to read such texts without this fact haunting the narrative. While none of the texts above can properly be said to suppress this fact, they do participate in traditional maneuvers of avoidance. As we will see later in this chapter, the myth of Yama and Yamī is substantially explored in a single source: the dialogue hymn X.10 of the *Rigveda*. In that hymn, the two deliberate about committing incest. She is for it, he against. He argues that it is wrong, she argues that it is right. The hymn ends on an aporetic note: Yama rejects his sister’s advances and ostensibly refuses to commit incest. Without the background of an initially spurned erotic invitation, and a mysterious off-stage reversal (since humans do, it seems, exist), Yamī’s rousing desire loses its central affective force—the mirror image of which is the enormous loss with she is left to contend in the later texts. But to remember the act that establishes the moral-cosmic

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<sup>5</sup> These moralizing narratives are discussed alongside X.10 in Pradhan 1990, 134-5.

<sup>6</sup> Sanskrit *yama* derives from Proto-Indo-European (PIE) \*yémHos, “connected, paired,” “twin” (cp. Avestan *yəma*, cognate with Latin *geminus*, etc.). The reconstructed word \*yémHos itself derives from a verbal root \*h<sub>2</sub>eym- meaning “to imitate” (ancestor of the *im-* of Latin *imāgō* and *imitor*, as well as the *aem-* in *aemulus*).

order (*rta*) is to remember an act that controverts it. It is an irresolvable problem, partly because the event in question is given as having already occurred. The interpretive aporia that results only exacerbates the need, as in the English poems for instance, to twist the story in one direction or another—whether it be in Cornford’s emphasis on the etiological establishment of human time or the melancholy of Leonard’s Yamī “remembering still / Their sleeps and kisses on the purple hill.”

In their maneuvers of avoidance, the traditions repeatedly disavow the very text, *Rigveda* X.10, upon which they are centered and toward which they direct our attention. Through these examples we can see concretely that the poetic ontology of the *Rigveda* proposes a clear problem to the philologist. As Wilhelm Halbfass put it “the preservation and glorification of the text seem to coincide with its neglect and the obscuration of its meaning.”<sup>7</sup> In Williams’ terms, tradition is at once seen as a “fixed form” or “product” that lends legitimacy to this story and the world order of mortal procreation—but tradition is also selectively reconstituted, as an “event” that invites hermeneutic participation.<sup>8</sup> Even within the *Rigveda* (and even within book X where we find a heightened concentration of hymns related to Yama) the story of Yama and Yamī is not explored further than in X.10. Instead, we find the Yama who has chosen mortality to become the progenitor of the human race and was later rewarded with a status as lord of the dead—an understanding of Yama that, obviating the specifics of anthropogenesis, has also had a lasting impact in later Hindu traditions of Yama as death itself or as a kind of psychopomp.<sup>9</sup>

Scholars have usually addressed this tension by limiting the import of the fundamental discrepancy offered by X.10’s narratives, wanting to discover the underlying ideology that will

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<sup>7</sup> Halbfass 1991, 2

<sup>8</sup> See my Introduction.

<sup>9</sup> Lincoln 1981. For studies of the role of Yama in later Hindu traditions, and also far beyond Hinduism and Sanskrit-language text, see *inter alia* Nichols 2012, Malamoud 2002a, 2002b.

allow them to use philological tools to neutralize the unease produced by X.10's focus on incest as a problem. When Charles Malamoud commented on the Yajurvedic passages cited above, he argued that they attest to the reception of the myth of Yama and Yamī as what amounts to a love story *tourne court, mais qui n'en finit pas de porter ses fruits affectifs et rituels* ["cut short, but which does not stop bearing its affective and ritual fruits"]—transforming Yamī's appeals to Yama in X.10 into *des déclarations et des témoignages d'amour* ["declarations and vows of love"].<sup>10</sup> Through this kind of reading, Malamoud neutralizes the unease of X.10 (Yama's refusal, Yamī's desire) in favor of more "normative" affects (such as those related to the love of a woman for her husband, her grief at his loss). Then the story can become an expedient premise through which to explain the cycle of days and nights and therefore the necessity of the daily *agnihotra* ["fire offering"] ceremony (this is the broader subject matter of the passages in which the myths above appear in the Yajurvedic texts). In a similar but distinct move, when Georges-Jean Pinault addressed the incongruence of X.10 with respect to other Rigvedic hymns adjacent to X.10 in which Yama is described ("the Yama Cycle"), he argued that, since these hymns are about funerary rituals, X.10's participation in that broader whole invites that we neutralize the unease at the incest in the service of providing more normative affects—ones appropriate to the funerary context. Thus, the aporia of X.10 can be neatly tucked away when we realize that this blip in the unfolding of the overarching *fabula* serves to establish that the moment of the funeral sacrifice is an inverted replication of the moment of marriage—X.10 teaches us how a widow might mourn her beloved by reconfirming her desire for him.<sup>11</sup>

Ritual readings can redirect our attention, in such texts, to "normative" affects, like a wife's love for her (deceased) husband, but they cannot erase the residue of lingering effects.

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<sup>10</sup> Malamoud 2002b, 57, 58

<sup>11</sup> Pinault 2012, 168

Unease, once felt, cannot be unfelt. As Malamoud acknowledges, a shrewd reader of the *Yajurveda* could mount a striking critique of the gods’ solution to Yamī’s mourning. The gods fix the world by transforming the meaning of words upon which the experience of the world rests—“today” is split into “to-day” and “night” is invented to defuse the suffering linked by Yami’s speech to the word “to-day”—the semantic magic they play is literally world-building.<sup>12</sup> This division serves the ritual context well. But it fails to properly address Yamī’s suffering, except by an unfeeling sleight of hand. There is a callousness in the gods’ turn to cliché as a palliative to the epoch defining loss experienced by Yamī. To this I would add that, in order to accept the gods’ solution, we would need to forget that in X.10 Yamī explicitly asserts that *rātrībhir asmā áhabhir daśasyet* [“night and day she would serve him”] (X.10.9a), as if proleptically addressing the existence of that kind of a solution to the unease already, and making their specific attempt to console her even harder to take seriously. Even in ritualistic readings that account for the social of experience of emotion (as in both Malamoud and Pinault), Yamī’s specific pain and desire as related to Yama becomes just a touch of narrative color, eventually discounted in the search for a broader or more technical meaning.

Yama’s own refusal fares no better.<sup>13</sup> I explore its affective contours later, but it is clearly a charged gesture, since it fundamentally imperils the establishment of a cosmic order by denying humanity its very existence. In a post-Vedic treatise called the *Nirukta*, which provides an “index” of Vedic deities in its overall project of offering etymological explanations for

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<sup>12</sup> Malamoud 2002b, 58-60

<sup>13</sup> The *Skanda Purāṇa*, mentioned above, is a later text that shows some echoes of Yama’s refusal, although there we see that Yama refuses not sex but food from his sister. This is enough to point out, once again, that the refusal was not forgotten *per se* but subordinated to a different narrative program to the extent that it avoids the unease at the core of X.10.

Sanskrit words, Yāska summarizes the story of the twins as follows right before he goes on to cite portions of *Rigveda* X.10.

*yamī yamam cakame. tām pratyācacakṣe. ityākhyāna. (XI.34)*

Yamī loved Yama. He rejected her. That's the story (*ākhyāna*).

This terse summary shows us a great deal. Yāska understand the hymn as a narrative unit, and his summary respect its boundaries (as distinct from the broader *fabula*, in which the union must have been consummated since humans exist). At the same time, incest is left as a subtextual residue in a reading that instead orients us to the trope of the scorned lover in *ākhyāna* hymns, such as those of Lopāmudrā and Agastya (I.179) and Purūravas and Urvaśī (X.95).<sup>14</sup> The summary rests on an oblique mode of reading that selectively activates certain elements of the affective landscape while leaving others more muted. But unlike Urvaśī, for instance, whose rejection of Purūravas is left unexplained, X.10 is filled with explanations that, however weak they may ultimately be found to be, are overlooked in the implicit reduction of X.10 to the generic framing devices of those other hymns.

These examples show that the individual hymns of the *Rigveda* operate as a tradition unto themselves, which is then processed through increasingly complex structures of feeling as readers return to it over time. The application of strong, paranoid, or suspicious hermeneutic theories ultimately obscures the work done by affect as its own vector of meaning and as a kind of poetic form that inheres in a text. As in my previous chapters, I propose here that a reparative position of reading allows us to inhabit the unease of the tradition and of the *Rigveda* itself,

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<sup>14</sup> For a more comprehensive discussion of X.10 in relation to the latter, see Goldman 1969. His discussion takes a very different approach than the one offered in this chapter, but the saliency of what can be termed the “affective” realm of poetic experience is explored in depth. I discuss this further below.

showing that the affective residue in the ideological structure of an event cannot be neutralized or accounted for through older philological techniques. What it can do is form the grounds for unexpected reflections on the values espoused by the *Rigveda* in certain hymns, as far as those relate to questions of gendered power and class dynamics.

To demonstrate this, I do three things in the following pages. First, I briefly discuss the poetic ontology of the *Rigveda* as I conceive of it and earlier work on the Vedas that has helped form my own approach. Second, I read X.10 closely and explore the myths of Yama and Yamī in the *Rigveda*, building on what I have discussed above. I start with this example because this one hymn most clearly demonstrates how competing ideological arguments can provoke an audience's unease. But, since we will see that the *Rigveda* is in some ways not at all like my other texts, the third thing I do is that I provide a very different example of Rigvedic unease by moving across a series of hymns, reading into the mythological and affective background to the figures known as the Ṛbhus, divine artisans who were originally mortals.

There are thematic reasons for putting a reading of these two sets of figures together. They are uniquely suited for an exploration of a poetics of unease because they expose the lability of tradition and ideology in their controverting of *ṛta* as the established order of the cosmos, specifically moving between the otherwise non-negotiable categories of the divine and human. Yama was a god, became mortal, and then became a god again. The Ṛbhus were born mortal and their divine deeds earned them immortality—they are then said to have even fashioned the gods. As Stella Kramrisch has noted, the mythologies surrounding these complementary figures are deeply interwoven—and the resulting network of mythological references covers some of the more foundational aspects of the *Rigveda*'s complex ideological

outlook, while also addressing portions of the *Rigveda*'s predominantly ritual-oriented content.<sup>15</sup> This allows us to see both sets of figures as components in the activation of a structure of feeling around the *Rigveda*'s residues.

In brief, Yama and Yamī's foundational event is the creation of the human realm that mankind will then preserve through ritual labor and sacrifice, replicating the cosmos on a daily, seasonal, and generational basis just like the gods intend them to do. By momentarily refusing to procreate, Yama is made to show how non-participation and dissent pose an existential risk for the status quo. Yamī's literal labor becomes the precondition of all further human activity, and Yama's own pioneering journey to (and foundation of) the world of the dead establishes the terminus toward which human labor is directed. The Ṛbhus, in their own way, challenge the status quo by demanding that their labor be recognized and their mortality be transformed into immortality on the basis of that work. As such they expose that the gods need human, although this hierarchy is usually presented in inverted terms. Where the ideological argument of the priority of the gods to mankind runs up against familiar problems (that can be seen across many mythologies and their religions), the *Rigveda* proposes the Ṛbhus as an affective core around which humans can model their relationship to labor, and specifically the kinds of sacrificial labor done for the gods, their superiors. In both examples, the tense genealogical relationship of these figures to the god Tvaṣṭṛ [literally "the begetter, creator"] helps us locate the unease they elicit with respect to the order of the created universe, since their contravention of the boundary between mortal and immortal disturbs the fragile order that his domineering presence serves to maintain, raising uneasy questions about the status of the cosmic order.

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<sup>15</sup> Kramrisch 1962, 131ff.

## 1. The Vedas as a Script for Affect

That the *Rigveda* can provoke unease is readily apparent from its structure as a corpus. Its unity as a corpus is beset with the potential to produce inconsistency. While it is in some senses a single text, its 1028 *sūktas* [“hymns”] were composed at different times and by many different people.<sup>16</sup> Then they were organized (also at different times) into ten *maṇḍalas* [“books”], of which the first and last appear to contain the most recent hymns, suggesting they were added to the collection later in its compositional history. Further, it is not merely the case that there are 1028 textual units across which discrepancies can emerge.<sup>17</sup> There are several other kinds of groupings in the *Rigveda* (of hymns or sets of hymns) across which analogous frictions could be described. For instance, there are “cycles” of consecutive hymns dedicated to the same deity or on similar themes that are also substantially present elsewhere in the corpus. As a case in point, both Yama and the Ṛbhus have cycles or series of hymns dedicated to them, but the “Yama Cycle” (X.10-19) is more properly understood as a series of funerary hymns, whereas the “Ṛbhu Cycle” (IV.33-37) is given over primarily to a description of the Ṛbhus’ marvelous deeds and to the relation of those deeds to the ritual of the third Soma pressing. An even more dizzying paradigm has been proposed by Stephanie Jamison, who argues that the basic semantic unit of the *Rigveda* is not its hymns but its individual verses.<sup>18</sup> It is a collection of hymns and verses that are in a sense always haunted by their own inner workings.

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<sup>16</sup> For a recent introduction to the *Rigveda* and its history, see Brereton and Jamison 2020. A more in-depth treatment is available in Halfbass 1991, discussed further below.

<sup>17</sup> On developing historical chronologies of different units of Vedic language through quantitative methods, see Hellwig 2020, building on a long tradition from Arnold 1905.

<sup>18</sup> Jamison 2007

Because the *Rigveda* is memorized as a whole by Brahmins (often alongside other texts) the synchronic availability of cross-references and comparanda is vast. The result is that the “text” of the Rigvedic hymns can be understood as a monumental effort in cognitive labor and embodiment, serving to establish the authoritative and unchanging status of the text. It follows that the corpus assumes the form of a complex hyper-text of intratextual references as well as a collection of discrete units that have their own poetic ontologies depending on the kinds of use to which the corpus is being applied.<sup>19</sup> In a ritual setting, a hymn will reasonably act as a narrative unit (or multiple hymns connected by an either pre-established or *ad hoc* thematic thread). But in a practice like *brahmodya*, in which Brahmins deliberate agonistically over the aporias of individual verses or narratives, the relevant exegetical units may be as discrete as individual words across the Veda or single verses.<sup>20</sup> Ritual audiences would also be attuned to tensions between portions of the corpus since the daily recitation of hymns at daily rituals grants them a high degree of familiarity with the many materials relevant to their everyday religious activities. There is no escaping the emergence of its internal discrepancies and partly incomplete negotiations of its ideological and traditional foundations.

The question of how to read the *Rigveda* has therefore preoccupied many scholars, and it has received many answers. The matter is further complicated by the position the *Rigveda* occupies a whole and its perceived poetic ontology. In a seminal study of the conceptual role played by the Vedas as a structuring force in the Indian literary tradition, Halbfass proposed we approach the *Rigveda* through “the hermeneutics of an event,” since “in the understanding of those who accept it, the Veda itself is the beginning and opening par excellence. It not only speaks, in its own elusive fashion, about the origin and structure of the world and the foundations

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<sup>19</sup> See Thornton 2015 for a similar discussion of the *Rigveda*’s “double voice.”

<sup>20</sup> Thompson 1997b, Witzel 1987, Renou 1978.

of society, it is also their real and normative manifestation and representation.”<sup>21</sup> This is meant literally: “It would be wrong to view such statements as merely metaphorical. The Veda *is* the foundation of language, of the fundamental distinctions and classifications in the world, and of those rituals which are meant to sustain the social and natural order.”<sup>22</sup> Each hymn, when performed, imposes one or another order on ritual, social, and mythological reality while implicitly evoking aspects of other parts of the corpus against which it stakes its own claims. Stephanie Jamison and Joel Brereton have recently argued for an understanding of the *Rigveda* in similar terms, pointing to the forceful, even coercive world-making force of Rigvedic poetry, where “*words create worlds*” through the specific, cosmic, and indexical force of *ṛtá* [“truth, order, reality”]—just one example of a concept that underlies the poetic ontology that underwrites the *Rigveda*, comparable in function (not meaning) to κλέος in the Homeric *Iliad*, which assumes a diverse range of oppositional meanings in different contexts.<sup>23</sup>

My own approach to the Vedas relies on the productive tension between the two claims I have just laid out: the haunting, hyper-textual nature of the *Rigveda* as a collection of thousands of semantic units and its reception as a compilation of diverse ideological propositions that does not merely represent but create reality. As such I am particularly drawn to the *Rigveda*’s status as a text for performance and as site of (often competitive) linguistic play, in which hymns form one component of a broader affective environment into which its semantic content unfolds. In this respect I follow the work of Elizabeth Thornton, who has opened up several routes into the rhetorical complexity of scripted ambiguity in Vedic language and Charles Caley’s Smith’s

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<sup>21</sup> Halfbass 1991, 5

<sup>22</sup> Halfbass 1991, 5.

