



Research on Character References in Homer's Epics

Zhipeng Zhou

College of Humanities, Central South University, Changsha, Hunan, China

728568512@qq.com

Abstract. This paper delves into the diversity of character references and their cultural connotations in Homer's epics. Renowned for its rich and intricate character references, Homer's epics encompass not only ethical relationships, physical features, attire characteristics, dwelling attributes, and positions but also reflect cultural characteristics of ancient Greek society, such as heroic features and cultural connotations. Through a detailed analysis of character references in Homer's epics, the article unveils the Greek society's perspectives on warfare, idealized character images, the understanding of honor, and perceptions of destiny. The discussion delves into the contradiction between the semantic requirements and rhythmic specifications in immediate composition, drawing upon the theories of Milman Parry and Albert Lord. It elucidates the relationship between linguistic programs and improvisation in Homer's epics, emphasizing the utilization of an "artificial language" tailored for the specific needs of epic creation. The author contends that in the oral tradition, creators must navigate a balance between tradition and freedom, employing devices such as modifiers and substitutes to adhere to the prosodic requirements of the epic. Overall, this paper provides a thorough examination of the complexity of character references in Homer's epics, supported by pertinent theoretical frameworks and statistical data.

Keywords: Character references, Hexameter, Hero characteristics.

1 Introduction

The use of referential symbols has historically held significant importance in both Eastern and Western cultures. The opening lines of the "Tao Te Ching," stating "The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao; the name that can be named is not the eternal name," [1] cast doubt on the determinacy and stability of naming in relation to things. Michel Foucault, in "The Order of Things," asserts that knowledge structures (lexical order) in different historical periods are built upon varied experiences with things (material order). Regarding individuals, personal names and addressing play a crucial role in confirming one's subjectivity. For instance, in Rainer Maria Rilke's "The Book of Hours," the dialogue between "I" and Gilgamesh straightforwardly emphasizes the viewpoint that "the name is the essence." Fraser, in "The Golden Bough," also mentions how early humans considered names as part of their bodies, endowed with mystery and

sanctity. The richness and frequent variations in the referential practices of characters in Homer's epics create a distinctive reading experience, worthy of exploration.

2 Diverse Referential Phenomena in Homer's Epics

It is noteworthy that the phenomenon of constant transformation, repetition, and combination of character references in the reading experience is exceptionally prominent. This phenomenon stands out not only in horizontal comparisons, where other epic works from different civilizations such as the Babylonian "Epic of Gilgamesh" and the Tibetan "King Gesar" do not exhibit such intricate and frequent shifts in character references during narration. It also deviates from the usual impression of Greek literature, often described as "plain, direct, and honest" akin to Greek sculpture. In contrast, Homer's epics defy this norm by employing an abundance of character references. Therefore, organizing and summarizing the naming patterns in Homer's epics can help us delve into the implications and significance behind this phenomenon.

Homer's epics feature a multitude of characters, too numerous to count. Due to space constraints, we will discuss and analyze only some of the major characters. According to the author's statistics, in both the "Iliad" and the "Odyssey," the major characters appearing most frequently, from most to least, are Zeus (860 times), Odysseus (823 times), Achilles (565 times), Hector (519 times), Athena (351 times), Agamemnon (232 times), Menelaus (214 times), Priam (189 times), Apollo (185 times), Nestor (153 times), Hera (150 times), Ares (136 times), Diomedes (108 times), Aeneas (86 times), and Helen (78 times). [2]It is evident that the appearances of Zeus and Odysseus significantly outpace those of other characters in the narrative text. Most of Zeus's appearances are attributed to blood relations or blessings, such as "Zeus's descendant Ares," "son of the great god Zeus, Priam's son Polyplets," "mortal beloved by Zeus," "Hector, beloved by Zeus," and so on. Thus, we can assert that Odysseus is the most crucial figure throughout both the "Iliad" and the "Odyssey." Simultaneously, as representatives of the Greek coalition and Troy, Achilles and Hector also have appearances exceeding five hundred times each. Among the selected fifteen major characters, five are Olympian gods, two are demigods, and eight are humans. This numerical contrast reflects an elevation in the status of "humans" during Homer's era.

The characters in Homer's epics are not only numerous but also exhibit a complex array of character references, mainly categorized into five classes: ethical relationships, physical and capability traits, attire features, dwelling characteristics, and positions (titles, authorities).

