

A Linguistic-Narratological Commentary on the Dialogue of Odysseus and Achilles in the Underworld in Homer's *Odyssey* (vv. 465 – 491)

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Abstract:

This commentary examines verses 465-491 from Rhapsody λ of Homer's *Odyssey*, where Odysseus encounters Achilles in the Underworld. Through a narratological and linguistic analysis, the study explores the use of direct speech and narrative techniques that express the psychological states of both heroes. Odysseus, as a secondary narrator, reflects on his sufferings, while Achilles reveals his deep regret about death, stating his preference for a humble life over rulership in the afterlife. The analysis highlights the shifts in time and space, the contrast between life and death, and the emotional depth achieved through Homeric formulas and linguistic structures. Special emphasis is placed on focalization, with both Odysseus and Achilles presenting their perspectives on past experiences and their current fates in the Underworld. This passage from Rhapsody λ offers valuable insights into the thematic richness of the *Odyssey* and deepens our understanding of Homer's narrative techniques, particularly in relation to heroic ideals and the human condition.

Keywords: *Odyssey*, Commentary, Narratological analysis, Linguistic approach, Homeric epic

Introduction

The aim of the present commentary is to analyze a passage from Rhapsody λ of Homer's *Odyssey* (465–491), focusing on its narrative structure while exploring the various linguistic phenomena present in these verses. This work will employ theories from narratology and linguistic analysis to support a comprehensive examination of the text.

In this passage, Odysseus encounters Achilles, who, after his death in the Trojan War, exists as a shadow in the Underworld. Following his interactions with other souls—such as his mother and Agamemnon—Odysseus' dialogue with Achilles emerges as a pivotal moment in the narrative. Throughout Rhapsody λ , Odysseus emphasizes the significance of his communication with the seer Teiresias, who provides crucial information about his journey back to Ithaca, as well as the contrasting themes of life and death.

This passage is particularly interesting from a narrative perspective, as it alternates between

ὡς ἐφάμην, ὁ δὲ μ' αὐτίκ' ἀμειβόμενος προσέειπεν·
ἴμῃ δὴ μοι θάνατόν γε παραύδα, φαίδιμ' Ὀδυσσεύ.
βουλοίμην κ' ἐπάρουρος ἔων θητευέμεν ἄλλω,
ἀνδρὶ παρ' ἀκλήρω, ᾧ μὴ βίσιος πολὺς εἴη, 490
ἢ πᾶσιν νεκύεσσι καταφθιμένοισιν ἀνάσσειν.

Linguistic – Narratological Analysis

465–467. In these specific verses, the direct dialogue from the previous lines (463–464) is interrupted as Odysseus, acting as a secondary narrator, continues his narration to the Phaeacian audience about the other souls he encountered. This narrative transition is marked by the choice of vocabulary, as there is no apostrophe or vocative at the beginning of these verses, unlike in the preceding (463) and following (473) lines. By encapsulating his dialogue with Agamemnon within the noun *ἐπέεσσιν*, Odysseus indicates the completion of that conversation and prepares to shift his focus to the other souls he met in Hades.

This approach to narration is further reinforced by examining the tenses and temporal markers utilized in these lines. The use of the Aorist and the Perfect establishes a past narrative sequence with events that are completed and distinctly bounded. In the verses under consideration (465–467), this phenomenon is evident. The secondary narrator, Odysseus, constructs a timeline marked by chronological indicators through temporal adverbs (*μὲν* and *δ'*) (Rutger, 2017). Additionally, there is a palpable effort to build emotional tension, emphasized by the references to feelings of sorrow (*στυγεροῖσιν, ἀχνύμενοι, κατὰ δάκρυ χέοντες*) (Bakker, 2009).

The Perfect tense (*ἔσταμεν*) is employed to convey a situation that remains ongoing, reinforced by the secondary temporal clause (*νῶι μὲν ὡς... χέοντες*), which frames the narrative within a specific timeframe from Odysseus's perspective (Lloyd, 2018). This ongoing emotional state is abruptly interrupted with the appearance of the remaining shadows, particularly that of Achilles, which is introduced through the use of the indefinite tense (*ἦλθε*).

Furthermore, the phrase *νῶι μὲν ὡς ἐπέεσσιν ἀμειβομένω* is a recognizable Homeric formula, reappearing in this rhapsody and in various other instances throughout the *Odyssey* (including v. 225) to indicate the conclusion of Odysseus' encounter with one soul and the beginning of dialogue with another (Janse, 2020).