<sup>23</sup> Brereton and Jamison 2020, 113-14. On *ṛta* in the *Rigveda*, see *inter alia* Jurewicz 2016 and Sandness 2007. The term is cognate with Greek ἄρμονία and is similarly understood in various contexts as the sacred order of the universe, or as truth, or as that which is right, etc.

recent approach to the Vedas and their “performance grammar,” replete with deictic and mimetic activity that transforms the ritual space into a mythological *in illo tempore*, or, in simpler terms, that bring the mythological into the here and now of performance.<sup>24</sup> From this perspective, the Vedic texts can be seen as implicit scripts for activating different structures of feeling so that these can be reexperienced as present (both in the sense of contemporary and presence).<sup>25</sup> This is most clearly the case in hymns recognized as *ākhyāna* hymns [understood as “narrative” or even “mythic tale,” the kind appropriate both to epic and sacrifice] and as a *saṃvāda* [“conversation, dialogue,” literally a “speaking together”] hymns.<sup>26</sup>

While the dialogue hymns are performative in relatively straightforward terms, the Vedic texts also supply scripted affective content in other terms as well. To concretize this other level of the Veda’s performative or enactive poetics, we can look at a limit case: a text that is not literally performative (like a hymn) but that still scripts a kind of virtual reality through its suggestive use of mythology as guide to affective experience. The following is a very short *prose* passage from the Taittiriya-Samhita (another branch of the *Yajurveda*, like those cited earlier).

*yāvatī vai pṛthivī tāsyaī yamā ādhipatyam pārīyāya. [...] iṣvagrēṇa vā asyā ānāmṛtam icchānto nāvindan.* (V.4.3)

Yama is lord protector of the earth, so far as it extends. [...] Although they may seek, they will not find even an arrow’s point [of the earth] that is without death.

These sentences appear as part of an explanation about how a sacrificer must carefully choose a spot on which to set up the fire sacrifice. They show that any spot chosen will be within the domain of the all-sovereign Yama, who is death. Although they belong to an instructional

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<sup>24</sup> Smith 2019. I cite Thornton’s work throughout, below, where I draw on her formulations of Vedic poetics.

<sup>25</sup> There are many studies on the dialogue hymns that discuss elements of performativity, many of which are discussed below with reference to portions of X.10. A more general and notable approach can be found in Witzel 1997a.

<sup>26</sup> On the background of interpretive traditions related to *ākhyāna* or *saṃvāda*, see D’Intino 2013, Konow 1969, Keith 1911, each with bibliography.

portion of the *Yajurveda*, the simple prose sentences are hardly an unmarked didactic way of saying what is elsewhere explained tersely, i.e., that Yama has dominion over the land, which he permits his sacrificers to occupy, and that there is no spot on the earth free of mortality's grip upon which a sacrificer may set up a sacrificial fire.<sup>27</sup> While the passage does remind sacrificers about the social codes of land ownership, since sacrificers often set up sacrifice on land that does not belong to them, that point could have been explained in very different and terser terms. Instead, the deliberate employment of metaphors charges the ritual instructions with a kind of affective force, transferable to lived experience. Through the metaphor of the arrow's point, the sacrificer is invited to think to himself that everywhere he turns he is within Yama's realm, the mortal realm, and that no infinitesimal portion of land is free from his domain. The metaphor builds on the ritual instructions as a coded way to instill an affective attitude alongside teaching the basic mechanical procedures of sacrifice.

Even in this instructional text we can see how the Vedas script an affective reality as a kind of performance or reperformance of an underlying myth in ways that produces complex structures of feeling. The pragmatics of performance and scripted affect in the *Rigveda* are, as we will see, vastly more complex—but the general mode of reproducing affective realities is the same. Although the Vedas have been studied from many angles over the last decades, it is in only more recently that an attention to the narratological and performative aspects of the Rigvedic hymns has emerged. Jamison's article on "the poetics of repair" in the *Rigveda*, describing how many hymns propose a semantic and syntactic problem that they later resolve, stands as an important turning point in the history of scholarship.<sup>28</sup> Earlier efforts to account for the "structural devices" of Rigvedic poetics can be traced back to Tatyana Elizarenkova's

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<sup>27</sup> Malamoud 2002b, 27-8

<sup>28</sup> Jamison 2006

*Language and Style of the Vedic Ṛṣis* (1995), in many ways an epitome of work in Vedic stylistics that shifted scholarly attention away from the quantitative analysis of repeated linguistic patterns and metrical forms toward an engagement with literary semantics, metaphor, simile, and the like.

An earlier attempt to shift the needle was made by Louis Renou when he defined certain hymns of the *Rigveda* as “speculative,” indicating that some of the hymns appear less directly tied to ritual activity and more engaged in philosophical questions, religious hypotheses, the narration of myths, and the investigation of poetry’s power.<sup>29</sup> He thereby established that certain hymns occupy a different mode or genre within the *Rigveda*, characterized by the attempt to reflect on other parts of the Veda and to systematize aspects of its ideological outlook. Although it has been argued more recently that every Rigvedic hymn is on some level liturgical or ritual-oriented (and that no hymn is purely “speculative” or “secular”), it remains the case that some hymns more than others concertedly develop their mythological narratives, scripting an affective landscape that reciters and audiences alike come to inhabit in performance.<sup>30</sup>

My readings below activate affect in the *Rigveda* by building on these scholarly trends in several new directions. Most specifically, in order to elicit the poetics of unease of the *Rigveda*, I ground my attention to literary devices, performance grammar, and speculative poetics in the broader issues of the *Rigveda*’s poetic ontology, as described above. That is, my literary readings try to account for the structures of feeling that emerge from oblique comparisons across the *Rigveda* as a whole made of shifting constituent parts. I premise my approach on the availability of other retellings and imaginings at any synchronic moment, whether in the mind of the reciter or the audience. As Smith has noted, any “heuristic” assumption about the *Rigveda* cannot

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<sup>29</sup> Renou 1956

<sup>30</sup> On the rejection of “secular” hymns as a category, see Goldman 1969.

obviate the “diachronic,” “multigenerational” process that led to its formation, resulting in a text that contains a mixture of “active” and “passive” forms of polysemy.<sup>31</sup> That is to say, there are historical reasons to suppose that some themes in the *Rigveda* are older than others (as comparison to Indo-Iranian and Indo-European parallels can demonstrate), and that any reading of the *Rigveda* ought to account for the structures of feeling that surround the problem as kind of de-historicized pastiche.

Indeed, the evidence of the *Rigveda* also shows us that the oldest material, whether it was understood to be particularly ancient or not, surfaces haphazardly across the diachronic span of the *Rigveda*’s compositional history. In concrete terms, the oldest books of the *Rigveda* often mention Yama, but it is only in the relatively newer portions of the *Rigveda* that his Indo-Iranian background comes through clearly. Similarly, the Ṛbhus appear to have been deities that were particularly dear to a subset of Rigvedic seers or families of seers—a localized interest group that seems to have staked out an argument for the Ṛbhus’ global importance. In an apparent paradox, the Ṛbhus emerge as most integrated into the fabric of the Vedic pantheon in hymns that are not strictly dedicated to them alone. The net result is that, since meanings are made available through an untraceable stratigraphy of historical accretions, it is not possible for scholars to rely solely on the tools of historicist reading to provide a full account of the kinds of semantics operating in the texts. A philology of affect remedies this predicament by offering, through its emphasis on structures of feeling, an alternative (and complementary) approach to aspects of Vedic poetics.

The *Rigveda* therefore reads and responds to itself reflexively. Today, as in antiquity, to “read” the *Rigveda* has invariably been an exercise in also reading earlier interpretations of the *Rigveda* (both within it and after it), revealing the conversant possibilities of engaging with these

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<sup>31</sup> Smith 2020, 4-5

ancient hymns as vibrant poetic objects. Unmediated access to authorial intent or specific ritual application alike is not possible in such a context—but the fuzzy, murky edges of affect provide a route into other kinds important tensions that were articulated time and again across its hymns. The readings below revel in the open-ended possibilities provided by this definitionally “haunted” textual network, a script that can activate a broad range of structures of feeling around any specific figure, and that can in places be caught marveling uneasily at the order with which it attempts to clothe the world.

## 2. Yamī’s Tradition

*Rigveda* X.10, the first hymn of the so-called “Yama cycle,” is a much-studied dialogue hymn that dramatizes a conversation between the divine twins Yama and Yamī.<sup>32</sup> The conversation is about incest, since the other (older) gods have ordained that the twins procreate in order to form the human race. Yama has become a mortal in order to father the human race, but after his death he will become lord of the dead. Since humans exist, the act of incest must have taken place—somewhere in the metaphysical realms of mythological inference—but the hymn does not describe the action or its consequences. Instead, it centers on a preliminary confrontation: Yamī is ready to go ahead and join as husband and wife, but Yama refuses on principle. The hymn’s drama ends unresolved.

That the hymn should haunt the rest of the *Rigveda* in a similar manner to how I described it affects the tradition, above, is evident from this premise. No attempt is made in the rest of the Yama Cycle, or elsewhere in the *Rigveda*, to clarify how and when and why Yama

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<sup>32</sup> For an extensive and up to date bibliography on studies of this hymn see Kulikov 2018, 44 n. 1. Studies that postdate Kulikov’s article are discussed below and cited separately.

might have changed his mind—nor is Yamī and her later sadness described anywhere. Scholars have noted that the hymn sticks out like a sore thumb, and have addressed it in several ways. I discussed above how Malamoud tries to smooth out the mythological narrative and how Pinault’s reading sees in the hymn a series of lessons pertinent to understanding the affective contours of specific rituals at which it might be performed. Robert Goldman argued along similar lines that the tension of the hymn does not properly relate to incest, but to the prohibitions (and exceptions to the prohibitions) surrounding women’s participation in sacrificial rites.<sup>33</sup> These readings work suspiciously against the text’s apparent challenge to orderliness. They uncover supposedly underlying rules that help integrate it into the more general frameworks of the *Rigveda*.

One of the assumptions of such approaches is that figures like Yama, inasmuch as they are also religious figures, have an independent meaning and existence outside of the texts in which they are described or in which stories about them are told. And if we understand Yama, as Malamoud does, as a god who is *un révélateur, un analyseur de la manière dont la civilisation indienne met en forme les rapports fondamentaux de la vie psychique et sociale* [“a revealer, an analyzer of the manner in which Indian civilizations gives a form to the fundamental relationships of psychic and social life”], then it is easy to hypostasize the figure into a kind of neat abstraction.<sup>34</sup> Yama, as the origin of human life, is the embodiment of tradition. And in the scholarly tradition he is treated as “inert” tradition, in spite of the fact that one of the central texts of the *Rigveda* both depicts him (and his sister) in ways that are remarkably difficult to pin down.

My reading of X.10 therefore departs from previous readings by maintaining an emphasis on the indeterminacy surrounding Yama and Yamī that is, in my view, a major subject of the

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<sup>33</sup> Goldman 1969

<sup>34</sup> Malamoud 2002b, 10

hymn—i.e., the thing that the hymn explores through its drama. There are multiple benefits to such an approach. The first is that such a reading can clarify why Yama is shown refusing to engage in the labor appointed to him by the gods, establishing a template for a kind of conscientious objection to the perpetuation of ideologies. The second is that it can repair our attention to Yamī through a feminist reading of the manner in which the patriarchy is asserted and subverted throughout the hymn, resisting the kinds of readings that would see her simply as depraved or over-sexualized. The third, and most general, is that the *Rigveda* has served (among its many other roles) as a vehicle for reproducing the uneasiness surrounding these figures into a constant present of performative reproduction. Although from one perspective it seems to be located far in the past, the existential threat of Yama’s refusal is constantly reawakened, producing ever more complex structures of feeling.

These patterns begin to emerge in the three opening verses of the hymn, which plunge us *in medias res*.

*ó cit sákhāyaṃ sakhyā vavrtyāṃ  
tirāḥ purú cid arnavám jaganván |  
pitúr nápatam á dadhīta vedhā  
ádhi kṣámi pratarám dīdhyanāḥ ||  
ná te sákhā sakhyám vaṣṭy etát  
sálakṣmā yád viṣurūpā bhávāti |  
mahás putráso ásurasya vīrā  
divó dhartāra urviyá pári k<sup>h</sup>yan ||  
uśánti ghā té amṛtāsa etád  
ékasya cit tyajásam mártasya |  
ní te máno mánasi dhāyy asmé  
jánuyḥ patis tanvám á viviśyāḥ || (X.10.1-3)*

[Yamī:] I would turn my partner right here to partnership—even though he has gone across many (realms), across the flood.

A (ritual) adept should provide a grandson for his father, envisioning his furtherance on the earth.

[Yama:] Your partner doesn’t want that partnership, in that she [=sexual partner] will have the same “marks” [=family characteristics] (though) dissimilar form [=gender].

The sons of the great one, the heroes of the Lord, the upholders of  
heaven, look around widely.  
[Yamī:] The immortals do want this: a legacy of the one and only mortal.  
Your mind has (already) been set upon my mind, upon me. As husband,  
you should enter the body of (your) wife.<sup>35</sup>

The hymn opens like many other dialogues hymns that depict an exchange between lovers. In the first three verses of the hymn—also the first “lines” in the exchange between the two characters—we do not yet know the name of the speakers, and will not hear a name explicitly until the seventh. The first verse, spoken by Yamī, develops the trope of the absent lover. The second, spoken by Yama, the lover’s refusal. It is only in the third verse, again spoken by Yamī, that the audience is offered a first, still muted set of clues, hinting at the actual context through her reference to the “legacy of the one and only mortal” (i.e., mankind). We will not know explicitly until a name is uttered in the seventh verse, although the hints will continue to grow until that point.

The delay in identification is a poetic device that allows different affective tensions to emerge in sequence, modifying one another sequentially—the tensions ripple outwards, but none is resolved before the next one appears.<sup>36</sup> Further, as meanings unfold and earlier parts of the exchange are suddenly refocused and clarified, not every audience member will be on the same page at the same moment. For instance, if an auditor understands that Yama is named in the third verse, then the “partnerships” mentioned in the first and second verses are more quickly reconceived as incestuous unions, than for an auditor who only picks up on the characters’ identity, say, in verses four and five. The text has also carefully ordered its scripted affective

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<sup>35</sup> When citing larger portions of Rigvedic hymns, I provide the translation by Jamison and Brereton, which is the current standard. For X.10, The names of the characters are given before each of their verses for convenience, but are not explicit in the hymn. Unless otherwise noted, all other translations are my own.

<sup>36</sup> Pinault even sees a progression within these first verses, from a slightly more officious ritual discourse that quickly reveals itself to actually be a lover’s discourse. I disagree, since the first verse already seems to me erotic (if not explicitly sexual), but his point only emphasizes my broader argument. See Pinault 2012, 144-5.

cues in a careful manner. By having the erotic tenor of the first verses give way to the crisis of incest and the crisis of mankind's origin, the hymn allows itself to be misread by appropriating the conventions of the poetics of love poems before subverting its audience's expectations.

The presence of these stylistic devices shows us that the hymn was designed with a clearly dramatic frame, one that commands its own sense of temporal unfolding through which parts of the hymn can be said to read themselves progressively and reflexively as new information reaches the listener. Schneider has even identified the presence of a rudimentary form of semantic response in the hymn, to the level of quarter verses, such that each "line" of dramatic dialogue finds a poetic echo or response, in fourths, in the next.<sup>37</sup> Given the overall poetic intricacy of the hymn, even listeners who may have encountered the hymn multiple times may reasonably experience different configurations of affective dissonance in each instance. Akin to an inversion of Jamison's principle of "poetic repair," the hymn takes advantage of its dramatic temporality to develop a state of poetic (and cognitive) disrepair for its audiences, playing on ambivalences that are later resolved in one fashion or another through a poetics fundamentally predicated on the gesture of surprise.

These effects are not lost to later readers (and reciters), since the dramatic form of the hymn and its use of characterization provides a use of language that is ostensibly heightened, inviting close scrutiny. The addition of paratextual indices (*anukramaṇī*) that, in this case, identify the speakers and apportion the lines between them, does not entirely erode the surprising aspects of this poetics. This is because usually the indices identify, among other things, the alleged authors of the hymn. By identifying Yama and Yamī themselves as the authors of their own hymn (or of their respective "lines" in the dialogue), the paratextual apparatus in a sense

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<sup>37</sup> Schneider 1967, 11-12

confirms and reproduces an aspect of the hymn’s poetics (the tight focus on a hymn-internal ratiocination between these two figures who are deliberating over their own status), translating it across media.<sup>38</sup> The reciter is also at no disadvantage through a foreknowledge of the content—he occupies his own unique position to experience the hymn’s poetics, since to give voice to this hymn is to literally split one’s own voice into two, and to argue with oneself, without properly relinquishing his own voice.<sup>39</sup> Smith accordingly writes about Yama as the “impossible author” of the hymn (although Yamī too is mentioned), through whom we have a surprising copresence of “mimesis” and “metalepsis” within the same diegetic frames.<sup>40</sup> Significantly, the reciter is thus faced with the task of both giving voice to gods and two characters who are opposites not merely in opinion but also in gender.<sup>41</sup> More precisely, voice is granted to a former god who will be a god again (or maybe not if his refusal holds), and to a goddess—implying a fractured hierarchical distinction as well, again along both lines of divinity and gender. The rippling effect of the hymn’s poetics, from its first words forward, encompasses every participant in its realization as “event” in an incredibly complex structure of feeling.