2.1 Ethical Relationships

This section constitutes the most crucial character references in Homer's epics, with a total occurrence of over 1700 times. Most of the mentioned major characters in the previous text are represented. Examples include Agamemnon, the son of Atreus, appearing 131 times; Athena, the daughter of Zeus, appearing 111 times; Zeus, the son of Cronus, appearing 104 times; Diomedes, the son of Tydeus, appearing 89 times;

Achilles, the son of Peleus, appearing 87 times; Menelaus, the son of Atreus, appearing 69 times; Odysseus, the son of Laertes, appearing 42 times; Hector, the son of Priam, appearing 42 times; Nestor, the son of Neleus, appearing 16 times; Pram's son, Pram's son, appearing 7 times. Zeus, as the father, also appears frequently, with 69 occurrences. Additionally, there are lesser-used ethical references such as "Nestor's son Antilochus," "Hippolochus's son Glaucus," "Dreisor's son Lycurgus," and others. Due to their lower frequency, these references are not extensively discussed here.

2.2 Physical and Capability Traits

In contrast to ethical relationship references, which emphasize relationships and blood ties, this category of references highlights the characteristics and personalities of the characters. For instance, in the descriptions of Achilles, there are various references such as "swift-footed Achilles" 50 times, "excellent Achilles" 46 times, "clever Achilles" 11 times, "god-like Achilles" 7 times, "brave Achilles" 5 times, "sweeper of armies Achilles" 3 times, "glorious Achilles" 3 times, "proud Achilles" 2 times, "lion-hearted Achilles" 1 time, "warlike Achilles" 1 time, among others. The predominant and noteworthy references are "swift-footed Achilles" and "excellent Achilles," with the latter being used for many characters, including Hector, Odysseus, and Agamemnon. Almost all major characters in the narrative assume the role of being "excellent." "Swift-footed" is evidently a manifestation of Achilles' personal trait. Similarly, Odysseus, as a significant character in both the "Iliad" and the "Odyssey," has various references highlighting different aspects of his capabilities, such as "cunning Odysseus" 81 times, "remarkable and experienced Odysseus" 25 times, "resourceful Odysseus" 24 times, "excellent Odysseus" 19 times, and "raider of cities Odysseus" 1 time. The descriptors "cunning" and "resourceful" distinguish him significantly from other Greek commanders, emphasizing his most important character traits. Furthermore, during his arduous journey back to his homeland, Homer uses the reference "remarkable and experienced" to portray him, depicting Odysseus as even more outstanding through the trials of his homeward journey and emphasizing the objective reality of his hardships.

2.3 Attire Characteristics

The number of references in this category is significantly fewer than other types, primarily including "shining-helmeted Hector" 17 times, "bronze-helmeted Hector" 5 times, "bronze-armored Ares" 2 times, and "bronze-clad Ares" 2 times. [3]These attire characteristics essentially represent the features of the armor worn by the characters, highlighting their prowess in battle.

2.4 Dwelling Characteristics

References to dwelling characteristics are less frequent. Some recurring ones include "charioteer Nestor from Gerenia" 30 times, "Helen of Argos" 15 times, "Muse from Olympos" 11 times, "Athena of Boeotia" 2 times, "Hera of Argos" 2 times, and "Pri-

am's son Priam of Dardania" 2 times. Notably, "charioteer Nestor from Gerenia" can be interpreted as focusing on both "Gerenia" and "charioteer," possessing dual significance. Other references, such as "Helen of Argos" and "Hera of Argos," have appeared multiple times. Argos (Ἄργος) is a Greek city, and according to legend, it became the ruling city after Danaus fled to Egypt. In the "Iliad," Diomedes is the king of Argos. Argos is also a hundred-eyed giant in Greek mythology, ultimately slain by Hermes. The city shares its name with the giant possessing formidable perception abilities, reflecting its inherent divine nature and thus being employed by Homer as a significant reference.

2.5 Positions (Titles, Authorities)

In this category of references, Agamemnon holds the highest number, including "king Agamemnon" 26 times, "king of the people Agamemnon" 23 times, "commander-in-chief of the entire army Agamemnon" 21 times, "shepherd of the soldiers Agamemnon" 12 times, "noble king" 9 times, and "ruler of extensive territories Agamemnon" 5 times. Apart from "excellent Agamemnon" and "son of Atreus Agamemnon," most references are related to his positions. As the leader of the Greek coalition, such references align with his status.