465–466. In verses 465–466, the combination of these lines forms an Intonation/Information Unit characterized by the use of the enclitic postpositive (*μὲν*), which occupies the second position. Given that there is enjambment between these two verses, with the meaning of verse 465 being completed in verse 466, this interpretation can be supported. The enclitic postpositive (*δ'*) appears again in the second position in the next verse (467), creating a new information unit (Janse, 2020).

One could argue that these two verses consist of not one but two separate information units included within the broader narrative. The first part of verse 465 (*νῶι μὲν ὡς ὧσιν ἀμειβομένο*) indicates

the completion of the dialogue between Odysseus and Agamemnon, while the remainder of the verse, combined with verse 466, shapes the emotional state of both heroes. As the secondary narrator recounts his continued journey to Hades, he conveys the emotional weight he shares with Agamemnon.

This emotional filtering presented by Odysseus as he reflects on his experiences in Hades serves as a form of focalization, highlighting the intense emotions involved. This emotional charge is pivotal to the unfolding narration, as it is at this moment that Achilles appears, with whom Odysseus will later engage in conversation. The emotional context will lead to a deep immersion in the subsequent verses (De Jong, 2014).

467–468. Formulaic Homeric types are evident in these two verses. Patronymic epithets, such as *Πηληϊάδεω*, are a common linguistic feature for ancient Greek heroes (De Jong, 2012). For instance, Achilles is frequently referred to in the *Iliad* with the same patronymic designation. Additionally, the phrase *ἀμύμονος Ἀντιλόχοιο* appears in the *Iliad* as well (*Ψ* 522).

In these instances, the verses can be viewed as not being attributed to the internal secondary narrator (Odysseus), but rather to an external primary narrator, who operates covertly in this rhapsody. The Homeric narrator is often invisible, with their presence obscured by comments or reflections. Thus, the repetition of these formulaic expressions suggests the influence of this external narrator, reinforcing the traditional structure and characterizations within the narrative.

467–469. The souls of the deceased warriors are presented in these verses in a manner that reflects the relationships they shared in life. Alongside Achilles, the souls of Patroclus and Antilochus—dear friends and fellow warriors of Achilles—are depicted in the same setting. Unlike other points in Rhapsody λ, where the names of multiple souls are often omitted, here they are specifically named (Ameis et al., 1900). This choice by the narrator may stem from the fact that all these figures are comrades of Odysseus, prompting him to acknowledge them by name.

Furthermore, the inclusion of Patroclus and Antilochus serves as a narrative framework that sets the stage for the forthcoming dialogue between Odysseus and Achilles. It is also possible that the naming of these heroes corresponds to the order in which the souls appear before Odysseus. In previous encounters recounted by Odysseus, such as his meeting with his mother, the souls are shown arriving in succession. Therefore, it could be inferred that in this instance, each soul presents itself in chronological order.

As Odysseus converses with Agamemnon, he adopts a panoramic perspective, serving as the secondary focalizer within this narrative framework (De Jong, 2014). This suggests that the souls appear progressively before him. The use of the coordinating conjunction *καί* further reinforces this chronological order, as it indicates a connection between each shadow he perceives in front of him, linking their forms within his visual field over time.

469–470. In verse 469, the use of the referent *ἐς* is notable. This pronoun can typically serve

as a neutral anaphoric deictic; however, in this context, it may take on a demonstrative function (De Jong, 2012). The narratee has already been informed about the specific hero being discussed through the previous verse (468), which references the name of Aedes. This establishes a common ground between the narrator and the audience, to which the subordinate clause of verse 469 adds new information (De Jong, 1997).

Specifically, Odysseus, as a secondary narrator, conveys to the Phaeacians, as well as to the audience of the *Odyssey*, the heroism and superiority of Aedes in terms of appearance and deeds. However, in verse 470, he clarifies that Aedes is not superior to Achilles. This clarification serves to elevate Achilles' characteristics, particularly in light of the forthcoming conversation between Odysseus and Achilles.

The linguistic choices made by Odysseus as a narrator thus contribute significantly to the narrative structure. They support the assertion in verse 478, which designates Achilles as the best among all the Achaeans, while simultaneously shaping Odysseus' perspective on Achilles' heroism (Chantraine, 2013). Moreover, the decision to mention Achilles' name in verse 467 before those of the other companions underscores his superiority, reinforcing the expectation that he would be the first soul Odysseus encounters after Agamemnon, given the hierarchical value assigned to heroes.