As a final comment on the hymn’s formal organization of its own experience as event, it should be highlighted (again following Smith) that the Rigvedic performance grammar includes the subtle use of pronouns in rhetorical questions. When Yama later in the hymn asks “should *we* speak untruth?” there is further confusion of diegetic frames—the question is in a sense posed to the audience, since the “we” is first person plural, not dual as elsewhere in the hymn (Sanskrit strongly prefers the dual when the subject of the verb refers to two persons).<sup>42</sup> This gesture draws

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<sup>38</sup> Pinault 2012, 140

<sup>39</sup> Smith 2020, 7

<sup>40</sup> Smith 2016, 222-3

<sup>41</sup> On the attribution of hymns to mythical figures, within and beyond the dialogue hymns, and with a particular focus on the women’s voices, see Witzel 2009. The discussion is terse but gives a clear sense of the relatively low frequency of these conditions of performance.

<sup>42</sup> Smith 2020, 11

the audience and the reciter into the frame of the myth *in illo tempore*, or otherwise allows the mythic realm to spill into the present moment of recitation. In turn, this further rippling outwards is compounded by the parallel use of carefully placed deictic markers through which the hymn “points” to the narrative it represents whilst making “this mythological event reoccur” in the *ihá* [“here,” but also, “now”] of the moments of recitation or reading.<sup>43</sup>

The concerted use of all these devices shows us how suited X.10 is as a hymn for the exploration of structures of feeling, since it is quite literally a drama that creates a world-space for innumerable tensions to emerge with particular affective sharpness as Yama and Yamī discuss their predicament in that very space. We will see that as the boundaries between the represented *in illo tempore* and the performative present reveal themselves to be increasingly porous, the ideological propositions of the hymn give way to a host of residues through which different forms of affective engagement with the poem become possible. By looking at the next verses of the hymn, which introduce draw the mythological background and complexity of the twins into sharp relief, we will see that the residues accrue around the ideological questions implicit in the mythology itself and, in different but related manners, around the gendered performance of each character. Since the next verses of the hymn explode the mythological simplicity of the opening scenario, I will need to go back and forth between questions of mythical ideology and gender as I perform my close reading of this passage. The payoff is arriving at a reparative position from which to appreciate the affective undertones of the passage from multiple perspectives at once—but with an emphasis on how both figures can simultaneously come to be seen as justified in their argumentation, but also as overrun by their own affective disposition (Yamī’s desire, Yama’s shame).

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<sup>43</sup> Smith 2020, 7-8

Strikingly, the twins present two distinct genealogies, each of which lays claim to a different pedigree and offers a different basis for ideological self-definition.

*ná yát purá cakṛmá kád dha nūnám  
ṛtā vādanto áṅṛtaṃ rapema |  
gandharvó apsv ápyā ca yóṣā  
sá no nábhīḥ paramám jā́mí tán nau ||  
gárbhe nú nau janitá dámpatī kar  
devás tváṣṭā savitá viśvárūpah  
nákir asya prá minanti vratā́ni  
véda nāv asyá pṛthivī utá dyaúḥ || (X.10.4-5)*

[Yama:] What we have not done before, should (we do it) now? While proclaiming truths, we would [/should we] murmur untruth? The Gandharva in the waters and the watery maiden—that is our umbilical tie; therefore our kinship is of the highest.  
[Yamī:] (Even) in the womb the Begetter made us two a married couple, god Tvaṣṭar, the impeller who provides all forms. No one transgresses his commandments. Heaven and Earth take heed of this about us.

The hymn shows us two perspectives here. On one level, there is a theological debate between the merits of Yama’s understanding of *ṛta* and Yamī’s own understanding of the cosmic order. The two genealogies are brought in as supporting evidence in this debate, since each understands the cosmic order differently. However, each genealogy also brings a series of mythic residues into the hymn. On the surface, “the psychological implications of these family dramas, replete with incest and mutilation, are readily apparent.”<sup>44</sup> But when they collide in such a small poetic space, they suppress as much as they reveal.

Yama’s position is initially rather clear: the twins are the nondescriptly related to a Gandharva and an Apsara. Yamī’s position is on the whole more implicit. By referring to Tvaṣṭar in as “the Begetter,” she is identifying him both in his role as a senior deity and a divine creator, and as their specific grandfather (clarifying her *pitúr nápātam* [“grandson for his father”] of the

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<sup>44</sup> Doniger 1979, 7

first verse). This identification suggests that her parents are Vivasvant and Saranyū (the latter is Tvaṣṭṛ's daughter). One reason to fill in the gaps in Yamī's claim in this way is that, throughout the rest of the *Rigveda*, Vivasvant is often identified as Yama's father, but Yama's claim is never repeated.<sup>45</sup> The two genealogies are therefore not entirely incompatible, but Yama appears to be skipping at least two generations to reach back to an older and vaguer origin in lower-ranked deities (seemingly unnamed or unspecified), whereas Yamī squarely positions herself in the lineage of Tvaṣṭṛ and Vivasvant—two unambiguously important figures.

Breaking the mythographic fourth wall, the hymn challenges interpreters (ancient and modern) to think very carefully about the two implications of the two sides of the twins' argument. In defining themselves, the twins are engaged in defining two traditions for themselves, but also—indirectly—for the hymn and its audience, too. Their claims are metapoetic because it is the characters themselves who deliberate over their own lives—seemingly as if they were aware that they are embedded in a mythological system that can be altered for different affective and ideological purposes. The debate's metaleptic contours emerge through the performer's speech acts. The characters raise a question through him that the audience is then asked to adjudicate, compelling active participation as they bring their background knowledge to bear and become actors triggered by the hymn as a semantically undetermined script. Significantly, each audience member must come to terms with the hymn individually rather than in a group deliberation, and the hymn is careful to supply no final answer. I will now go into detail about the two claims bearing these levels of signification in mind and showing the incredible range of contradictory affective experiences that these verses can activate.

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<sup>45</sup> For instance in X.17, which I discuss further below.

Since Yamī's claim finds backing in other parts of the *Rigveda*, we can begin from hers. Given that the Gandharvas and Apsaras are not elsewhere understood to be ancestors of the twins, or of their ancestors, her claim would seemingly offer a more well-known lineage. But this point requires a great deal of nuance, since Yama clearly thinks he knows who his parents are, his sister disagrees, and the audience is left with the problem of evaluating both sides of the argument. That Yamī's genealogy was likely known to audiences finds further support in the known Indo-Iranian background attesting to the antiquity of the connection of Yama to the solar deity Vivasvant (who at times is understood as a manifestation of the sun itself, or of the sun god Sūrya). The evidence for this comes from several portions of the Avestan corpus, where an analogous and cognate figure Yima is given as the son of Vīvaŋhat. The Vedic *vivásvant-* and Avestan *vīuuauŋ<sup>v</sup>haŋt-* are also cognates that both mean something like "endowed with radiant light," underscoring Yama's own connection to the sun (common in the Vedic texts).<sup>46</sup>

Consequently, some scholars have seen Yama's proposed genealogy as aberrant, or else tried to neutralize it by arguing that Gandharva could be another name for Vivasvant.<sup>47</sup> Certainly, it might have appeared very strange to an audience member with only the seemingly more common knowledge of Yamī's perspective. To that kind of reader, Yama is presenting a strange alternative to the norm, extemporizing and manipulating the mythological background for his own purposes. But recent work has shown that, at least to some audience members, even Yama's genealogy might have been familiar or at least conceivably a component of the tradition. In brief, Kulikov has argued that Yama's proposed parentage also has Indo-Iranian roots. He points to the existence of an Iranian figure Gaṇdarəba (earlier Gandarewa), cognate with Gandharva, who is a son of Yima in several Middle Persian sources. Although it became inverted in these later

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<sup>46</sup> This lineage has long been the subject of discussion by Indo-Europeanists, see for instance Dumézil 1973.

<sup>47</sup> One instance is Barnett 1928, who conflates the figures under the rubric of a solar deity theory.

sources, he proposes that a homology can be drawn whereby Yima : Gaṇḍarəba :: Yama : Gandharva.<sup>48</sup> Therefore, we cannot interpret Yama's claim as actually aberrant, although it may very well have registered as such to certain audiences given its low attestation.

Since a connection between Yama and Gandharva is at least conceivable as background knowledge, the twins are addressing an oscillation in the mythic record that might have reasonably reflected a similar ambivalence in the minds of at least some audience members. The hymn does not adjudicate between positions, but leaves that deliberation open-ended. The structures of feeling surrounding the two genealogies are activated on the basis of the possible connotations that these stories provide to the hymn as "exemplars" of each twin's gesture of self-definition.

Yama's claim has most recently been understood as a kind of insult against Yamī. In Kulikov's reading, the "less exalted" pairing of a Gandharva with an Apsara casts a negative light on the sexual desires of his Yamī by connecting her to these mythological figures. He arrives at this conclusion by noting that Gandharvas and Apsaras are in the Vedic period much darker figures than they are in later mythology. While they later become "semi-divine creatures, acting as celestial musicians and dancers respectively," in the Vedas they instead "occupy a rather low rank of semi-divine or demonic creatures, yet of a fairly dangerous nature."<sup>49</sup> The Apsaras are dangerous in their seductive quality and their (sexualized) guile; the Gandharvas, "lustful and sexually aggressive, are particularly dangerous for young women."<sup>50</sup> Thus, Kulikov sees Yama as casting aspersions on his sister by connecting her to these lower-level divinities.

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<sup>48</sup> Kulikov 2018, 55.

<sup>49</sup> Kulikov 2018, 52

<sup>50</sup> Kulikov 2018, 54

I accept Kulikov's characterization of Gandharvas and Apsaras, but not the view that Yama is merely slighting his sister by suggesting she is sexually depraved like their relatives. The form of Yama's utterance actually speaks against an interpretation of the genealogy as insult. Firstly, because he explicitly and forcefully characterizes this descent as their shared inheritance—"that is our descentance (*nābhiḥ*); our kinship is utmost"—he does not seem to be singling her out. Secondly, Yama seems to be making his claim as a way to *avoid* sexual union, not to draw attention to the sexualized precedent of his ancestors in a way that might suggest he wants to engage in sexual activity. But, since none of this is quite made explicit in the hymn, an audience aware of the sexualized nature of Gandharvas and Apsaras is an audience that could conceivably reach a conclusion similar to Kulikov's own. Here it is worth signaling another interesting scholarly mix-up of sorts. Kulikov assumes that the Gandharva and Apsara the twins' parents, a position also taken up by other scholars.<sup>51</sup> The Indo-Iranian evidence cited above does not warrant this assumption, particularly as the homology is already fraught. But it may, for separate reasons, be the case that some readers and audiences could have taken them as their parents, depending on a background unknown to us which would have affected the meaning of the word *nābhiḥ*, shifting it in the direction of "parentage" from the more common meaning of "relatives" in a vaguer sense (there are some etymological reasons to suggest that *nābhiḥ* might have indicated a closer blood-connection, like that of parents to their children).<sup>52</sup> Therefore, for all of Kulikov's overstatements, there are ways in which his claims might have described actual reactions to the hymns, thanks to the kinds of misprisions that can naturally occur due to the hymn's poetics, which, as described above, see the audience rapidly been drawn into the hymn's

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<sup>51</sup> Schneider 1967, Kosambi 1962

<sup>52</sup> Jamison and Brereton translated it "umbilical tie" playing on the etymology of the term, which is cognate with English "navel," Lat. *umbilicus*, and Grk. ὀμφαλός. I return to this below.

often compressed and obscure semantics as active participants in determining its semantic possibilities. A philology of affect can hold onto these possible meanings as components, although perhaps less pronounced than others, in the structure of feeling that surrounds the hymn. While Yama may be suggesting that the twins act differently than their hyper-sexual relatives, the argument is quickly reversible: precisely because the Gandharva and Apsara are that way, they form a useful precedent as much as they potentially offer a negative exemplum. To adjudicate with finality appears antithetical to the hymn's own construction as an open-ended and heavily cross-referential debate.

The reading that Yama is trying to avoid the implication that incest runs in the family is one that remains compelling as an option, partly for the simple reason that Yamī can be read as forcefully staking the claim that incest is acceptably precisely because the gods do it all the time—and not just any gods, the twins' ancestors, near and distant, most specifically.<sup>53</sup> Yamī opens her argument by linking the twins to their grandfather Tvaṣṭṛ, who is potentially embroiled in a very significant set incestual relation. The incestual union of Tvaṣṭṛ and his own daughter Saraṇyū surfaces rarely in the Vedic corpus.<sup>54</sup> But there are reasons to take it very seriously as something that haunts this episode, since it would make Tvaṣṭṛ both the grandfather and father of the twins. Hymn X.17, which narrates the marriage of Vivasvant and Saraṇyū, provides indirect evidence for a broader set of genealogical problems that can support this reading. There, Saraṇyū mysteriously disappears after the wedding (and after giving birth to the twins), and a copy of Saraṇyū replaces her, who later gives birth to a second set of twins (the Aśvins).<sup>55</sup> Wendy Doniger has written at length on Saraṇyū and the vast questions gender dynamics that she raises

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<sup>53</sup> On her response as a pointed and nearly formal “retort,” see also the analysis of Thornton 2015, 183.

<sup>54</sup> The most discussed occurrence can be found at V.42.13. I return to this hymn, and Tvaṣṭṛ's role in it, when discussing the Rbhus, later.

<sup>55</sup> For a more global reading of X.17, see Goldman 1969.

in her various mythological guises, often embroiled in incestuous unions; her conclusion on the matter of the possibility of incest between Tvaṣṭṛ and Saranyū in the *Rigveda* is that it is ultimately impossible to tell, but the proximity of his mention here to the incest the twins are deliberating makes the association likely.<sup>56</sup> I would go a step further and argue that, although we cannot be certain, Yamī’s reference to Tvaṣṭṛ as “the Begetter,” who placed the two in their mother’s womb as a pair, makes it eminently possible that an audience member who vaguely recalled the possibility of Tvaṣṭṛ’s incest with his daughter might find a confirmation in these verses.<sup>57</sup> This is only reinforced by the fact that Yamī ends her argument by pointing to the union of Earth and Heaven as precedent-setting for her relationship to her brother, since that was an acknowledged incestuous union and the pair was broadly seen as ancestral. Thus X.10 leaves wide open the possibility that the ancestry of the human race be seen as a long history of incestuous unions, of which Yama and Yamī form merely the latest iteration.

As Pinault pointed out, a history of how the philological difficulties of X.10 have been resolved over the centuries of scholarship would amount to a substantial contribution to the writing of a history of Vedic philology.<sup>58</sup> But I have shown above that attentive reading and the choice between possible alternative readings are not coterminous: a reading attentive to affect as a form that enables unexpected kind of semantic proliferations shows us clearly that X.10 relies on an unsettling poetics of indeterminacy.

The poetics of unease in X.10 comes more clearly into view when we bracket the problem of incest and instead focus on the striking consequences of how Yama and Yamī argue

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<sup>56</sup> Doniger 1996, 166 (also citing Kuhn’s reading of X.17’s swapping of Saranyū as a consequence of the incest). In the online commentary to her translation, Jamison also raises the possibility of the incest with some skepticism (pointing to V.42.13 as the clearest evidence).

<sup>57</sup> At other moments in the hymn, Yamī’s language may be echoing the language of V.40, where the story of the incest between the Sun and Dawn is told. I discuss this briefly below. On celestial incest more broadly, see Goldman 1969, 295 n. 1.

<sup>58</sup> Pinault 2012, 143

over the traditional foundations on which they want to respectively reject or enact the creation of the human world.<sup>59</sup> After all, it seems clear from X.10 that incest is not suggested as a generally acceptable act. Exceptions are made when gods do it (and in certain myths involving humans), especially out of cosmic necessity. What I want to draw attention to is that, while Yama may reasonably balk at the idea of committing incest, this does not necessarily paint him in a positive light in terms of how the hymn progressively develops its critique of the logics that underwrite tradition. Indeed, Yamī's defense of incest is grounded in a principled understanding of divine precedent, showing that the twins fit the limit case for an exception to the moral rule. His only retort to this logic, as we will see in the rest of the hymn, is to insult her, denigrate her sexuality, and to present straw-man arguments that derail the conversation and show the audience that Yama may have misunderstood the cosmic predicament.<sup>60</sup> The genealogies bring this underlying disagreement into focus because they show us how Yama attempts to subtract himself from a predicament that seemingly cannot be escaped, while Yamī urges for the ordained union to take place. The resulting aporia of Yama's refusal gives him what appears to be a contingent victory but also exposes some affective residues in Yamī's own position.

A reparative reading of X.10's poetics of unease can provide a reframing for how the hymn was read, partly to better understand why Yamī had such long afterlife in the tradition but the specifics of this episode have not.<sup>61</sup> One trace of unease scripted into the hymn surrounds the

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<sup>59</sup> A similar view of incest as a residue that masks other underlying tensions is presented by several authors, who however do not see the text as debating tradition but certain specific practices, such as certain sacrificial prohibitions in Goldman 1969. One source of contention that keep reigniting the debate on incest is complicated by the fact that, in the Iranian evidence, Yima's possible incestuous relationship with his sister (and other mythical incest) are used to justify the practice of incest. A collection of essays on the topic is available in Azarnouche and Redard 2012, amongst which Pinault 2012 and Malamoud 2012a.