3 Contradiction Between Immediate Composition Semantic Demands and Prosodic Specifications

The theories proposed by Milman Parry and Albert Lord provide profound and comprehensive insights into the diversification of character references in Homer's epics. [4] Parry's focus is on the linguistic patterns within Homer's epics. He posits that Homer's epics employ an "artificial language" specifically designed for epic composition. This linguistic pattern evolves over generations through the long-term use by oral poets, creating a generational norm for poetic recitation. Influenced by factors such as the accentuation of syllables and pauses, the placement of noun phrases like "polumetis Odusseus" (resourceful Odysseus) consistently occurs at the end of poetic lines in Homer's epics. Similarly, the appearance and placement of phrases like "polutas dios Odusseus" (endured hardships and god-like Odysseus) are regulated by metrical constraints. The hexameter, a poetic structure consisting of six feet with prescribed variations, limits the poet's choice of words, enhancing the value of lesser kings or leaders (such as Eneas and Eurymolos) by adorning them with the epithet "aner andron" (king of the people). Parry's student, Lord, builds upon Parry's foundation and emphasizes improvisation and interaction in oral traditional composition. Using Homer's epics as a backdrop, Lord creates "The Singer of Tales," delving into how creators leverage accumulated material for impromptu expression. Parry-Lord's oral poetry theory emphasizes the process of re-creation. [5] In the oral tradition, creators are not entirely free but are simultaneously bound by pre-existing story frameworks and prosodic rules. Especially in immediate composition, creators must strike a balance between tradition

and freedom, using devices like modifiers and substitutes to meet the epic's prosodic requirements in specific contexts.[6]

Apart from this, concerning the issue of versions of Homer's epics, since the 1990s, a dispute has persisted between the classical philology school led by Professor Welles of Oxford University and the oral poetics school led by Professor Nash of Harvard University, forming the factions of "original text" and "multiple texts." However, two facts acknowledged by both schools are: skepticism about the existence of a singular "Homer" and doubts regarding the identity of the author. The text follows the hexameter poetic form, exhibiting inherent unity, systematicity, and sophistication as a classic text. It has existed simultaneously in oral and written forms, each presenting the crystallization of a historical process, and has undergone several classical text consolidations amidst the norm of diverse versions.

So, why does the same subject use such varied references? Firstly, even after undergoing classical text consolidations, Homer's epics were predominantly recited orally in ancient Greece. The first "transcripts" or the second "scripts" obtained from these consolidations merely served as tools and means for oral poets in a single recitation. In other words, "a transcript is not an 'equivalent' to a single poetic performance." [7] Given this fact, we can speculate that, after several classical text consolidations, the basic structure of Homer's epics achieved relative stability. The narrative structure, adapted from historical events, solidified, exhibiting minimal changes. Transcripts and scripts served the poets by providing a stable plot framework, but during oral recitation, due to the excessive length of Homer's epics, the specific narrative language couldn't precisely replicate the established text. Therefore, oral poets had to engage in an immediate composition and re-creation process. [8] However, the poets' creations were not entirely free but constrained by both the established story framework and the hexameter structure as an oral tradition. In many cases, simple name references and pronouns couldn't comply with the hexameter's prosodic regulations, leading to the use of modifiers and substitutes to adjust the tone in accordance with the epic's required prosodic patterns. Thus, the poets, as temporary re-creators, repeatedly navigated the dilemma between semantic demands and prosodic restrictions in different time-space contexts, constantly cutting and recreating the text within a basic story framework.[9] This is likely the most direct historical driving force behind the diverse referencing phenomenon in Homer's epics.

4 Heroic Characteristics and Cultural Connotations

In ancient Greek culture, a person's name served not only as a simple identifier but also as a profound symbol representing an individual's existence in society and their close connection to the surrounding environment. The symbolic significance of names played a crucial role in ancient Greek literature and society, reflecting the values, cultural traditions, and expectations placed on individuals at that time.

4.1 Concept of Warfare

The Greek concept of warfare in ancient times was predominantly characterized by a societal ethos that revered martial prowess. In the early Greek society, especially depicted in the "Iliad," warfare was portrayed as a glorious and sacred activity. War was not merely a scene of conflict and bloodshed but was also viewed as a political livelihood. As Thucydides remarked, during that era, the profession of arms was not considered shameful but rather esteemed as honorable. Heroes like Achilles were endowed with divine attributes, and their performance on the battlefield was not only celebrated but also deemed a source of glory. This conception of warfare reflected the positive evaluation of war in society at that time, viewing it as a means to acquire wealth and honor. Consequently, numerous references related to war can be found in Homer's epics, such as "valiant," "warlike," "roaring on the battlefield," "skilled with the spear," "beloved by Ares," and "wielding a massive shield." These war-related references dominate the physical and skill-related characteristics, indicating their association with the prevailing Greek concept of warfare.

4.2 Ideal Characters

Bakhtin asserted, "The characters in an epic must be the complete representatives of the national spirit," implying the pursuit of excellence and becoming an all-knowing, all-capable individual. In the Homeric epics, the portrayal of ideal characters reflects the aspiration for comprehensive, multifaceted development and sound completeness. The most conspicuous example is Odysseus, sculpted as an ideal character possessing diverse skills and qualities. He is not only a courageous warrior (Odysseus, the valiant sacker of cities) but also an astute leader (clever Odysseus), an eloquent orator (resourceful Odysseus), a seasoned sailor, and even skilled in farming, cooking, and art appreciation. The epic descriptions underscore the ideal pursuit in ancient Greek culture for holistic development and well-rounded proficiency, emphasizing not only wisdom and combat skills but also a synthesis of agricultural, artistic, and other competencies.