469. In this particular verse, the Imperfect tense (*ἔην*) is employed to indicate an ongoing situation within a specific timeframe, viewed from the perspective of the character, in this case, the secondary narrator, Odysseus. In Hades, Odysseus observes only souls that have taken on the form of shadows (as demonstrated in his interactions with his mother in earlier verses of Rhapsody λ). It appears that Achilles, as a soul, does not present a distinctive form compared to the other souls. His superiority is derived from his actions during his lifetime. This leads to the conclusion that the use of the Past Participle likely refers to the period when Achilles and his companions were alive, during which their forms could be differentiated.

The use of the Imperfect reinforces the narrative mode, providing a brief and focused description of the narration regarding Aedes (and, by extension, Achilles), while simultaneously introducing a pause in the narrative flow on the part of Odysseus (Rutger, 2017). The mention of Achilles' external appearance (*εἶδος*) further connects linguistically and narratively to verse 475, where the term *βροτῶν εἶδωλα* is used, highlighting the connection between their identities in life and their current states in the Underworld (Bakker, 2009).

470. In verse 470, the designation *μετ' ἀμύμονα* can be interpreted in two ways: it may indicate that the Achaeans join with Achilles, making him their leader, or it could imply his exclusion from them. This same term was previously used in reference to Aedes (468) (Ameis et al., 1900). The transition from the descriptive mode to narrative mode, as the secondary narrator resumes the account of his interaction with Achilles' soul, may lend credence to the latter interpretation of the prepositional modifier.

Achilles, as noted earlier, surpasses the other warriors and souls, positioning him as the one

who engages in conversation with Odysseus. The repeated emphasis on the designation *ἀμύμων* for both heroes likely highlights a shared understanding of their heroism. Furthermore, the use of the preposition *μετ'* suggests a differentiation or exception for Achilles, reinforcing his unique status among the other figures in the narrative.

471. As in verse 467, in this verse the secondary narrator employs the temporal conjunction *δέ* after an Aorist (*ἔγνω*), signaling the shift from descriptive to narrative mode. The first intonation unit, which ends with the personal pronoun *με*, aligns with the caesura of the verse and introduces the narrative mode by marking the start of Odysseus' new encounter with Achilles, leading into their dialogue. The remainder of the verse contains a formulaic expression characterizing Achilles (*ποδώκεος Αἰακίδαο*), which fits within the descriptive mode (Rutger, 2020).

In this verse, the word order appears somewhat unconventional, as the personal pronoun (*με*) is separated from the cognitive verb (*ἔγνω*) to which it relates, placed at the end of the first intonation unit. One possible explanation could be the parallelism with verse 467, where for the first time in Rhapsody λ, Odysseus' contact with Achilles is referenced. Additionally, the metrical structure may have influenced this particular arrangement of words.

472. Although one might argue that the repetition of this verse in verse 154 suggests it is a formulaic expression of the Homeric narrator, it seems that its occurrence at these two specific points in the rhapsody is due to the intense emotional state of the souls when they see Odysseus before them.

Additionally, the use of the participle *ὀλοφυρομένη* by the secondary narrator to convey Achilles' emotional state facilitates a smooth transition to Achilles' focalization and perspective. In this way, Odysseus embeds Achilles' viewpoint into the narrative, signaling to the audience that the direct speech, which follows and contains Achilles' words, is charged with strong emotions.

473. This line consists solely of vocatives. Just as Odysseus used several adjectives when narrating to the Phaeacians, employing typical formulaic Homeric terms, Achilles in this verse applies similar adjectives to Odysseus. It marks the first time Achilles directly addresses Odysseus, making the use of the vocative necessary. The vocative here highlights the discursive mode, emphasizing the interaction between the narrator and his addressee.

The exact same vocative had previously been used by another of Odysseus' comrades-in-arms, Agamemnon. This phrase, therefore, not only reflects the typical adjectives fellow warriors would use among themselves but also marks the transition from Odysseus' communication with Agamemnon to his interaction with Achilles.

The line is divided into two intonation units: the first refers to Odysseus' lineage (*διογενές Λαερτιάδη*), and the second (*πολυμήχαν' Ὀδυσσεύ*), following the caesura, highlights his renowned cunning.

474. In this verse, Achilles' focalization becomes particularly intense for the first time in his

speech, as he offers a qualitative assessment of Odysseus' journey to the Underworld. By characterizing this act as *μείζον ἔργον* (a great deed) and posing a somewhat inappropriate question (given that Odysseus' greatest challenge is his return to Ithaca), Achilles' focalizing presence is strongly revealed. This moment underscores Achilles' perspective on the magnitude of Odysseus' actions, shedding light on how he perceives the gravity of such feats in the context of life and death.