<sup>60</sup> I argue this at length below, but that Yama's arguments are lacking in force and sometimes appear irrelevant has been noted before, see Pradhan 1990, 122.

<sup>61</sup> On this seemingly peculiar omission in the later literature, which otherwise tends to revel in retelling incest stories, see Goldman 1969, 294-5.

specifically gendered contours of the exchange above and the rest of the hymn. As I forward the claim that X.10 permits a critique of gendered stereotypes by showing us the pettiness in Yama's reluctance to accept his cosmic predicament, I am keenly aware that stereotypes are often effective in spite of their supposedly logical underpinnings. Yama's reluctance is affectively loaded and carries its own kind of persuasive force—not all audiences need to be understood as sympathetic to the disparity in treatment of gender, and some might very well enjoy a paradigm of male narcissism as presented in X.10, although the hymn seems, as I will argue, to expose the arbitrariness of Yama's shame in a mode of potential critique. The lability of the ideological articulation of gender, particularly of gender as imaginatively performed in a text predominantly written for men and by men, is always a tricky subject.<sup>62</sup> But Yamī is also, as we will see, represented as empowered in several ways. She has the lineage of important gods on her side, and my reading will bring out aspects of thought-provoking verbal dexterity in her characterization. The uneasiness of the hymn lies precisely in how a forceful asseveration of Yama's views is accompanied by the possibility that his arguments become transparently groundless. While I do not claim that X.10 is a perfect document of Rigvedic feminist thought, we will see that it is uneasy enough (regardless of any authorial intent) in its presentation of Yama that it is possible to recapture another way of reading him and for understanding how Yamī's reception in the later texts may have drawn on X.10.

The first clear marker of Yama's unconvincing argumentation presents itself in the debate over the genealogy. Yama is shakiest when he appears to make his most forceful claim, couching

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<sup>62</sup> My approach here is indebted to the work of several feminist critics that have emphasized how the concerted play on gender roles, including unexpected inversions of power dynamics and stereotypes, can productively lead to the discovery of discourses that are otherwise entirely erased from the historical record, since so few works by women from the periods in which I am discussing are available. I have modeled my reading in part on readings of tensions in X.95 (another hymn with pronounced and radically unexpected gender dynamics), on which see Thornton 2019. Two studies that approach texts in these terms are Armstrong 2000 and Zeitlin 1996. On the projection of women's authorial intent onto Vedic texts, see Witzel 1997a (already cited above).

his view of the twins' genealogy in the language of *ṛta*. Right before mentioning the Gandharva and Apsara, his verse opens with the rhetorical question “that which we have not done before, should we do it now?” (X.10.4), followed by another rhetorical question.

*ṛtā́ vādantó anṛtaṃ rapema* (X.10.4b)

...proclaiming truths, we would [/should we] murmur untruth?

This seemingly absolute claim about *ṛta* is deeply ambivalent, from its syntax to its semantic implications. The translation displays an ambivalence in how we translate the verb *rapema* caused by a difficulty in evaluating the meaning of the optative in Vedic. Bracketing that kind of problem for a moment, there is a much more fundamental ambiguity in how we treat the form *ṛtā́*. The translation above takes it as the accusative plural of the present participle *vādanto*. It could also be taken as a collective plural (“proclaiming *the truth*”) with minor modifications to the sense. Again, *ṛtā́* could be taken as instrumental singular, used adverbially, and the accusative *anṛtaṃ* could similarly be taken adverbially (“proclaiming (things) truthfully, should we (now) murmur untruthfully?” where “untruthfully” means literally, “in a manner contravening the truth, the order of the cosmos”).

All of these options are potentially available to an audience's hymn, and each can evince different kinds of unease by coding an insecurity about the status of *ṛta* into Yama's statement. Since *ṛta* is an abstract content that relies on context for clarification, it can be understood a partly pre-formed concept that invites semantic clarification from both the speaker and listener. The range of possible meanings is dizzying, so I will focus just on two that have pervasive implications for how we read the hymn as meditating over the “proper” establishment of tradition.

The first is the implicitly metapoetic understanding of *ṛta*, which can even be understood as the order of force of a (sacred) poetic utterance. Plural forms of *ṛta* (although rare) carry an especially strong metapoetic associations, and can even be understood as referring to hymns (or explicitly, enhancing the metaleptic quality of the third person plural forms of both the participle and verb).<sup>63</sup> For instance, as the reciter voices this phrase on order and its opposite, it can sound like he is rhetorically asking the audience more generally whether we (the form is plural) should ever speak in contravention to *ṛta*. One association available to audiences in such an instance is that of the *dvārāv ṛtasya* [“the double doors of *ṛta*”] whose opening makes the hymn accessible to the poet. On the diegetic level, instead, Yama’s admission to the fundamentally dialectic (and ideological) force of *ṛta* opens up the very kind of debate that he attempts eschew by providing a genealogy, which is a device that in principle offers one constructed view of reality as authoritative. But, as we saw, he leaves himself open to Yamī’s retort, through which she outlines a genealogy that is more strongly in keeping with non-codified but well-known notions of cosmic order, connecting the twins to Tvaṣṭṛ as an all-powerful creator god who cannot be disobeyed (and carries his own haunting presence), developing a clear precedent for incest in the cosmic situations of creation or founding. The fundamentally labile quality of *ṛta* comes into clear view at this moment of the hymn.

By taking *ṛta* and its negation in their adverbial function, a similar unease is evinced, although the emphasis falls on the verbs themselves. The use of the verb *rap-* (a dialectical variant for the more common *lap-* [“mutter, whisper, murmur,” by extension, “speak nonsense”]) is rare in the RV, but Pinault and many translators have noted the implicitly significant opposition between the usually unmarked *vad-* [“say, speak”] and *rap-* in this context.<sup>64</sup> The

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<sup>63</sup> Sandness 2007, 61

<sup>64</sup> Pinault 2012, 152

notion of speaking well (in accordance with *ṛta*) and speaking badly (in contravention to *ṛta*) is thereby doubly coded by the use of *rap-* in a manner that marks it as a kind of potentially deviant (but also subversive) speech, not least because the latter is a colloquial form. Indeed, while Yama uses this language to develop a contrast between himself and his sister, explicitly demoting her speech to the level of non-truth, later in the hymn she rapidly appropriates the verb for herself, “murmuring” her invitation to sexual union (X.10.11). We will see that Yamī’s ability to play at Yama’s game, twisting her own language to suit his deliberate derailments and pompous abstractions, introduces aspects of humor and jocosity in the hymn—Yamī practically teases Yama for his evasiveness. This antanaclastic play rests serves to abrogate the listener’s conclusions on any one speech act, and haunts the meaning of practically any word in the hymn with an unusual affective tension.<sup>65</sup> That a competitive and ludic aspect of linguistic play can be taken to characterize the articulation of *ṛta* and *anṛta* most clearly unsettles the supposedly world-forming of the hymn, transforming it partly into a reflection on the mixed ideological agendas that subtend the *Rigveda* as a whole.

This jocose aspect of the hymn provides an affective opening or a stage for Yama’s evasiveness to take on a concrete form as a kind of anxiety or shame. Readers who see Yamī as existentially sexualized from the get-go fail to appreciate that her sexual invitations develop in a growing response to her brother’s reception, until they are for instance embodied in “the roiling emotions are [eventually] reflected in the ragged meter of the some of the later verses.”<sup>66</sup> At her own pace, Yamī transforms euphemisms into a more explicit sexual metaphors, evincing slangy insults that demonstrates Yama’s mounting discomfort.

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<sup>65</sup> On antanaclasis in Vedic hymns, and specifically “antanaclastic repair,” see Thornton 2014, 230-2. That antanaclasis is clearly a feature of this hymn is also demonstrated by Yama’s own repetition (with difference) of Yamī’s words as he drives their conversation to its aporetic conclusion, discussed below.

<sup>66</sup> Jamison and Brereton 2014, 1382

Consider the “soft” opening of the hymn.

*ó cit sákhāyaṃ sakhyā vavr̥tyāṃ* (X.10.1a)

I would turn my partner right here to partnership.<sup>67</sup>

The language of *sakhya* is used here by Yamī because it is conveniently understated, oscillating between generalized notions of partnership but implying the kinds of relationships that can produce offspring. With respect to the term *sakhya*, Theodore Proferes has recently argued that X.10 provides “tantalizing” evidence for the notion of the kind of conjoined body politic imagined in other Vedic texts as the ideal society. It is not merely that Yamī desires to be connected sexually to her brother, she wants a union of bodies, in terms that prefigure the classical notion of the body politic as literal incorporation of societal elements.<sup>68</sup> This more formal vocabulary is couched in a dignified tone, for example relying on a careful use of the optative, allowing Yamī to steer clear of more risqué implications of *sakhya* as a specifically sexual kind of union.<sup>69</sup> This leads Yama to respond (as we saw above) with first a technical argument about the similarity of siblings and then his genealogical argument.

But as Yamī’s sexual metaphors become more explicit, Yama’s paranoia reaches a peak. It that extends far beyond his fear of being heard speaking (or murmuring) against *rta*.

*yamásyā mā yamyāṃ kāma āgan  
samāné yónau sahaśéyyāya |  
jāyéva pátye tanvāṃ riricyāṃ  
ví cid vr̥heva ráthyeva cakra ||  
ná tiṣṭhanti ná ní miṣanty eté  
devānāṃ spása ihá yé cáranti |  
anyéna mād āhano yāhi túyaṃ  
téna ví vr̥ha ráthyeva cakra ||*

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<sup>67</sup> On the difficulties surrounding a translation of this verse, only some of which are relevant to this discussion, see Kulikov 2018, 45-8.

<sup>68</sup> Proferes 2007, 55-7

<sup>69</sup> This is in essence the reading in Kulikov 2018, who agrees with Pinault 2012, 144. However, I disagree with Kulikov’s emphasis on just how openly sexual the notion of partnership comes across—*sakhya* certainly includes the possibility of sexual activity, but it remains in my view euphemistic.

*rātrībhir asmā áhabhir daśasyet  
sūryasya cákṣur múhur ún mimīyāt |  
divā pṛthivyā mīthunā sábandhū  
yamīr yamásya bibhṛyād ajāmi || (X.10.7-9)*

[Yamī:] Desire for Yama has come to me, Yamī, to lie together in the same womb [/place].  
Like a wife to her husband I would yield my body. We would “let ’er rip” like two chariot wheels.  
[Yama:] They do not stand still; they do not blink—the spies of the gods who roam about here.  
With another than me, lubricious one, drive off straightaway; with him “let ’er rip” like two chariot wheels.  
[Yamī:] Night and day she would do service to him. She could for an instant trip up the eye of the sun.  
The couple has the same (kin-)ties as Heaven and Earth. Yamī could bear the unbrotherly (act) of Yama.

The section translated above begins at the midpoint of the hymn, a natural turning point marked by the first explicit mention of the twins’ names. The stakes are unambiguously clear, and they are made clear by Yamī herself as she positions their names into a relation with *kāma* [“desire”].<sup>70</sup> There may also be an intra- or inter-text here with another Rigvedic verse, from the dialogue between Lopāmudrā and her husband (I.179.4a), where a much more explicitly sexual desire is described.<sup>71</sup>

Throughout the above passage, euphemistic language gives way with increasing frequency to more explicit connotations: the term *yoni* [most clearly, “womb,” “female genitalia”] can only metaphorically be taken as “place” (of birth, and by extension “home, lair, nest, bed”), hence Jamison and Brereton only offer that meaning parenthetically. The verb *bibhṛyād* [“she endures, bears”] can also be taken to mean “she is made pregnant,” and sits in the final verse in a context of clear sound play, since Vedic “j” is very close to the semivocalic “y,” such that *jāmi* and *ajāmi* [“brotherly” and “unbrotherly”] approximate the sounds of the

<sup>70</sup> “Desire” is here the abstract concept, not the personified god Kāma of later Classical Sanskrit.

<sup>71</sup> Pinault 2012, 144

characters' names.<sup>72</sup> By conscripting these terms and concepts into a network of linguistic play, Yamī is systematically responding to elements earlier in the hymn that can now be revealed to be forms of double speak. For instance, the use of *yoni* as womb and as a place where they can have sex responds implicitly to Yama's use of *nābhiḥ* (in the genealogical passage). Whereas he argued that their shared *nābhiḥ* [I translated it as “descendance” earlier, but it can also mean “umbilical tie,” cp. English “navel,” Lat. *umbilicus*, and Grk. ὀμφαλός] is an abstracted connective tissue that signifies their connection in womb and therefore prohibits sexual pairing, she re-connotes the womb as precisely the location for such a union. In the end of the passage above, she makes explicit her previous implicit reference about to Heaven and Earth and their own incestuous union (cf. *mithunā* [“(sexual) pair, couple”] and *sabandhū* [a compound that can be rendered literally as “same-bond,” and used for kin relations]).<sup>73</sup>

When the invitation to participate in sexual reproduction is keyed in terms of desire and enjoyment, most saliently through the metaphor of the chariot, Yama's paranoia reaches its peak. Yamī wants to yield her body, eagerly awaiting the movement and penetration implicit in the rotation of the chariot wheel and the axle's position in the hub of the wheel—a positive and appreciative metaphor that emphasizes the pleasures of synchronization and iterative contact in an intimate encounter.<sup>74</sup> Yama instead becomes deeply self-conscious and uneasy. When it comes to the practical matter of sexual intercourse, he patterns the kind of unease I have been describing more broadly in this dissertation in the way he flits between ideological stances and finds them successively wanting—looking for a metaphysical conception of the fundamentally

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<sup>72</sup> Malamoud 2012b, 45

<sup>73</sup> Some aspects of this oppositionality, as well as the concomitant difficulties in rendering this verse, are noted in Pinault 2012, 159. See also Malamoud 2002b, 45-8.

<sup>74</sup> For a review of the debates over how the mechanics of the metaphor are understood (or misunderstood), and the obvious role played in all this by the attitude of the philologist to discussing sexual intercourse, see Bodewitz 2009, 271-3, with an illustrative (but not exhaustive) set of examples from a range of scholars.

material act. He does not reject the possibility of sexual pleasure outright, but his mind turns directly to thinking about the spies of the gods (expanding in X.10.8 on a claim he already made in X.10.2). In shielding himself from an imagined voyeuristic threat his moralizing response reveals its own insecurities and sense of shame more than it addresses Yamī’s arguments. Yama’s discomfort is not so much with the breakdown of heteronormative modes of reproduction produced by incest as much as it based in a concern about exposure—shame, to a degree, but also a more general discomfort with the strictly physical act that underwrites the idealistic ordainment that this gesture will beget the human race, and consequently forge a very literal new world.

Even to this, Yamī has a solution in mind. She can, for a short while at least, “darken the eye of the sun” (X.10.9b).<sup>75</sup> The phrase *sūryasya cakṣur muhur un mimīyāt* is highly poetic and lends itself to equally cryptic translation (Jamison and Brereton’s “she could for an instant trip up the eye of the sun”). But the overall meaning is clear, for the sun’s light (or the sun itself) is often understood as a spy or as a conduit of gods’ vision. Yamī is acknowledging Yama’s paranoia, in a move that is at once affectively attentive and also playful, suggesting they can enjoy the pleasure of intercourse in secret—adopting a common ironic trope about daylight and publicity. She plays along with her brother’s sense of shame in order to get what she wants, but also glancingly acknowledges its peculiar arbitrariness.

The gesture of making the sun go dark offer several significant literary and mythological parallels from the *Rigveda*. In the myth of Svarbhānu, who punished the Sun for engaging in incest with his daughter, it is explicitly connected to a sense of punishment or shame: *yat tvā sūrya svarbhānus tamasāvidhyad āsuraḥ* [“when, O Sun, Svarbhānu, the Āsura, pierced you with

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<sup>75</sup> Debate over how to understand *muhur* has reached a general consensus toward “for a short while” or “for an instant” rather than “quickly” or “instantaneously.” On this debate, see Bodewitz 2009, 273.

darkness”] (V.40.5). This indicates that there exists an admittedly somewhat mysterious additional connection between the sun going dark and incest. In addition, Thornton has noted that the language of Yamī’s retort (the use of the verb *mī-*) is paralleled also in that of the wondrous ability of the Maruts (wind gods) to “confound” or “darken” the eye of the sun with the rain (V.59.5d).<sup>76</sup> In this and related contexts, she argues that we can see that the verb comes to signify a god’s “ability to push for a change in the status quo, or in conditions—atmospheric or otherwise,” that “some gods possess to their credit.”<sup>77</sup> In an effort to appease her brother, Yamī is willing to disrupt nature—playing with the literal cosmic order—to create space for a foundational moment of human mortality, all so Yama can feel comfortable performing an act the gods already know must happen. Her ironic suggestion reveals the arbitrariness of divine power in the first place, and consequently the arbitrariness of the need for Yama to feel shame.

The confusing artificiality of his resistance is only emphasized in his next retort to Yamī, in which he proposes that she find some other mortal with whom he invites her to reproduce. But as they (and the audience) know well, there is no other mortal in existence yet. Grasping at literal straw men, Yama’s enervation comes to the fore. The rest of the hymn—with its ragged meter and slangy tone, mentioned above—plays itself out around this claim of the non-existent other partners, leading to its aporetic conclusion in which Yama superficially wins the argument after Yamī (in a clearly sarcastic tone) accedes to his claim.

