Who is the best of heroes, Achilles or Odysseus?
And which is the best of epics, the Iliad or the Odyssey?

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For example:

§1. In H24H, I speak about the complementarity of the Homeric Iliad and Odyssey in foregrounding respectively Achilles and Odysseus as the best hero among all the Achaeans who came to fight in the Trojan War. (In this context, the ‘Achaeans’ are the Homeric prototypes of the historical Greeks, also known as ‘Argives’ and ‘Danaans’.)

§12. A central theme unites the Homeric Iliad and Odyssey: as we see from the pervasive use of the title aristos Akhaiōn ‘best of the Achaeans’ in both epics, Achilles emerges as the rightful owner of this title in the Iliad while Odysseus earns the same title in the Odyssey. But the poetry of epic awards this title not by way of measuring the successes achieved by these heroes by virtue of their predominant heroic qualities, namely, strength in the case of Achilles and intelligence in the case of Odysseus. After all, Achilles failed to capture Troy with his heroic strength. As for Odysseus, although he used his heroic intelligence in inventing the Wooden Horse, which was the key to the capture of Troy by the Achaeans, this success did not win for him the title of the ‘best of the Achaeans’ in the Iliad. Rather, Odysseus earned that title by becoming the main hero of the Odyssey, just as Achilles earned the same title by becoming the main hero of the Iliad.

In the footnotes for the paragraph I just quoted, I direct the reader to a book that I first published in 1979, The Best of the Achaeans. In Chapter 2 of that book, I analyze the passages in the Iliad and Odyssey that show decisively the roles of Achilles and Odysseus as ‘the best of the Achaeans’. But there is more to it, much more, as I go on to say in the first sentence of the next paragraph of H24H, which I quote here:

§13. Underlying the complementarity of the Iliad and Odyssey and of the main heroes of these two epics is an element of competition. The kleos or epic glory of Achilles in the Iliad is competitively contrasted with the kleos of Odysseus in the Odyssey.

In the rest of the paragraph that follows this sentence as I quoted it from H24H, and in two subsequent paragraphs, I elaborate on this idea of an underlying competition between Achilles and Odysseus—and even between the Iliad and the Odyssey. This elaboration is based on what I wrote in a new Preface for the second edition of The Best of the Achaeans, published in 1999, twenty years after the first. In this 1999
Preface (§§16–18), I argue that, although Odysseus could claim credit for the destruction of Troy by way of his intelligence, since he invented the Trojan Horse, his epic klesos or ‘glory’ as aristos Achaioi ‘the best of the Achaioi’ in the Odyssey depends not on what he did at Troy but on what he will do in his own epic by way of achieving a safe nostos or ‘homecoming’.

§2. With this background in mind, I propose here to revisit one of my all-time favorite passages in Homeric poetry. This passage is a kind of micro-epic, basically ten verses in length, and we find it embedded in the narrative of Odyssey 8. We see in that part of the Odyssey what can best be described as paraphrases of three songs performed by Demodokos, the blind singer of the Phaeacians. The micro-epic that I am highlighting is the first of the three songs.

§3. As I argue in The Best of the Achaioi, this micro-epic can be seen as a micro-Iliad—to be contrasted with the macro-epic that we know as the Homeric Iliad, which is over 15,000 verses in length. When we consider the details of this micro-epic as embedded in Odyssey 8, we find obvious similarities with the details of the Iliad as we see them narrated at the very beginning of that macro-epic. I quote here the text of our micro-Iliad, along with my translation:

§72 σύνερ ἐπὶ πάσας καὶ ἔπες ἔξ ἐρων ἐντό, §73 Μοῦσα ἄφρο οἰοῦν ἄνθηκεν ἀνεδείξασαι κλέα ἄνδρων, §74 οὕς, τῇ τὸ τῷ ἀρα κλέες ὀφθανδόν εὐρύν ίκεν, §75 νεῖκος Ὀδυσσέας καὶ Πηλείδων Ἀχιλλῆς, §76 ὡς ποτε δηρίαντο τεῖν ἐν δαίμονι θεόλει, §77 ἐκπάγιόνς ἐπέεσσαν, ἄνος δ` ἄνδρων ἀνθρώπων πολύνων §78 χαῖρε νῦν, δ` ἴδρασι ἄμοινόν δηρίαντο. §79 ὡς γὰρ ἐς χρείουν μυθήσατο Φοῖβος Ἀπόλλων πεῖν ἐν ἡγαθεί, δήθ` ὑπάρχῃ λόγων ὀδόν δεκαήμορον, τότε γὰρ ὑποκλινδότες μῆτιν δρήποι §80 ἑρωικά τε καὶ δαναοῦ Ἐνῶς μεγάλου διὰ βουλᾶς. §81 ταῦτα ἄφρο οἰοῦν ἄλεξεν περίπλωτος σύνερ Ὀδυσσέας . . .

§72 When they had satisfied their desire for drinking and eating, §73 The Muse impelled the singer to sing the glories [klesos plural] of men, §74 starting from a thread [oimê] [of a song] that had at that time a glory [klesos] reaching all the way up to the vast sky. §75 It was the quarrel [neikos] of Odysseus and Achilles son of Peleus, §76 how they once upon a time [pote] fought at a sumptuous feast of the gods, §77 with terrible words, and the king of men, Agamemnon, §78 was happy in his mind [noos] that the best of the Achaioi were fighting. §79 For [gar] thus had oracular Phoebus Apollo prophesied to him, §80 at holy Delphi, when he [Agamemnon] had crossed the stone threshold §81 to consult the oracle. For [gar] then [tote] it was that the beginning of pain [pêma] started rolling down §82 upon both Trojans and Danains, all on account of the plans of great Zeus. §83 These things, then, the singer sang, whose fame is far and wide. As for Odysseus . . .