475. This verse begins with the adverb *πῶς* and the verb *ἔτλης*. Achilles' phrase can be understood as equivalent to the question, "How did you find the courage?" Through this, Achilles achieves two things in addressing Odysseus (Ameis et al., 1900). Firstly, it reinforces Achilles' earlier characterization of Odysseus as brave (*σχέτλιε*), explaining Achilles' astonishment at Odysseus' daring act. In the previous verse (474), Odysseus' descent into Hades is portrayed as one of the most challenging tasks for any living mortal, leading Achilles to believe that Odysseus could scarcely undertake anything more difficult (*μείζον ἐνὶ φρεσὶ μῆσαι ἔργον*). Secondly, this question allows Odysseus, in his response (478–480), to briefly explain the purpose of his descent to Hades.

Simultaneously, this verse also touches upon the narrative space where the events unfold. Throughout the narration of Odysseus' journey, the general setting is Hades, where his interactions with the souls take place. However, considering that mortals cannot enter the Underworld (even with divine assistance), this descent might be a fictional construct created by the secondary narrator. Thus, the descent becomes more of a hypothetical or dream-like setting, turning Hades into a symbolic frame rather than a literal one.

There is no detailed description of Hades in the verse, which could be attributed to the narratees' pre-existing mental map of the Underworld, rendering further description unnecessary. The only reference to the setting comes through the verb *κατελθέμεν*, and specifically its participle form, suggesting that Hades is a subterranean space. Achilles reinforces this notion with the word *Αἰδός* and the adverb *δε*, which provide indirect deixis to signify the location to the audience.

476. In this particular verse, Achilles, as narrator, refers to the existence of the souls in Hades. He describes the dead using the Present tense (*ναίουσι*) to emphasize the continuous arrival of these souls to the Underworld. This ongoing, unbounded action is symbolic of the mythological understanding of life after death. Within the discourse between the secondary narrator, Odysseus, and Achilles, Achilles as a psyche informs Odysseus about the perpetual flow of the dead into the Underworld. The use of the Present (*ναίουσι*) here can be characterized as a generic-habitual present, fitting within the descriptive mode of Achilles' narration (Rutger, 2017).

The enjambment in this verse does not contribute to the progression of the narration or the plot. However, this linguistic choice serves to justify the appearance of the word *εἰδῶλα* in the second half of the verse. These "idols" lack physical substance and no longer possess their minds. This idea aligns with what Odysseus learned from his mother, Anticleia, who informed him that souls need to drink blood in order to communicate with the living (Rutger, 2020).

It appears paradoxical, however, that Achilles includes himself among the souls he calls *ἀφραδέες*, those who lack their own minds. Yet, in verse 471, Achilles recognizes Odysseus without the necessity of drinking blood. It is possible that, given Anticleia's earlier explanation, Odysseus' narratees—the Phaeacians—are already familiar with the process of communicating with the souls, and thus the reference to drinking blood is omitted here to maintain the narrative's flow without slowing down time.

477–478. These verses feature a typical Homeric formula, frequently employed by the secondary narrator (Heubeck, 1989).

In verse 477, the pronoun *μιν* refers to Odysseus' interlocutor, Achilles. This is further clarified in the following verse, where Achilles' name is explicitly mentioned, confirming the identity of the individual being referred to by the pronoun.

Verse 478 marks the beginning of Odysseus' response to Achilles. Just as Achilles, in verse 473, addresses Odysseus with specific formulaic adjectives, Odysseus reciprocates by adopting a similar approach, using corresponding terms of respect and acknowledgment toward Achilles. This mirroring of speech reflects the mutual regard between the two heroes, reinforcing the thematic continuity within the dialogue.

479–482. Verses 479–482 serve as Odysseus' response to Achilles' question in verse 475. In these lines, Odysseus explains the purpose of his descent into Hades and reintroduces the theme of his *nostos* (return home). He begins by clarifying that his journey was undertaken to meet Tiresias (verse 479), and then shifts the narrative back to the subject of his *nostos*.

This structure of Odysseus' response is reflected in the differentiation of the corresponding intonation units. Initially, through the phrase *ἦλθον Τειρεσίαο κατὰ χρέος*, Odysseus provides the main reason for his descent into Hades. The prepositional modifier *κατὰ χρέος* is used here to emphasize that the journey was made out of necessity or obligation (Ameis, 1900).