*bató batāsi yama*  
*naívá te máno hṛdayaṃ cāvidāma |*  
*anyā kīla tvāṃ kakṣyèva yuktām*  
*pāri śvajāte libujeva vṛkṣām || (X.10.13)*

[Yamī:] You jerk, you really are a jerk, Yama! Truly we have not found mind and heart in you.

<sup>76</sup> See Thornton 2015, 184, and Bodewitz 2009, 274.

<sup>77</sup> Thornton 2015, 184

Another (woman) will surely embrace you, like a girthband a yoked  
(horse), like a vine a tree.

Her outburst is characterized by the use the plural *avidāma* [“we have not found”], that can be taken as a colloquial feature (building on the unmetrical colloquialism of the opening half-verse), or even as a way of ribbing Yama’s fear of exposure by pointing to its irrationality. The “surely” of the third half-verse, should be read as sarcastic concession (“yea, OK then, sure”), since *kīla*, can be taken as a particle denoting hearsay. We may here be faced with a quite radical antanaclasis of Yama’s suggestion to find “another.” Yamī could be understood be saying something along the lines of, “from your perspective, i.e., for all I care, you can think that it’s another woman who is embracing you;” in other words, “pretend that it’s someone other than me!”

To this, Yama’s only response (closing the hymn) is to repeat her language of embrace, and then wishes her the best moving on.

*tāsya vā tvám māna ichā́ sá vā táva*  
*ádhā kṛṇuṣva saṃvídaṃ súbhadrām* (X.10.14cd)

Seek his mind—or he yours. Then make yourself a very happy compact.

To end on the auspicious word *súbhadrām* [“glorious, auspicious, fortunate”] is to conclude on a note of apparent solemnity—in some senses deflecting from the problem at hand. Positionally, it draws the hymn (and argument) to a close and suggests, somewhat perversely, that we have reached something of a happy ending. But the application of *súbhadrām* to the kind of impossible relationship Yama is suggesting his sister go find makes the diegetic function of the word harder to pin down. The fracture in their relationship opened up by the hymn thereby comments on the language of order used to structure hymns more broadly. In a parallelism to how the order of the cosmos is here seemingly determined by an audience’s affective investment

in a mythological quarrel, the lack of resolution (phrased as a literal resolution or agreement *saṃvīdam*) broadens the implications of the hymn into a commentary on the very ability of hymns to persuasively and coherently represent and build a world order. The audience may hear that a “happy compact” has been reached but then reflect on the emptiness of such a concluding remark.

This reading has served to repair our attention to the extent to which Yamī can be read as the more compelling figure in this hymn, and how it her arguments that invite the activation of a poetics of unease that has very broad ramifications for the poetic ontology of Rigvedic hymns. Her role in X.10, reveals the material implications of the metaphysical cosmic order—and by foisting the weight of that confession onto her the *Rigveda* uneasily obfuscates the memory of an act that was in practical terms irreducible.

I will now end this section by pointing to a few pieces of evidence that suggest that such a reading of Yamī is perhaps available in the *Rigveda* itself, or that it was imputed to a part of the *Rigveda* by some of its redactors (by the authors of the indices that assign authorship to the hymns). This will underscore that it is not so easy to walk away from the hymn as a praise of Yama’s restraint. One possible piece of evidence for a discomfort with Yama’s fickleness in X.10 might be registered in X.13, where we hear that Yama “chose” to lose his divine status and to produce offspring. There, Yamī and her persuasion (and her sexuality) have been conveniently “elided” from the picture.<sup>78</sup> To restore Yama his agency implies forgetting that it was his sister that worked to win him over so that he would perform his ordained duty.

To this we might add the irony of X.154, a hymn attributed to Yamī herself. This hymn to a dead person, inviting him to join the illustrious forefathers in the realm of the dead, ends with

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<sup>78</sup> Jamison and Brereton 2014, 1389

two verses addressed directly to Yama. If we agree to take Yamī as the speaker, we can see that the agents that attributed the hymn to her may have seen in this portion of the *Rigveda* a sly rehashing of the debate, transposed into another context entirely. In other terms, a reading of X.10’s structure of feeling that is available only “at the very edge of semantic availability” and a product of reception—but one that in any case identifies a possible reading of this otherwise anonymously voice hymn.

*yé cit pūrva ṛtasāpa  
 ṛtāvāna ṛtāvṛdhaḥ |  
 pitṛñ tāpasvato yama  
 tāmś cid evāpi gachatāt ||  
 sahasraṇīthāḥ kavāyo  
 yé gopāyānti sūryam |  
 ṛṣīn tāpasvato yama  
 tapojām āpi gachatāt || (X.154.4-5)*

Also those ancients who were servers of truth, truthful, strong through truth,  
 the forefathers full of fervor, o Yama—right to them let him go now.  
 The poets of a thousand devices who protect the sun,  
 the seers full of fervor, o Yama—to those born of fervor let him go now.

The attribution pushes Yamī to indirectly praise her brother’s role, initially muting any discontent with his reticence. But then she points to the dead as the keepers of truth—including, perhaps, her truth, embroiled in the work of the poets who protect “the sun” (who, given the funerary context, can be identified with Yama himself.<sup>79</sup> Although this reading would require developing a more capacious poetics than I can offer in this chapter, I would venture to say that it is important that these verses—in a seemingly unrelated hymn only later attributed to the impossible authorship of Yamī—can provoke reflection on the power structures between poets and the worlds that they create through their ideological representations.

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<sup>79</sup> The identification of the sun with Yama is a common one, because his father is understood to be a solar figure (as discussed in the etymologization of his name given above) and due to the view that the sun looks over the realm of mortals like Yama does as lord of the dead.

My objective in this section was to clarify that Yamī (in her debate with Yama) establishes the grounds for the cosmic order (and the instauration of mankind within it), developing a notion of tradition that can reinforce several axes of ideological thought, including those related to patterns of heteronormative relationships and time. At the same time, her “tradition” is also of an etymological kind (a betrayal): her intervention into Yama’s shame exposes the artificiality of the principles that undergird the order that she and her brother must labor to produce. Yamī’s lability therefore throws *ṛta* into the spotlight as a fundamentally ideological component of social reality—closer to the later concept of *dharma*. While she haunts the tradition in this way, she can be appreciated reparatively in contrast to Yama’s masculine dissent, predicated on a literally unproductive form of dissent.

It remains an open possibility that Yama’s refusal, and his disavowal of the cosmos as given, can also be read reparatively as a critique of the gods’ order. But it is the poetics of unease in Yamī’s discourse that allows for that possibility too. As if she were acknowledging the inevitability of an ideological world (and without explicitly trying to defend it except insofar as she recognizes its inevitable existence) she offers Yama, and the audience, a model for filling the world with affective pleasures that can make up for the discontents and disappointments of *ṛta*’s ultimate inability to provide solid justifications for why world is as it is.

It is this affectively driven Yamī, trained on grievances and partial palliatives, that we saw re-emerge across the tradition as the mourning lover. A simpler, although extremely important kind of disappointment with the world—Yamī’s mourning is haunted by this much more complex background. One of the more surprising aspects of Leonard’s poem—the Yamī that “left her cot, / And played with flowers on the mead in mirth”—shows us how Yamī can still

be recovered in her older aspect, as a figure that offers us a way out of a certain depressive conceptualization of reality precisely by forging human forms of affectivity, material connections that uncomfortably clarify the manner in which idealized social realities come into being. That the tradition has held onto an image of her as widow emphasizes only a portion of this dynamic, but one that can lead us back to its tense articulation within the *Rigveda* itself.

### 3. The Ṛbhus and their Labors

In my reading of X.10, I explored the poetics of unease within a very limited portion of the *Rigveda*. The focus of X.10 on a mythological episode of inestimable importance invited a relatively traditional form of close reading, which I developed through a philology of affect not dissimilar to that employed in previous chapters. In this second and final section of the chapter, I instead adapt a philology of affect to a mode reading that is more usual in the study of Vedic texts: one in which it is necessary to range across hymns to develop a coherent picture of a mythological narrative. The Ṛbhus prove a useful parallel in their mythological outline to Yama and Yamī, and similarly face a complex (but much smaller) reception in the later tradition. Like Yama and Yamī, the story of the Ṛbhus is explicitly one on the border of *ṛta* and the boundary between mortal and immortal. We will see that they are complexly bound into the same genealogical lineage—particularly in their relation to Tvaṣṭṛ. The three Ṛbhus, usually and significantly conceived as a unified trinity of interchangeable individuals, are born mortal and

become immortal by petitioning the gods on the basis of their wondrous labors—deeds that improved the world of the gods and served to establish the ritual basis of the human world.<sup>80</sup>

The myth of the Ṛbhus provides an implicit theory of the value of human life through the value of human labor. As proto-typical laborers, the Ṛbhus can be seen as establishing the traditional and ideological principle of man’s servile (but beneficial) relation to the gods, for whom men labor through sacrifice. But, as I will argue in this section, this implicit theory of labor—and the tradition it seemingly supports—is haunted by an unease surrounding labor’s world-building power, which the Ṛbhus unambiguously arrogate for themselves as mortals. I will show that the *Rigveda* deploys a poetics of unease that invites its audiences into this fundamental antinomy, one that develops structures of feeling so intense that it is even possible to provide some preliminary and speculative conclusions that account for why the Ṛbhus appear to occupy a quantitatively minor position in the *Rigveda*, disproportionate to their seeming importance, before the later literary tradition transforms them by way of imperfectly forgetting their haunting role in the *Rigveda*.

The Ṛbhus are mortal artisans that attain divine status through their wondrous labors. Their name literally means “the laborers,” and the word *ṛbhu* literally means “craftsman, artisan,” (possibly deriving from the Sanskrit verbal root *rabh*, but a cognate of the reflex of the same PIE root that can be seen clearly in the \*arb- of Gothic *arb-aiþs* and German *Arbeit*). Its scientific etymology may have been partly obscure to Rigvedic authors and audiences, who instead emphasized the presence of the vocalic *r* in their name as a clear sign of the connection between craftsmanship

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<sup>80</sup> Kramrisch sees the Ṛbhus as an extension of the “doubling” force of the twins into the realm of the “three,” explaining this proliferation as the articulation of the role of the artist and creator in the *Rigveda*, beginning with Tvaṣṭṛ as one figure who represents an originary “oneness.” Kramrisch 1962.

and notions of *ṛta* (for instance, at III.5.6).<sup>81</sup> Yāska gives the following series of richly textured folk etymologizations that play on this theme: *uru* “wide” added to the verbal root *bhā* “to shine” giving us “the ones who shine brightly,” or, *ṛta* and the same verbal root, giving us “the ones that shine with the sacred truth/order,” or, the same noun *ṛta* but the verbal root *bhū* “to be, exist, become,” giving us “the ones who lived in accordance with divine truth/order.”<sup>82</sup> As we saw above, it is hard to imagine a more affectively loaded term in the Sanskrit language than *ṛta*. To this important coefficient of affectivity surrounding these figures it is worth adding the leitmotif-like presence of several verbal roots and their nominal forms pertaining to labor that surface again and again when they are mentioned, including *takṣ-* [“make, fashion”], *śam-* [“toil, labor”], *svi-* [“work, sweat”], and *śram-* [“work hard, become weary”]. Each of these carries its own set of further connotations in a greater semantic and mythological landscape, and I will address them as necessary below. But I want to underscore that the Ṛbhus are embedded in a poetic vocabulary that follows them in ways that also affects their placement across hymns as characters that haunt the characterization of several crucial conceptualizations of how labor operates within the cosmic order.

There are about a dozen hymns that are addressed to the Ṛbhus (alone or paired with other divinities) and they are represented across the rest of the *Rigveda* with relatively low but regular frequency in hymns not dedicated to them.<sup>83</sup> Reading such hymns, it is possible to come away with a basic outline of their mythological trajectory. They are born mortals. They perform five major deeds. They transform the one soma cup of Tvaṣṭṛ into four cups. They fashion an

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<sup>81</sup> A possible exception is in VIII.93, but I think there we have a play on “craftsman” and “that which belongs to a craftsman.” A brief summary of the etymological speculations surrounding this term can be found in Chakravarty 1990, 140.

<sup>82</sup> See *Nirukta* 11.14-15.

<sup>83</sup> Brereton 2012, 112. The usual listing is as follows: I.20, I.110-11, I.160, III.60, IV.33-37 (their “cycle”), VII.48.

impressive chariot for the *Aśvins*. They bring into being the horses of Indra. They resurrect a cow (and perhaps re-sacrifice it). Finally, they restore their aging parents to youth. Other miscellaneous deeds include the fashioning of gods' armor and weapons, as well as performing or participating in sacrifices.<sup>84</sup>

Brereton has argued at length, in one of the very few studies of the *Ṛbhus* in the last decades, all of these deeds can be seen as symbolically related to the ritual structures of the Third Pressing of Soma, or connected to other aspects of the mythological background of Vedic religion.<sup>85</sup> For instance, the mysterious sacrifice and resurrection of the cow is read as an allegory of the processes of pressing and re-pressing soma stalks at different daily rituals, bathing them in water in order to extract further juice from them.<sup>86</sup> Hence, a verse that described how the *Ṛbhus* bring a “lame cow to water” (I.161.10) is to be understood as describing how a priest may pour water on the stalks—and when one of the *Ṛbhus* “bore away [the cow’s] dung” (in the same verse) we are to understand that the priest is carrying away the byproducts of the ritual process (presumably the pressed stalks from which no further juice can be extracted, or ashes of the fire, etc.). This cogent allegorizing of the *Ṛbhus*' labors into ritual actions is convincingly systematic. But from a different perspective, it also limits the affective wonder coded into the very labors themselves, which are evidently impressive precisely because they cannot literally be replicated in the real world—they are the stuff of myth and legend.

One way to recover the uneasy sense of wonder is to emphasize that the *Ṛbhus*' trajectory to immortality was explicitly agonistic. In a sentence, they petition the gods for immortality

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<sup>84</sup> An exhaustive cataloguing of line references for all of these is given in Brereton 2012.

<sup>85</sup> I cite this and a few other papers that exist throughout this section. There are also two very dated and partial surveys of the *Ṛbhus* that I do not cite, but that have nonetheless been useful guides: Ryder 1901 and Nève 1847. As a rule, standard reference works on Vedic mythology that discuss the *Ṛbhus* in general terms are not cited. However, I engage with Bergaigne's summation of Vedic mythology (1878-83) in greater detail below, and it is worth mentioning that it is a work that has often spurred new interest in the *Ṛbhus* thanks to its rich detail.

<sup>86</sup> Brereton 2012, 125-8

because they know they are able artisans, but are asked to prove themselves. The five labors above are presented as a performance that will impress even the gods, and it does. Accordingly, they are afforded immortality. But not all the gods approve.

I.161 provides us with the clearest example of the unease coded into the narration of the Ṛbhus’s labor. In its first verse we hear the Ṛbhus strike a defensive tone about their multiplication of the soma cup into four cups.

*ná nindima camasám yó mahākuló  
'gne bhrātar drúṇa íd bhūtím ūdima || (I.161.1cd)*

We have not insulted the cup with its great hollow. Brother Agni, we have spoken only of the excellence of the wooden (vessel).

Agni reassures them, explaining that the gods want them to make it into four cups. When they do so they will be allowed to become immortal. However, a few verses later, Tvaṣṭṛ is revealed to be the source of the tension.

*yadāvākhyac camasāñ catúraḥ kṛtān (I.161.4c)  
[...]  
hánāmainām̐ íti tváṣṭā yád ábravīc  
camasám yé devapānam ánindiṣuḥ | (I.161.5ab)*

When he caught sight of the four cups that were made,

...

When Tvaṣṭar said, “We shall smash those [=the Ṛbhus] who have insulted the cup that gives drink to the gods”

Tvaṣṭṛ’s rage has been accounted for in various ways, since the source of his discontent is not made explicit in the *Rigveda*.<sup>87</sup> That he would resort to physically disciplining the Ṛbhus shows us a side of Tvaṣṭṛ not described elsewhere. The subjunctive *hánāma* might even best be translated “let us kill,” showing that Tvaṣṭṛ’s reaction is diametrically opposed to that of the

<sup>87</sup> Brereton neutralizes the tension off by reading this passage as an etiology of the *pātnīvatagraha* rite, see Brereton 2012, 120. The ritualistic reading is not unavailable to Vedic audiences, in my view, but the affective sharpness of the passage requires further scrutiny.

other gods, who praise the Ṛbhus and are pleased to make them immortal. Whatever the specific source of his anger, Tvaṣṭṛ sees them as an existential threat to his own status of the divine fashioner or artisan (his name, as “the creator, begetter, etc.” is ultimately derived from PIE \*twerk- “to carve, cut off, trim”).

Roberto Calasso accounts for Tvaṣṭṛ’s anger by pointing out that the unease may stem from the reproduction of the same cup into four.