Odyssey 8.72–83

(In my Homeric Responses (2003: 7–19), I offer a brief commentary on this remarkable passage, analyzing the logic of the time-frames being narrated.)

§4. I focus here on the prophecy made by the Oracle of the god Apollo. As I reconstruct this prophecy, the Oracle had said: ‘When the best of the Achaioi get into a quarrel at a feast, then you will know that Troy will be conquered’. In Odyssey 8, the disguised Odysseus is listening to this narrative about such a prophecy, and, as we read further in the narrative, he reacts by weeping, though he manages to conceal his sad reaction (83–93).

§5. This reaction of the hero may at first strike us as puzzling. Since the Oracle is prophesying the conquest of Troy, and since we know that Odysseus gets the credit for this achievement, why would this hero feel sadness, not delight, when he hears an epic story that tells how the god Apollo had prophesied the conquest? This conquest, achieved primarily by Odysseus as a paragon of intelligence and even trickery, seems to prove that the main hero of the Odyssey is better than Achilles, the main hero of the Iliad, who failed to conquer Troy. Achilles, the ultimate paragon of heroic strength in the Iliad, failed to achieve what Odysseus achieved as the ultimate paragon of heroic intelligence.

§6. The complementarity that links this success of Odysseus and this failure of Achilles is actually dramatized in the quarrel between ‘the best of the Achaioi’ as prophesied by the Oracle of Apollo. As I argue in Chapter 2 of The Best of the Achaioi, this quarrel was all about one all-consuming question: how to conquer Troy? Would this conquest be achieved through intelligence, as championed by Odysseus, or through strength, as championed by Achilles? And, as the story says clearly, the quarrel was between Odysseus and Achilles. By hindsight, then, the prophecy is referring to Odysseus and Achilles as ‘the best of the Achaioi’.

§7. For the disguised Odysseus, who is listening to the micro-Iliad performed by Demodokos in Odyssey 8, the outcome of the prophecy once spoken by the Oracle of Apollo is already a foregone conclusion, viewed from hindsight. Odysseus as the champion of heroic intelligence has already succeeded where Achilles as the champion of heroic strength had failed. Odysseus has already lived through the Iliad, as it were, and so he must know that he can take credit for the conquest of Troy. Nevertheless, as I argue in H24H (§14),
this accomplishment of Odysseus does not and cannot qualify him to be 'the best of the Achaeans' in the Iliad: and that is because the kleos or epic 'glory' that Odysseus earns in the Odyssey cannot be the Iliad, which means 'tale of Troy' (Ilion is the other name for Troy). The Iliad establishes Achilles as the central hero of the story of Troy, even though he failed to destroy the city. Because of the Iliad tradition, as I argue in The Best of the Achaeans (§17), "the kleos of Odysseus at Troy was preempted by the kleos of Achilles."

§8. I pursue the argument further in H24H (§14):

The kleos that Odysseus should get for his success in destroying Troy is elusive, by contrast with the kleos that Achilles gets in the Iliad, which is permanent. So, Odysseus cannot afford to dwell on his success at Troy, because the kleos he may get for that success will become permanent only if it extends into the kleos that he gets for achieving a successful homecoming.

And the fact is, when Odysseus is listening to the micro-Iliad of Demodokos in Odyssey 8, he is still uncertain of ever achieving a successful homecoming. That is why he is sad, not happy, to hear the retelling of an Iliadic story that can never guarantee for him the kleos that he hopes to achieve in order to become, ultimately, the best of the Achaeans in the Odyssey.

Afterword

§9. This posting is relevant to my earlier posting about Ajax, who has the misfortune of becoming the second-best of the Achaeans in both the Iliad and the Odyssey. It will also be relevant to a future posting about Agamemnon. In that posting, I will ask this question: in the micro-Iliad of Demodokos, Odyssey 8.72–83, what does it mean, that Agamemnon was 'happy in his mind' (78), when he saw a quarrel break out between the two unnamed heroes described as 'the best of the Achaeans'? The answer, as I will try to show in that future posting, is not as simple as it may seem.

Tags: Achilles, best of the Achaeans, Demodokos, Iliad, kleos, neikos, Odysseus, Odyssey

3 Responses to Who is the best of heroes, Achilles or Odysseus? And which is the best of epics, the Iliad or the Odyssey?

nigel April 11, 2015 at 4:18 am (Edit)

When will be the blog on Agamemnon? Love your writing...thanks!

Steven Saylor September 25, 2015 at 6:49 pm (Edit)

Prof. Nagy,

I love the Iliad-Odyssey wordcloud image on this page. Your creation?

I had the pleasure of hearing you speak at the Faculty Club at UC Berkeley last night. Very stimulating, as are all your written works. I am especially glad that you make so much of your scholarship freely available online.

Best wishes,

Steven Saylor

Mat Jose April 9, 2017 at 11:17 am (Edit)

I also found it disturbing that intelligence took a back seat to strength while deciding the best of heroes. Maybe in those times the intelligence aspect in winning any war might not have been well understood or even might not have sounded exciting in the plays.