4.3 Understanding and Pursuit of Honor

The comparison between Achilles and Hector, along with the exploration of the understanding and pursuit of honor in ancient Greek literature, reveals complex and profound moral concepts and insightful observations on human nature.[10]

Achilles, a powerful and valiant hero, pursues personal honor and glory on the battlefield without fear, withdrawing from the war when his honor is slighted and returning to defend his friend's honor. His story in the "Iliad" revolves around the pursuit of honor, enduring danger and hardship for the sake of battlefield brilliance. In contrast, Hector is portrayed as an honorable hero surpassing mere bravery, displaying deep affection for his homeland and family. This difference can be seen as a distinction in their views on honor. Achilles in the "Iliad" is depicted as a hero pursuing ultimate honor, participating in war, withdrawing due to a tarnished honor, and returning to

maintain a friend's honor. He endures danger and suffering solely for the pursuit of battlefield glory. [11]On the other hand, Hector's concept of honor places a greater emphasis on the dignity of his homeland and family. Defending the city of Troy, he intertwines personal glory with the fate of the city. This honor perspective reflects in ancient Greek literature that honor is not merely an individual's expression but also the glory of the family and the city, a manifestation of responsibility to one's homeland.

This difference results in distinct character references for the two, with Achilles' references mostly centering around his individual abilities, such as swift Achilles, excellent Achilles, clever Achilles, god-like Achilles, valiant Achilles, army-sweeping Achilles, glorious Achilles, proud Achilles, lion-hearted Achilles, warlike Achilles, and more. In contrast, Hector is referred to as glorious Hector, mentioned a remarkable thirty-one times, demonstrating Homer's recognition of Hector's honor.

5 Conclusion

The character references in the Homeric epics not only showcase literary techniques but also reflect the profound cultural, religious, and philosophical notions of ancient Greek society. Through the diverse character references, these epics portray a multi-layered and three-dimensional image of ancient Greek society. Among them, references to ethical relationships reveal the significance of patriarchal society, while descriptions of heroic traits reflect the societal emphasis on individual achievements and honor during that time. Simultaneously, these epics demonstrate a deep understanding and reverence for fate, emphasizing the relationship between fate and the individual. Through the analysis of these character references, a deeper understanding of ancient Greek culture and its impact on Western civilization can be gained. [12]The Homeric epics are not only literary works but also important sources for studying ancient Greek society and culture, holding significant implications for understanding the development of Western culture.

References

1. Bi Wang. (2016). *Commentary on the Tao Te Ching by Laozi*. China Bookstore, Beijing. Pp.1. 978-7-101-11674-8
2. Homer. (2016). *The Homeric Epics*. Shanghai Translation Publishing House, Shanghai. 978-7-5327-7343-5
3. Tiantai He. (2023) Historical Examination of the Realism in Helmet Descriptions in Homer's Epics: Mutual Confirmation of Legend and Archaeology. *Journal of Wuhan University of Technology (Social Sciences Edition)*: 1-10.
4. Jian Lv. (2014) "Original Text" or "Multiple Texts"? A Retrospective on the Debate over the New Edition of the Iliad. *Comparative Literature and Comparative Culture*, 1
5. Weixuan Lin. (2022) The Influence of Oral Tradition on the Notions of Justice in Ancient Greece: A Focus on δίκη in Homer's Epics. *Mythological Studies Journal*, 2: 273-288.
6. Gejin Chao. (2022) Textual Perspective on Oral Poetics. *Literary Heritage*, 3: 21-34.
7. Quanguo Zhu, Yanli Xiao. (2020) On the Performativity of Oral Literature. *Cultural Studies*, 4: 299-313.

8. Neel S. (2023) Christopher B. Analytical developments for the Homer Multitext: palaeography, orthography, morphology, prosody, semantics. *International Journal on Digital Libraries*, 24(3):179-184
9. Hinds S. (2021) The Experience of Poetry: From Homer's Listeners to Shakespeare's Readers. *Modern Language Quarterly*, 82(3):371-375
10. Guangze Lin. (2004) Cultural Connotations of Character Images in Homer's Epics. *Journal of Chengdu University (Social Sciences Edition)*, 2: 30-32.
11. Shuiyi Ding. (2022) Analysis of the Typical Character Images of Heroes in the Iliad. *Writer's World*, 7: 64-66.
12. Maciej P, Patrick G V, John D W. (2023) The Staying Power of Thetis: Allusion, Interaction, and Reception from Homer to the 21st Century. De Gruyter.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