So long as the unique exists, the simulacrum is its prisoner within. But no sooner are the cups multiplied than an unstoppable cataract of simulacra rains down from the sky. The world has lived off them ever since—all this was hardly likely to please the gods; for if the copy cancels out the unique, then in the wake of the copy comes death.<sup>88</sup>

On this view, Tvaṣṭṛ is the only god that has recognized the Ṛbhus’ labor (and its success) as an infraction of the fundamental hierarchical order of the cosmos, an implicit class distinction between gods and immortal, the latter understood to be the only ones who have the right to bring things into (and out of) being. To admit the Ṛbhus to the gods on the basis of their labor would therefore expose the ideological artifice maintained by that hierarchy—if they can reproduce that which the gods have created, including the cosmic order, there would be no need for the gods. Karl Friedrich Geldner has even proposed that we read Tvaṣṭṛ as furious because the four cups don’t merely dilute the value of the unique cup, they are also a source of shame for Tvaṣṭṛ because the Ṛbhus have improved on the design of his cup.<sup>89</sup> On these readings, Tvaṣṭṛ rejects the Ṛbhus’ claim in the first verse of the hymn that their imitative activity amounts to a form of praise.

There are reasons to think that the Ṛbhus’ argument that they are praising the work of the gods is a haunting ideological claim of its own. In a passage of scholarship that has since been

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<sup>88</sup> Calasso 2002, 77.

<sup>89</sup> Geldner 1951, cited in Brereton 2012, 119-20

seemingly forgotten, although the work in which it is found is cited often, Abel Bergaigne understatedly pointed to a quite incredible claim that is forwarded in subtle ways across the *Rigveda*: the Ṛbhus, in their *hardiesse singulière* [“unique boldness”], fashion the gods themselves.<sup>90</sup>

The central evidence for this claim is that the Ṛbhus explicitly fashioned the Aśvins (supposedly the sons of Vivasvant and one or other version of Saranyū, as discussed above).

*yé aśvínā yé pitárā yá ūtī*  
*dhenúṃ tatakṣúr ṛbhávo yé ásvā |*  
*yé áṃsatrā yá ṛdhag ródasī yé*  
*víbhvo nárah svapatyāni cakrúḥ || (IV.34.9)*

The passage bears literal translation for clarity—especially in terms of clarifying that the Ṛbhus are the subject of the verb *tatakṣúr* [“they fashioned”] and that the preceding nouns in the first half verse are the direct objects of the verb.

The Ṛbhus (are the ones) who fashioned the Aśvins; the parents/ancestors; the cow, through (their) refreshment/help; the horses.  
 The Vibhūs [=Ṛbhus] (are the ones) who made the epaulette-armor; the separated heaven-and-earth; good human descendants.

Here, the traditional list of the Ṛbhus’ wondrous deeds is extended to include that they “fashioned” a pair of deities that temporally precede them (in the mythological narratives) and outrank them. Further, they are said to have “made” the separation of heaven and earth itself, and to have “made” good human descendants (ones who will perform propitious sacrifices, presumably). Bergaigne also refers his readers to other instances in which the Ṛbhus can be seen as god-making: making the Maruts (in the guise of Agni) and even Indra.<sup>91</sup>

<sup>90</sup> Bergaigne 1883, II 410

<sup>91</sup> For the Maruts, see VI.3.8. For Indra, see VIII.77.8 (not VIII.66.8, a typo in Bergaigne’s edition), and III.49.1. The latter references are best understood through Bergaigne’s elucidation of the relevant compound epithets, see Bergaigne 1883, II 410.

This characterization of the Ṛbhus as god-makers and cosmos-makers activates a profound unease—evident in Tvaṣṭr’s virulent reaction, but that also has haunting implications for reciters and audience members (and, as we will see, also for later readers).

The Ṛbhus, recognized as “divine artisans” carry an important metapoetic characterization.<sup>92</sup> The labor of the Ṛbhus is consistently compared to the labor performed by priests and poets who fashion sacrifices and hymns for the gods. For instance, the opening verse of hymn III.60 sets up a brief mythological survey of some elements of the Ṛbhus’ career listed above, keying it to the notion of Rigvedic poets as belonging to families like priests and poets.

*ihéha vo mánasā bandhútā nara  
uśíjo jagmur abhí táni védasā |  
yābhir māyābhiḥ prátijūtivarpasah  
saúdhanvanā yajñīyam bhāgám ānaśá || (III.60.1)*

In one place and another, by their thought and family relationship, by their knowledge, o men, the fire-priests have arrived at these things: the craft by which, o sons of Sudhanvan, you have attained a sacrificial share, rapidly adopting a (different) form.

In passages like these, as well as in many other shorter ones where ritual labor is compared to the work of the Ṛbhus, their transition from mortal to divine status comes to represent sacerdotal ambitions to either transcend their own mortality or otherwise share in the bounties of the gods like the Ṛbhus were able to do when they attained immortality. We even see the Ṛbhus described in the scholarship as (historical) priests who became immortal through their excellent deeds, no doubt thanks to lines like the following (also taken from the hymn quoted above).<sup>93</sup>

*saudhanvanāso amṛtatvám érire  
viṣṭvī śámībhiḥ sukṛ́taḥ sukṛtyáyā || (III.60.3cd)*

The sons of Sudhanvan rose to immortality by applying themselves to their labors, ritually acting well by good ritual action.

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<sup>92</sup> Brereton 2012, 115

<sup>93</sup> See Pradhan 1930, 62-3.

Further, the Ṛbhus do not merely offer a metapoetic paradigm for priestly activity and labor—they also offer a similar paradigm for poets and poetic labor.<sup>94</sup> This is because they invented poetry itself.<sup>95</sup> In 10.80.7a, for instance, we see them at work composing hymns: *agnáye bráhma ṛbhávas tatakṣur* [“the Ṛbhus fashioned a sacred utterance for Agni”].<sup>96</sup> As such the Ṛbhus also represent the ambition of poets and composers of hymns to attain figurative or literal forms of immortality through their labor.

The haunting implication is then that the *Rigveda* comes eerily close to an admission that the gods are invented by humans, and not vice versa. If the Ṛbhus represent priests and poets, and if the Ṛbhus can be said to have invented the gods (or even modified the divine order that it was presumed to be the unique province of the highest gods to alter), then the Ṛbhus can be seen as figures that reveal the ability of priests to invent and alter the very cosmos that they are in principle supposed to perpetuate and secure through sacrificial and hymnic labor. This ideological confession of sorts slips out from the *Rigveda* as a kind of radical surprise. One way of reading Tvaṣṭṛ’s reaction is therefore as a kind of shocked text-internal acknowledgment about how dangerous these figures are for the stability of the mythological hierarchy itself. Tvaṣṭṛ’s shame—if we follow Geldner in recognizing it as such—could be said to pattern neatly onto Yama’s own shame (and his refusal), as part a recognition that the creation of mankind is understood to be the foundational ideological event: to not be able to establish that the gods came first implies also an inability to justify the class-basis of societal organization, which, for instance, sees priests and poets as higher up in the hierarchy than banausic laborers. That an

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<sup>94</sup> Thompson has even argued that the Ṛbhus come to behave as a form of *satyakriyā* [literally, “act of authority”] for seers who want to establish the authority of the hymns—they (and their stories) are used to denote constative truth utterances. Thompson 1997a, 142. See also Thompson 1998.

<sup>95</sup> This is the primary topic of Calasso 2002.

<sup>96</sup> For an interesting discussion of this passage, see Minkowski 1989.

audience can be reminded of the artificiality of this claim show the incredible vulnerability and risk implicit in the tradition's lability.

Naturally, the *Rigveda* is not a document that argues overall that the gods are invented by humans. But if we were to articulate a fuller Rigvedic theory of labor we would begin to see that labor is consistently asserted as a skill done not in the service of men, but in the service of gods (at sacrifice, preparing ritual, preparing hymns, etc.). Indeed, the vast majority of the *Rigveda* might be described as a liturgical catalogue of discrete ritual actions that carefully codify the works of mankind for the gods, in a consistent hierarchization of priorities.<sup>97</sup> Since there is not the space here to present a full account of Rigvedic labor—nor can we expect a properly unified implicit theory given the multiple authors and generations of composers that worked to produce it—this baseline is offered as a speculative premise.<sup>98</sup> But the point that labor is conceived of in labile terms can be made in a more limited context by observing the way in which a literal residue is applied to the Ṛbhus (and other laborers, whether religious or otherwise, that straddle the mortal-immortal divide in peculiar ways)—the residue of “effort,” and its visual and olfactory corollaries of sweat and smell, which then conditions how the Ṛbhus are treated in the later tradition.

The Vedic poetics of labor characterizes effort in both positive and negative terms—often overdetermining their descriptions to emphasize the concerted nature of the activity, the “effort” at stake in a particular description. I listed above a series of key terms that cluster around the activity of the Ṛbhus but that also recur in other contexts in which the effort of labor is

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<sup>97</sup> Brereton and Jamison 2020, 43

<sup>98</sup> Much of what follows below is based on a broader study of Vedic labor that I will return to in the future. No such study exists upon which to base my arguments, so my provisional observations on relative frequency of the use of certain terms and broader trends in the characterization of labor are given by way of an example, in any case serving the more focused argument of this section: to show that the Ṛbhus' labor, in its conceptualization in a large part of the *Rigveda* serves to push back against the surprising, haunting feature of its ability to overturn the ideological paradigm of the cosmic hierarchy.

described. The fundamental word is *takṣ-* [“make, fashion”], which is then qualified (or replaced) by words like *śam-* [“toil, labor”], *svid-* [“work, sweat”], and *śram-* [“work hard, become weary”]. Through these verbs, effort can come to be seen as a mark of worthiness at the same time that it can be looked down upon with a certain distaste.

Some gods are said to work hard in a positive manner, for instance to punish certain people or to perform incredible deeds (e.g., Rudra at VII.46.4, Indra at VII.104). Further, it happens to be the case that in some instances in which Indra even sweats he is explicitly connected to the Ṛbhus through his “master of the Ṛbhus” (e.g., IV.17.18). The Maruts, themselves sometimes described as mortals who became gods, can help us illustrate the poetic overdetermination of labor that leads to sweat and exhaustion—not characteristic, for instance, of the labors of Tvaṣṭṛ (e.g., at I.61.6 or I.85.9, fashioning Indra’s mace, to which I return in a moment).

*śaśamānāsya vā naraḥ  
svédasya satyaśavasah |  
vidā ... || (RV.I.86.8)*

You superior men whose strength is real, you know the sweat of the one  
laboring to exhaustion.

Similar participial uses of *śam-* reoccur in the *Rigveda* to describe the exhausting work, for instance, of sacrificers (e.g., twice, in IV.2). But it is striking that this is the language used to the *kāravah* [“bards”] of X.92.7 (who could be identified with the Ṛbhus themselves, since elsewhere they are said to have fashioned Indra’s mace and to have labored to attain his benevolence). While Indra and Tvaṣṭṛ are at different times said to fashion that mace, it is only the *kāravah* (whether or not we see them as Ṛbhus) that “labor to exhaustion” in producing that

same object.<sup>99</sup> A clear enough distinction is made, both between classes of sweaty people by the fact that the same task generally makes some people sweat, but others not. The sweaty laborer is more easily forgotten in the alienation of their labor product (such a wondrous mace) if constituted as in some ways more lowly or less deserving than the eventual owner of that object (Indra).

The relationship between the gods and effort-intensive labor (through the word *śram-*) is explored with particular lability at the end of one of the Ṛbhu hymns (IV.33). There we find the following half-verse, which admits to two possible and opposing translations.

*ná ṛté śrāntāsya sakhyāya devāḥ* | (IV.33.11b)

Jamison and Brereton argue for recognizing a “pun,” since there are two possible interpretations of the form *ṛte*, which can be parsed as the locative singular of *ṛta* but also as a word derived from the noun but meaning “except.” Since the latter normally governs an ablative or accusative of that which is excluded, but here we have a genitive *śrāntāsya*, they supply an implicit ablative *sakhyāt* [“companionship”] to complete the sense.<sup>100</sup> This would give us the meaning, taking *ṛte* as “except,” that “the gods are not in partnership (with men), except (in partnership) with him who has labored.” This would seem to accord well with the passages cited above, in which labor is controlled through its subordination to the task of pleasing the gods. It is conceivable that some audience members or readers could take this verse in this way, supplying the necessary ablative or ignoring the grammatical irregularity, since the form *ṛte* is indeed used in both senses in the RV. But if we take *ṛte* as a locative, we do not merely end up with a different meaning—we get a troublingly opposite meaning: “the gods are not in partnership with him who has

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<sup>99</sup> A curious parallel is presented in X.64.10, although it is unclear how to identify the laborer there (in a verse that mentions Tvaṣṭṛ and the Ṛbhus, incidentally) that ends with *raṇvaḥ śamsaḥ śaśamānasya pātu naḥ* [“let the delightful laud of the one who labors protect us”]. Perhaps it is the poet himself?

<sup>100</sup> Jamison and Brereton 2014, 611

labored in truth.” The poetics of unease surrounding labor, and the specific threat of the Ṛbhus to the order of the gods, here seems to resurface. The emphasis placed on the participle of *śram-* by the wordplay elevates labor as the definitional aspect of *ṛta* itself. Indeed, *ṛta* is most often given in oblique cases in the *Rigveda*, receiving specific connotations based on the noun(s) on which it depends.<sup>101</sup> The use of *sakhya* should also not be understated, since, as discussed with reference to Yama and Yamī above, the “partnership” described here carries important normative overtones for understanding early notions of incorporation of different members of a community into something akin to a body politic. Thus, the determination of the punning verse’s meaning throws an audience member of reciter into an ideologically fraught space.

A further argument, relying more on comparative philology, can be made to show how the word *śam-* is used to characterize the Ṛbhus in this ambivalent light. Superficially, *śam-* can be seen as valorizing the Ṛbhus’ labors in several verses. For instance, in III.60.3d (discussed already above) the half-verse *viṣṭvī śāmībhiḥ sukṛtaḥ sukṛtyāyā* is technically composed out of four words that all essentially refer to labor and modify each other. The most obscure term, *viṣṭvī*, is likely an absolutive form meaning “having performed ritual labor” (*vel sim.*). The instrumental *śāmībhiḥ* (from *śam-*) underscores effort. Taken together, these instrumentals in the first part of the half-verse can be translated as “through toiling at their labors.” The phrase that completes the half-verse, *sukṛtaḥ sukṛtyāyā*, employs two forms of *su-kṛ-*, the latter element *kṛ-* often referred to as the “dummy” verb of Sanskrit, given its broad semantics of “make, do, act,” is in both words preceded by a prefix meaning “good.” By ending on a note of “doing well the good thing to do,” the verse expends itself in a semantic revelry around their deeds, giving it as broad a possible set of significances.

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<sup>101</sup> Sandness 2007, 62

But in all of this the specific force of the *śámī* should not be understated. As I mentioned in chapter one, discussing the cognate Greek *κόμνω* and Hephaestus' making of the scepter, over-determined phrases describing labor can carry unexpected connotations. They emphasize the physical and notional strain of such labors as embodied activities—precisely the kind of activity in which effort is apparent through its physical consequences (tiredness, sweat, smell, pain, etc.). Jamison has made an analogous argument about the relation between ritual and labor and sweat as part of what she terms the Indo-Iranian ritual vocabulary, commenting on the parallelism between Vedic *svid-* and its Avestan cognate *xšuuīd-*. She underscores the importance of the physical in the gestures of ritual (and, by extension, hymnic composition and performance) that are more usually thought of in their metaphysical connotations.<sup>102</sup> She sees the root *śam-* as “specialized in Vedic for ‘perform ritual labor’,” but she does not engage directly with the Ṛbhu hymns where this notion is complicated by a series of further affective connotations.<sup>103</sup> Certainly, the Ṛbhū are often described as working hard at their specifically ritual actions (as we just saw). But the parallelism between the root *śam-* and the discussion of Hephaestus as a deity who suffers as he works and also sweats, and is therefore perceived as somehow inferior in his status as a deity, may productively expand our understanding of *śam-* in the context of discussing the Ṛbhū.<sup>104</sup> We saw above that the Ṛbhū, also divine artisans like Hephaestus, were looked down upon and seen as potentially threatening. Indeed, the Greek context supports this lability, since some scholars have read into Hephaestus compromised status a fear at the seemingly magical or in any case world-upsetting powers of the artisan or smith. Hephaestus “preserves among an aristocratic society [of the gods] the *physiognomy* of a cunning

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<sup>102</sup> Jamison 2011

<sup>103</sup> Jamison 2011, 21

<sup>104</sup> On Hephaestus, see my discussion in chapter one, based on the discussion in Bremmer 2010.

blacksmith whose professional skills are highly admired and secretly feared.”<sup>105</sup> The emphasis on the physical—the fact that Hephaestus suffers and sweats—provides a buffer: “by undercutting the dignity of Hephaistos in a variety of ways, those early aristocratic Greeks also stressed the marginal position of the smiths on whom they were depending.”<sup>106</sup>

If we accept the comparison even as merely an explanatory hypothesis that alerts us to affective overtones in the use of *śam-* (i.e., as a parallelism without suggesting that we can reconstruct a PIE notion of how certain forms of labor were perceived), we will see that the fate of the Ṛbhus in the later Sanskrit texts can more properly be understood as a transformation of the structures of feeling in the *Rigveda*. The emphasis there on the physical corollaries of intense labor (sweat and smell in particular) can then, in turn, help support this parallelism and lead us to a clearer picture of the manner in which labor, through its fundamentally human potential for creation, is seen as posing a challenge to the overarching divine values of Vedic mythology.

After the *Rigveda*, the Ṛbhus first reappear in a few early exegetical treatises. The emphasis is on their training and their attainment of immortality. In a first instance, represented by the *Bṛhaddevatā* (a work that expands on the background of Vedic deities), the tension between the Ṛbhus and Tvaṣṭṛ appears to be entirely forgotten. We learn there that the Ṛbhus were Tvaṣṭṛ’s pupils—they learned their skills in conversations with him and through him, then they were challenged by the other gods to perform the wondrous deeds, including the multiplication of the cups, which led to their divinization (III.83-88).<sup>107</sup> This version of the myth specifies that both Tvaṣṭṛ and Savitṛ (and Prajāpati summons all the gods as well) chose to confer immortality to the Ṛbhus. This second mentorship—itsself rather mysterious—is present in

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<sup>105</sup> Graf 2005, cited after Bremmer 2010, 208 (my emphasis)

<sup>106</sup> Bremmer 2010, 208

<sup>107</sup> More hymns, outside of the Rbhu hymns, that link Ṛbhus favorably to Tvaṣṭṛ: IX.64, IX.65, X.92. No others suggest unfavorable connections.

RV.I.111, but even there we find no tension between the gods relating to the Ṛbhus.<sup>108</sup> Thus the *Brhaddevatā*, which often intricately recalls miniscule mythological details, seems to have suppressed both the *Rigveda*'s and Tvaṣṭṛ's discomfort with the Ṛbhus in favor of the more neutral narratives available in the *Rigveda*.

The *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* offers a contrasting picture, presented as part of an exegetical explanation of the ritual context for a Ṛbhu hymn. Here many more gods seem inimical to the Ṛbhus. After the Ṛbhus attain immortality, they try to participate in the morning offering of Soma and are turned away by Agni with the Vasus. Next, they try to participate in the midday offering but are rejected by Indra with the Rudras. When it came to the third, evening pressing—at which the *Rigveda* appears to place the Ṛbhus, the plot thickens (given the etiological purposes of the passage). Initially, the Ṛbhus are rejected by all the gods (to whom the third offering is reserved), until Prajāpati points out to Savitr that they are his pupils, so he should not refuse to drink soma with them. Savitr consents, and also instructs Prajāpati to participate. The ritual takes place. After deliberating on some ritual intercalations into RV.I.111, the *Aitareya Brahmana* offers a rationale for telling their story, explaining the rejection of the Ṛbhus by some of the gods, *obiter dictum*.

*tebhyo vai devā apaivābībhatsanta manuṣyagandhāt* (AB III.30.4)

The gods just abhorred them [=the Ṛbhus] because of their human smell. That the gods who “just abhorred” the Ṛbhus in the *Aitareya Brahmana* do not explicitly include the one god, Tvaṣṭṛ, that is scandalized by them in the *Rigveda* shows us that the fact of their exclusion was later taken to be more central than the specific cast of characters. Similarly, Indra rejects the Ṛbhus in the passage, but in the *Rigveda* the affinity between the Ṛbhus and Indra is

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<sup>108</sup> For an investigation of the relation of Tvaṣṭṛ and Savitr (and a summary of the material surrounding the Ṛbhus not unlike that presented here) see van den Bosch 1984.

never contradicted—a verse even tells us how he himself identified the Ṛbhus as “gods” (III.54.17). The reception of the Ṛbhus in the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* thereby shows how their more negative portrait in the *Rigveda* can continue to haunt the tradition even as the narrative details are seemingly jumbled in a contradictory fashion. The base instinct of social differentiation, the ideological core of hierarchically imposed difference, survives even the reprioritization of the gods themselves in a different narrative context where, evidently, Tvaṣṭṛ didn’t even seem worth mentioning.

After this period of Sanskrit literary history, it seems that the Ṛbhus were forgotten or at least radically reinvented—charting a clean break. A character called Ṛbhu, who is an ascetic sage, surfaces in the later Hindu tradition of the Ṛbhu as relatively prominent figure who dispenses all sorts of wisdom, but bears no resemblance to the laboring Ṛbhus or the immortal Ṛbhus at the third pressing, let alone to any of the more contentious aspects of the Ṛbhus in the *Rigveda*.<sup>109</sup> The haunting seems to have come to an end with the decline of the Vedic period broadly writ.

But there’s always the reboot, or “fifth Veda.” Since it encompasses practically everything, the *Mahābhārata* cannot but be haunted by Ṛbhus, centuries after this apparent break in the tradition. The Ṛbhus play a categorically minor role in the epic, where they are mentioned only a handful of times in total. But their role in one of the stories told in the Vana Parva presents them in a manner that picks up on some of their Vedic characteristics, with a number of twists. There is no talk of attaining immortality—the epic Ṛbhus are unimpeachably high-order gods, perhaps an echo of their status as “god-makers” in parts of the *Rigveda*, and they are

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<sup>109</sup> The main sources are the story of a sage named Ṛbhu in the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* (1.2.14-15) and the Shaivite *Śivarahasya Purāṇa*, the sixth part of which is known as the *ṛbhugītā* [“Ṛbhu Gita”], a sacred dialogue with a sage called Ṛbhu as its primary interlocutor.

accorded a superlative label of no mean significance (that also reappears with their name in a later book of the epic).

*ṛbhavo nāma varadā devānām api devatāḥ* (Mhb 3.247.19.1 = 9.43.32cd)

The propitious Ṛbhus are the gods even of the gods.

This verse (in its first occurrence) is preceded by a description of heaven—more specifically, of *svargasukham* [an abstract compound that can be translated as the “ease, pleasure, happiness of heaven”]. Heaven, high up somewhere, is filled with familiar divinities including, incidentally, Yama, Apsaras, and Gandharvas. It is hard to imagine a more utopic space.

*na kṣutpipāse na glānir na śītoṣṇabhayaṃ tathā ||*  
*bībhatsam aśubhaṃ vāpi rogā vā tatra kecana |*  
*manojñāḥ sarvato gandhāḥ sukhasparśās ca sarvaśaḥ ||*  
[...]  
*na śoko na jarā tatra nāyāsaparidevane ||*  
[...]  
*na ca svedo na daurgandhyaṃ purīṣaṃ mūtram eva ca |*  
[...]  
*īrṣyāśokaklamāpetā mohamātsaryavarjitāḥ |*  
*sukhaṃ svargajitas tatra vartayanti ... ||* (Mhb.3.247.9cd-10, 11ab, 14ab, 16)

There is no hunger or thirst, no exhaustion, no fear of cold or heat.  
It is free of loathing, without shame, there aren't any diseases,  
From all sides come wholly pleasing smells and sensations of touch.

[...]

There is no anguish, no aging, no need of effort or source of complaint.

[...]

There is no sweat, no bad smell, not even excrement or urine,

[...]

They are free from envy, sorrow, and fatigue, and devoid of confusion and jealousy,  
Those who have attained heaven and live happily there ...

Bodies in heaven, if they can be called that, are clean—even sterile. The bodies are free from secretion and excrement because there is no somatic process that can produce them: no eating, no working, and certainly no suffering. In that blissfulness there is also no cause for negative affects such as shame or jealousy. But this is not where the Ṛbhus live.

The passage goes on to locate the Ṛbhus in an even more rarefied realm, where even the gods worship them, as their label “gods of the gods” suggests. They too have divine bodies without corporeal form, and are all the more untouched by all those negative things listed in the passage given above. In a winding explanation, we are told that this highest heaven is attained not by impressive labors, but by the bracketing of all worldly desires and a life of uninterrupted asceticism and contemplation. In this way the *Mahābhārata* does two things. Firstly, it seeks to neutralize the haunting characteristics of the Ṛbhus as figures that earlier embodied the ideological lability in the Vedic conception of labor—it negates all of their attributes, positive (wondrous labor) and negative (smell, the need for effort, the desire for immortality itself). Secondly, it proposes in its stead a state of enlightenment that is a radical negation of the world itself, including both mortal and divine realms—in its own way picking up on the risk posed by the Ṛbhus to the cosmic order of the older gods. Thus, we see that the *Mahābhārata* shows us a transformation within the structure of feeling surrounding the Ṛbhus that also helps explain that earlier break, and the later emergence of Ṛbhu the ascetic. But, most significantly, it effects its own reparative reading of the Ṛbhus, seeing in them neither a source of wonder nor shame, but a suspension of ideology that allows the individual who imitates their asceticism a self-determination so total that it cannot be described except in the superlative terms that he who attains this state is the god of the gods.

Across their long history, the Ṛbhus accrued a very specific set of coefficients of affectivity, tied initially to their status as laborers who attained immortality through the literal sweat of their brow and to the ambivalent reception of their great achievements among the gods. I argued that that Tvaṣṭṛ’s virulent reaction to the Ṛbhus in the *Rigveda* mapped onto a broader problem of ideological lability, which was more broadly coded into the poetics of unease surrounding the

Ṛbhus. In the later period, much as we saw in the reception received by Yamī, the tradition moved in unexpected directions as it repurposed and negotiated the Ṛbhus. Although much less prominently than Yama and Yamī, the Ṛbhus continued to haunt later narratives through unsettling implications related to their role as laborers. The remediations performed by the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* and *Mahābhārata* both show how the risk they pose to the cosmic order survives substantial narrative reformulations. In order to imagine a world in which those tensions are neutralized, the latter proposes no world at all.

At the beginning of this section, I signaled that a reading of the poetics of unease as they it relates to the Ṛbhus would look different to the reading given in the previous section on Yama and Yamī. Moving between verses from many different hymns—although a common practice in Vedic scholarship—does not as easily lend itself to describing a unified series of poetic devices like a close reading of a single hymn does. Individual devices of unease were identified in places, and read closely, but the question remains: how can we conceive of a poetics of unease for the figures as a mythological unit that is fragmentarily presented across so many smaller texts?

However, the Ṛbhus allow us to look at the poetics of unease from a different, more historical angle in order to think about how such a poetics might originate in a dialogic and competitive collection of hymns with so many authors and composed in varying locations and time periods.<sup>110</sup> Brereton turns our attention to forms of scholarly speculation that set the foundations for answering this question when he raises the possibility the slight role played by the Ṛbhus in the *Rigveda* as a whole might be explained in terms of the heterodoxy of ritual practices and mythological understanding between families of priests.

In the same way [that certain myths about Maruts were invented to justify their role in the second pressing (according to Stanley Insler)], the story of the Ṛbhus' cups may have been a myth to establish them as principal recipients at the third pressing. Recall that the

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<sup>110</sup> On the schools of Vedic thought, see Witzel 1997b, 1995, and Gonda 1975 *inter alia*.

Ṛbhus likely did not enjoy rousing popularity among some priestly families, and those who did honor them might well have had to make the mythological case for their inclusion.<sup>111</sup>

I agree that the predominance of hymns that speak about the Ṛbhus in the “family” books of the *Rigveda* here allows for a certain kind historical claim. It is in some ways too simplistic to treat the family books as a unified synchronic bloc, but it is true that all the references to the Ṛbhus as god-makers occur in that generally earlier portion of the *Rigveda*—as does the “punning” verse at the end of IV.33. In contrast, Tvaṣṭṛ’s suggestion that the Ṛbhus be killed for what they did to his cup occurs in a chronologically later book, in hymn I.161.

However, it does seem cogent to propose that different authors would have had very different opinions about the Ṛbhus, and also very different affective commitments to their representation or inclusion in a hymn. The survey of the Ṛbhus presented above shows that at different moments, some priests must have seen the opportunity to elaborate on the mythology of the Ṛbhus as a chance to valorize or otherwise ennoble these figures (and, with them, certain conceptions of labor). In some instances, this valorization took on a nearly absolute form—in the kinds of claims that veer just short of admitting that the gods (or at least their order and hierarchy) is determined by humans (and specifically by mortal priests and sacrifices). I described this above as a “confessional” ideological gesture, but I want to underscore that as part of a poetics of unease it remains an extremely forceful gesture—since it arrogates to the priests who forward such claims a kind of world-forming power that those hymns attribute to the Ṛbhus.

At the same time and perhaps even in some of the same places, other priests saw fit to intervene on the mythology of the Ṛbhus from a different angle, making clear their place within a divine framework that far exceeds them. These claims could take many forms too subtle to

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<sup>111</sup> Brereton 2012, 119 (citing Insler 1995)

discuss in any detail, including the silence of exclusion. The manners in which the Ṛbhus controvert *ṛta* (in addition to their bodily excesses) form sufficient grounds for understanding why certain priests might resist their presence in the pantheon, or at least wished to diminish their prominence.

The agonistic contours of the hymnic tradition, as well as unknowably complex systems of patrons and political affiliations created an ideal setting for these contrasting views to become sharpened, specialized to the point of obscurity, and deeply encoded into the language of the *Rigveda*—if also scattered across its vast expanse. The relevance of figures like the Ṛbhus and the normative weight of topics like labor would naturally have become a site of contestation in such a context, in which societal discontents surrounding things like class mobility, hostility to work, and even class essentialisms must have thickly contributed to the structure of religious discourse. Even the most intentional compositional mind, operating in such a world, would have struggled to produce an un-haunted vision of the Ṛbhus.

The poetics of unease surrounding the Ṛbhus, then, might be understood as a product of these social conditions. There is no strict intentionality that determined its specific form—even an exhaustive cataloging of every mention of the Ṛbhus would fall short of revealing a definite structure of feeling. But through a philology of affect, selective as the previous pages have been, we can elicit small fragments of this ancient debate—whether that residue became perceptible in the *Rigveda* itself, or in some later moment of reception.

#### 4. Bringing the Episodes of Unease Together

The two case studies in this chapter served to raise the question of what T. S. Eliot labeled the “simultaneous order” of tradition.<sup>112</sup> The two groups of characters, the Twins and the Ṛbhus, crossed the threshold between mortality and immortality, moving in opposite directions in mythic fabulae that have a chronological or sequential extension, although there are unfillable gaps between episodes, odd diremptions, disjointed moments of overlap. But these figures also have in common a kind of existence in a pre-formed time, before human time, in which their mortality and immortality strangely coexist—a mythic *in illo tempore* in which their stories have already come to a close before they can be told and experienced. The *Rigveda*’s poetics of unease folds us into that temporality, relying on and subverting our knowledge and expectations as it opens up complex structures of affect surrounding figures like Yama, Yamī, and the Ṛbhus.

This permanent present proposed by the *Rigveda* as an assemblage of hymns that can be relived, as ritual and as text, is the space in which tradition deliberates over its own form and comes to assume harder-cut ideological connotations. But, at moments, the *Rigveda* lets us inhabit the affective landscape of that space before a conceptualized world is offered up as structured. It activates feelings of shame, horror, grief—but also their contraries—associated with the need to originate anything in the first place. Whether in a literal dialogue hymn or in a dialogue between hymns, these affects on “the edge of semantic availability” are not an accident of readerly experience to be neutralized by philologists, but a form of active provocation.

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<sup>112</sup> Eliot 1982 [1919], 37

## CONCLUSION

### Uneasy Subjects

I argued in each chapter that a poetics of unease can be identified and described in three of the oldest literary corpora still extant: the Homeric poems, the Gilgamesh texts, and the Vedas. I did so by adopting a method I termed a philology of affect, using historical records of the affects provoked by the texts as a route into understanding their poetics. While I limited myself to the affect of unease, and organized my readings through a specific attention to the kinds of unease provoked in narratives that represent different kinds of labor, several common threads emerged that suggest this kind of analysis could be extended to different affects and to other corpora and traditions. Further, although I construed labor very broadly in order to explore the different aspects of unease that might emerge from the representation of human work and concomitant forms of suffering, inequality, and alienation, this methodology could be applied to much broader (as well as narrower) themes. In this conclusion, I will sum up some of the major family resemblances and differences between the work that poetic unease does in each corpus, then I will briefly sketch out the main theoretical implications of my work.

As we saw over the course of each chapter, a major source of unease emerges from the contrast between merely-human and more-than-human forms of labor. The representations of the latter strain the symbolic valorization accorded to the former by exposing strategies of alienation and expropriation, as well as the thinness of discourse surrounding the idealized notions of labor's value. In turn, this provokes an unease that disrupts the systems of values more broadly

represented in the poems. The unease complicates the ideological landscape of the work by populating it with a problem of apparent contradiction: if the elite that produce these poems disavow non-elite labor and suffering then the poems are paradoxically creating a space for that same labor to be recognized, and the ideological strategies to become transparent. The manner in which different forms of labor come to be recognized and accorded value therefore structures how a reader or audience member may experience the poem along several axes, offering opportunities for identification on several levels, including forms of identification that may be inimical to the individual in question. By paying attention to sources of unease we become better readers of these underlying poetic tensions and develop a keener sense for their consequences.

By way of summing up this paradigm in the Homeric poems, we can think back to Achilles' choice, since he recognizes that fame is tied to heroic action and early death, and that to return home and live a long uneventful life would mean that his name would be forgotten shortly after his death. The kinds of labor that carry the reward of imperishable fame are not available to all, and require uncommon ability, even if merely in terms of courage. This system of values is seemingly opposed to the mundane existence of an uneventful life. This difference produces very real tensions within and between the two poems, not least because in the *Iliad* Achilles opts for glory, but when Odysseus confronts the spirit of Achilles in the underworld in the *Odyssey*, the hero seems to resent his choice and the social forces that led him to valorize an early death in terms of imperishable fame.

μη δὴ μοι θάνατόν γε παραύδα, φαίδιμ' Ὀδυσσεῦ.  
βουλοίμην κ' ἐπάρουρος ἐὼν θητευέμεν ἄλλω,  
ἀνδρὶ παρ' ἀκλήρω, ᾧ μὴ βίωτος πολὺς εἴη,  
ἢ πᾶσιν νεκύεσσι καταφθιμένοισιν ἀνάσσειν. (11.489-91)

Stop pretending my death is not a big deal, glorious Odysseus,  
I would rather be a land-working laborer, serving another man,

Even of a man who doesn't own much and whose livelihood isn't great,  
Than to rule over all the dead who have perished.

The appeal of an uneventful, simple life emerges as the converse of the heroic fate—along with an unease toward the systems of values on which it rests. While there is a clear difference between the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* in terms of how this tension is articulated, I showed in my first two chapters that there is enough in both poems to challenge this strong contrast, which merely entrenches the heroic ideology by its subtle implications. That is, neither Achilles nor Odysseus, on their return home, would likely have faced the kind of life imagined by Achilles. The rhetorical force of the claim serves to valorize heroic suffering while it in fact disavows the suffering experienced by those who are represented as working for others, even for wealthy others like Odysseus himself. The converse of glory is a kind of idealized life imaginable only to the heroic elite (and in that sense an extension, rather than an inversion, of heroic labor). Further, the other option is presented in the mode of a contrafactual that serves to reveal something new about Achilles' present position—nearly as an afterthought, the *Odyssey* introduces the notion that someone like Achilles might rule over the dead because of his deeds. While a hesitancy about the value of such a station is central to the passage, its mention still serves to reinforce the appeal of the trajectory offered by heroic labor. After all, we are still reading and thinking about Achilles, but the slave woman discussed in the introduction remains nameless (a fate dreaded by the Homeric heroes).

To pay attention to the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*'s poetics of unease means realizing that the opposition constructed around heroic labor and its recompense is a false (or at least fraught) alternative. They are merely two sides of the same coin, a coin that can only be tossed by a certain class of people. One result is a sympathy towards heroic labor suffering as in some way

definitionally more significant than quotidian forms of labor and suffering—it establishes an affective orientation that erodes the significance of quotidian experience. This is a persistent structure of feeling. It commands our affective care toward those who are in a structurally more secure position, at the cost of laboring toward our own interest. Tennyson has his Ulysses announce, “all times I have enjoy’d / Greatly, have suffer’d greatly,” thereby masking the distinction between the suffering and enjoyment of heroes and that of the people who look up to them from structurally weaker positions, inviting them to identify with the perpetuation of a class that effectively oppressed them, “one equal temper of heroic hearts” that will preserve the mission of empire through sacrifices to a higher good. But this discursively enforced equality reminds us of Finley’s critique of epic’s propensity to traffic in the fantasies of the oppressed. Here the importance of Achilles’ aside comes to the fore. The implicit promise of status in the underworld turns attention away from this life, offering up a reward that it is impossible to quantify except in symbolic terms. The praise of quotidian labor, such as it is, is limited to passages which really reflect on the afterlives of heroic men. The *Odyssey* therefore does not show us the plight of the dispossessed but precisely the logics of dispossessions, and it may simply be the case this is our only route into the underlying injustices. My chapters on the Homeric epics sought to get beneath these structures of implicit valorization, the heroic ideologies that mask certain realities that creep into the frame of the poem. I attended both to active critiques in the *Iliad*, as in the Thersites episode, and to passages in which the articulation of an ideological position produces affective disorientations, such as in the genealogy of the scepter. Working through the *Odyssey*, my emphasis on Odysseus’ sailors in the Sirens episode and on the maids in the later parts of the epic served to bring out the thinness of this discourse and how much unease it can provoke.

A similar dynamic emerged in my discussions of Gilgamesh, who even more explicitly struggles to define his own labor and its value and is then afforded the position of lord of the dead by the gods (who refuse to grant him immortality). The comparison to Achilles is I think slighter than critics have argued, but the similarity between heroic ideologies is cogent in these terms.<sup>1</sup> The drama of Gilgamesh's labors, his ambitions, and his disappointments ultimately eclipses the material specificities of some of the labors that are represented in a few passages of the Gilgamesh texts. Gilgamesh's failures establish the grounds for a kind of sympathy toward his mortal side, but we are never quite allowed to forget that he is no mere mortal. Not only a king, but a semi-divine king, the Gilgamesh texts make clear at several reprises (across a thousand or so years) that he is exceptional—and that his labor and his suffering are exceptional. We saw that the mobilization of work forces in the Sumerian "Death of Gilgamesh" and the complex emphasis on the restoration of Uruk in the Standard Babylonian Version continuously reframe human labor in terms of the heroic prerogatives of the king. For this, Gilgamesh even finds a difficult model in Utnapishtim, who was, however, afforded immortality. That gap between the two figures does not ultimately erode the similarities between the kinds of labor each commanded, in which voluntary or coerced communal labor is recoded as the heroic achievement of an individual.

Gilgamesh's striking encounter with the bureaucratic machinery of the divine assembly reveals the stages of ideological inversion through which the texts valorize certain forms of labor and suffering over others, pointing to the king's disappointment and his contingent power in a way that implies an impossible commonality between king and subjects. The continuation of the king's rule in the afterlife served as telos around which some forms of labor were valorized over

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<sup>1</sup> For recent work on the subject, see Clarke 2019, Lopez Ruiz *et al.* 2018, as well as the seminal work in West 1997.

others, and in the service of which certain acts of expropriation and alienation were justified. By making the fate of Uruk synonymous with the fate of Gilgamesh, the epic similarly suggests that collective interests of the king's subjects are coterminous with that of the king. This leads to a world in which all labor is in service of higher ideals, although pockets of dissent are registered in the contradictions that the poets square up to. Thus, the unease provoked by the fragility of the ideology in several passages that represent the sheer and plastic gestures of human labor imperils this overarching set of abstracted, symbolic values. The manner in which the Sumerian tale erases Gilgamesh's tomb, both in terms of its burial under the waters of the Euphrates, and by discursively shifting gears and describing other forms of commemoration, evinces an unease with just how much it has revealed that its symbolisms outrun credibility. The absence of this episode from the SBV is significant, as it indirectly confirms that the monumental burial risked admitting too much, showing too clearly how "docile bodies" are produced and how hegemonies manufacture subjects willing to consent to the erosion of their livelihood—even to the point of being buried alive with their king.

The *Rigveda* operates in different but related terms. Although it is not an epic text, some of its hymns develop comparable mythic narratives that later, if not already back then, were the subject of extended literary treatments in epic, prose, and drama. Given its status as both a literary and liturgical document, its hymns do more than project an imagined reality—they in essence constitute and guarantee the reproduction of the real world itself through the labor of ritual and poetry. The myth of Yama and Yamī occupies a special place in this system precisely because the couple will give birth to the human race, which is definitionally the workforce that can enact the *Rigveda*. The possibility, in X.10, that their union nearly did not take place, therefore carries enormous implications. On the one hand, the text invites us to appreciate that

the union of the twins did in fact take place, against all protestations, since we are here. It asks us to recollect and sympathize with Yama's fruitless struggle to resist the preordained order, but then asks us to forget it (and the reasons for it). But, on the other hand, the texts contain an indelible trace of discomfort with the artificial societal implications of the world that emerges from this union.

The hymns in which the Ṛbhus appear clarify this dynamic: the mortal brothers attain immortality through their labors (that are to an extent a model of sacrificial, ritual, and hymnic activity), but not all the gods are pleased by this. Their humanness lingers in the form of their smell in the *Aitareya Brahmana*, and the visibility of their labor and effort in the *Rigveda* itself produces tensions at level of Vedic conceptions of different forms of labor and its relative values. But in a striking set of passages, the Ṛbhus are even said to have created the gods themselves— inverting the metaphysical order of the cosmos with an uneasy materialist one, in which it is men (or, more specifically, sacrificial priests and seers) that create the gods and the societal structures that propitiate them, and that allow for those technicians of the sacred to live a life free of certain kinds of labor and suffering. Read alongside the myth of Yama, the stories of the Ṛbhus provide a complementary picture of the unease at the artifices of ideologies of an imputed cosmic order. Above and beyond the (slight but suggestive) evidence that these questions caused theological struggles in the very early times of the *Rigveda*'s formation, these questions seem to have resurfaced pointedly across larger periods of Sanskrit literary history: Yama, Yamī, and the Ṛbhus carry a shifting affective charge across history, but one that leads consistently back to the manner in which certain kinds of human activities (from building a family to performing sacred rites) are inscribed in an artificial social order that is consistently retrojected to an *in illo tempore*. At the same time, the crises that engender that inscription can be reperformed as a

present crisis in moments of hymnic performance, making the experience of unease possible time and time again.

This brief summary establishes, beyond the fact that these texts can and often do provoke unease, that to carefully attend to this unease means to resist a reduction, flattening, or neutralization of the ideological tensions in the poems. That is to say that the texts direct our attention to a set of difficulties that are recognizably a matter of ideological difference, partly as a way of shoring other difficulties from systematic scrutiny. This conclusion leads us in turn to the question of why unease is productive in these texts as a kind of affective leverage.

The Homeric poems are, as we saw, works that deliberate over heroic labor and suffering, exploring its articulations in complex ways. Thus, it stands to reason that they would be designed in such a way as to avoid the possibility that an audience would question the basic premise of the validity of the heroic world. Similarly, the Gilgamesh texts rest on the premise that kingship is fundamentally a desirable form of societal organization, in spite of the problems of any one king at any one moment. The *Rigveda*, in turn, confidently asserts that the reciprocal relationship between gods of men satisfactorily organizes social life and social experience, such that that reality needs to be constantly renewed through the work of Brahmins and seers. What my work has shown is that we may want to be open to the possibility that unease accompanies ease as a corollary that protects these basic premises. When a residue is presented in the key of unease, the expectation is that a reader will assume an avoidant or protective stance—falling back on some aspect of the easier ideological tensions, rather than suspend the entire premises on which the social imaginary rests. When the slave labor of the mill-woman is foregrounded, the *Odyssey* at once directs us to circumscribe her activity back into the overarching question of whether Odysseus ought to restore his household. The uneasy notion that the unequal basis of society be

rethought to avow her personhood is presented as a dangerous option and smoothly subtracted from the reader's mind when Odysseus ties up the passage with his interpretation of the omen.

Hence my insistence, throughout my chapters, that a poetics of unease does not straightforwardly lead to what might be termed emancipatory readings. A principal but by no means exclusive function of poetic unease is that it can form a specific kind of subject—one that is compliant and that consents to the importance of certain ideological deliberations over the threat posed by the residue to the very premise of ideological tensions. But poetic unease may form others kinds of subjects, too. For instance, a reader that engages in a concerted inhabiting of unease, an occupation of unease against the movement of the texts that engage with residues only to ultimately leave them behind. To return to Hobbes' metaphor of the man in the carriage, my view is that these texts incorporate furrows that provoke unease, but also that the carriage then keeps on moving and the unease is quickly left behind (although the possibility of bumpy roads ahead lingers). This does not preclude that one may choose to inhabit unease, arresting the motion of the carriage to step out and inspect the furrow.

I showed that some analogous interpretive gestures can be espied in ancient scholarship and creative receptions of these works: Licymnius' discomfort with the genealogy of the scepter, Eustathius' view that the same passage smirks at its audiences, Eustathius' associative move from Agamemnon's singer to Libyan birds to Antigone, the "Death of Gilgamesh" as it disavows its own ideology of commemoration causing ripples in the tradition that can be traced in the Middle Babylonian and Standard Babylonian Versions of the epic, the Yajurveda's interest in Yamī's suffering, the Brāhmaṇas on the R̥bhus' smell. These hermeneutic gestures of arrest, which I explored through my philology of affect, pave the way for "reparative" readings of unease—readings that do not disavow the experience of unease by returning to the whole of the

text, but that activate the reader as an agent in the reading process and in a sense demand a creative struggle through and against the texts' residues.

Thus, an appreciation of unease and its affordances allows us to critique the view that these canonical works have been successful precisely because of their dialogic quality. In my view, it is not so much the invitation to speculate between ideological poles that attracts readers to these texts, but the way in which they safely foreclose more discomforting discussion by mapping out a domain of easy deliberation against one of uneasy deliberation. For all of the apparent difficulty of questions related to the variability within conceptions of heroism, divine kingship, and cosmic order, these questions are simpler when the premises on which they rest are bracketed. The convoluted mythologies make it less possible to identify injustice, to separate it out from the affective appeal of symbolic values of the heroic world. It makes it more difficult to find the affective resources through which to think our way around the seemingly self-evident presence of these larger debates, and to arrive, perhaps more modestly but with principle, at the roots of our unease. If these texts are seen merely as ideological contests, freed of the more complex affective implications of how those contrasts are staged, and of what is left on the side of the stage but still in view, then it is all too easy to conclude that they merely serve to "raise questions" about heroism, immortality, divinity, or even something as vague as the human condition. An attention to unease permits a radical reframing: the texts are establishing the boundaries of the acceptable discourses, developing affective domains of propriety and order, corralling readers into a status as subjects that will ensure their success and those of the powers that be that stand behind their production, dissemination, and preservation across centuries.

Yet, other readings remain possible. Jerome McGann once remarked that “every text has variants of itself screaming to get out, antithetical texts waiting to make themselves known.”<sup>2</sup> The philology of affect presented here embraces this position, but also modifies it in an important direction. To an extent, texts pre-empt this hermeneutic conclusion, they contain (in both sense of the word) these textual others, relying on affective cues to predict and organize the probable work of their readers, although they cannot control them fully. However, while the poems may drive forward in one direction, corralling even resistant readers toward a generalized meaning or a set of reflection on the value of human labor and suffering, the evidence speaks to the possibility of surprising forms of reading that find in these texts the resources that unease offers them, nearly in spite of itself.

To engage in a philology of affect is therefore to consider carefully how texts organize our attention also in order to better understand how disorders can emerge that are not merely a part of the text’s ideological constructs. Thus, a philology of affect empowers us to follow these more improbable invitations, and consequently to work actively alongside the text as it shapes our subjective dispositions as readers. To acknowledge the functioning of a poetics of unease as an imposition of affective limitations on the possible extrapolations that can be made from a text carries a weighty methodological consequence—it demands a more affect-centered philology, aware of how its tools for reading and interpreting have been prefigured by the very objects philology purports to analyze. To what extent do our hermeneutic strategies respond to texts precisely in the terms that they direct us to work within certain predetermined boundaries at the cost of excluding other avenues of investigation? To what extent do creative “departures” from the text only seem like departures because the text determines the domains of its own relevance?

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<sup>2</sup> McGann 1991, 10

Finally, to what extent do we reproduce damaging affective structures when reading primarily for forms of meaning that support coherence?

These questions haunt philology, but answers can be forwarded through an expansion of its epistemological boundaries and through the inclusion of affect at the center of its methods. We saw this, partly, in the concerted recovery of older moments of reading that can help us define the structures of feelings in which these texts intervened over time. As Pollock once put it, we have available to us “the incomparable intellectual excitement and astonishing magic of speaking with the dead,” but also the opportunity to feel alongside them.<sup>3</sup> We can to a degree reconstruct, and partly reexperience, the affective contours of these interpretive moments, of other worlds characterized by forms of negative affects (as well as positive ones) that shape the possibilities of the social imaginary. This is not a matter of merely reconstituting hauntological conditions and understanding them, although that too is essential. The process of accounting for such affective realities in detail is itself an important exercise in understanding the manner in which art both comments on and reproduces societal tensions, as has been shown in work on more recent literature, for instance in Sianne Ngai’s reassessment of what Adorno labeled the “administered world” of late modernity (characterized by a coincidence of affective and political realms of experience), or in Lauren Berlant’s articulation of “cruel optimism” as a specific result of societal organization. But such work is not mere accounting. It can also offer us routes out of the depressive position of resignation toward the seeming inescapability of the ideological. Ursula K. Le Guin recently praised the power of speculative fiction to disturb the hold that ideologies have on present experience in similar terms.

Hard times are coming, when we’ll be wanting the voices of writers who can see alternatives to how we live now, can see through our fear-stricken society and its

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<sup>3</sup> Pollock 2014, 399

obsessive technologies to other ways of being, and even imagine real grounds for hope. We'll need writers who can remember freedom — poets, visionaries — realists of a larger reality. ... We live in capitalism, its power seems inescapable — but then, so did the divine right of kings. Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings. Resistance and change often begin in art.<sup>4</sup>

Through a philology of affect, I would propose that a “realism of a larger reality” can be as useful to scholarly work as it has been in creative work. And if the affective reality of the past was such that the divine right of kings seemed inescapable, then the implicit lesson is that the inescapable was not, after all, capable of foreclosing a different future. By investigating and describing a poetics of unease in these ancient corpora, I have started to build on these ideas, accounting both for the strategies of containment mobilized by the texts I have studied, as well as the manner in which they have led readers to peer at the furrows in the road.

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<sup>4</sup> Le Guin 2014.

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