By framing his answer this way, Odysseus effectively dismisses Achilles' earlier implication (verse 475) that he undertook the journey to achieve seemingly impossible goals or to continuously surpass himself. Odysseus makes it clear that his descent into Hades is centered on the search for Tiresias, as part of his broader quest to return to Ithaca. In verses 481–482, Odysseus further elaborates on the sufferings he has endured, explaining that he is a prisoner of his journey (Heubeck, 1989). This indirect refutation of Achilles' assumption is reinforced by the negation *οὐ* and the particle *γάρ*, which serves to provide justification for his journey to Hades.

482–483. The unbounded actions discussed in the previous verses, regarding Odysseus' reference to the time frame of his return to Ithaca and the impossibility of achieving his *nostos*, are also evident in the present verses, though they now pertain to the exceptional qualities of Achilles. From the end of verse 482, we see the reaffirmation of a theme related to Achilles' personality traits, which began in verses 478–479 with Odysseus' direct address to him (*σεῖο δ', Ἀχιλλεῦ*).

In verse 483, the focus shifts to the heroism and greatness of Achilles, who is described as the happiest of all men (*μακάριτος*). The use of negation (*οὐ*) and the impersonal pronoun (*τις*) emphasizes Achilles' unbounded supremacy over all others in terms of happiness. His joy is portrayed as unmatched by anyone, past or present.

This unbounded supremacy is also evident on a temporal level, with the use of the necessary temporal adverbs. Specifically, there are references to both the past (*οὐ προπαρόιθε*) and the future (*οὐτ' ἄρ' ὀπίσσω*), where the double negation related to Achilles' happiness expands into a temporal generalization, illustrating the enduring and absolute nature of his contentment (Rutger, 2017).

483–486. In these specific verses, the contrast between temporal levels and the local context of Achilles' actions as a hero becomes evident. Odysseus, in essence, reflects on both Achilles' past and his current state.

The primary reference point for each temporal level and local context is Achilles' death, which marks a shift in his role and actions. The adverb *πρὶν μὲν* is used, followed by the participle *ζῶν*, to establish the timeframe during which Achilles was alive. The use of the Imperfect tense (*ἔτιμον*) further emphasizes the unbounded and recurring honor paid to Achilles by his comrades throughout his life. This functions as an *analepsis* (flashback) to Achilles' life, situated within the broader flashback that Odysseus is recounting to the Phaeacians. Given the high esteem in which the other heroes held Achilles, this scene is imbued with great emotional weight (Rutger, 2017).

In verse 485, the narration shifts forward, focusing on Achilles' state of being and actions after his death. Since the time of the secondary narration is situated within Odysseus' journey to Hades, the timeframe of Achilles' existence among the souls of the dead aligns with the moment of the secondary narration (Rutger, 2020). Thus, no temporal adverb referring to life after death is used; instead, the adverb *νῦν* highlights the synchronicity of the narration. The narrator also employs the present tense (*κρατέεις*) in combination with the noun *νεκύεσσιν*, which contrasts with the participle used in the previous verse.

The present tense here carries a dual meaning. It indicates both the temporal metaphor of Achilles' continued supremacy as re-enacted by the secondary narrator, Odysseus, and the notion of his permanent authority within the realm of Hades. This suggests that Achilles' dominance is not just a past fact but a present and ongoing reality in the afterlife (Bakker, 2009).

486. A characteristic element of this specific verse is the deixis achieved through the use of the local adverb *ἐνθάδ'*. Here, a shift occurs from the local context in which the narrator and the narratees find themselves during the primary narration to the setting of the secondary narration in Hades (De Jong, 2012). The narrative focus transitions away from the island of the Phaeacians and the palace of Nausicaa, moving instead to the Underworld, which now serves as the backdrop for the secondary narration.

This shift signifies a relocation to the narrative world, creating a space that exists within the imagination of both the narrator and the narratees, distinct from their actual spatio-temporal reality.

The use of deixis in this context emphasizes the contrast between the tangible world of the Phaeacians and the more abstract realm of the Underworld, highlighting the imaginative nature of this transition.

487. After the typical Homeric formulaic phrase used at the beginning of the verse, the speech transitions to Achilles. His name was mentioned in the preceding verse (485) when Odysseus addressed him. In this instance, the use of demonstratives (δ $\delta\epsilon$) serves to reaffirm the topic at hand (Janse, 2020). As Odysseus hands over the speech to Achilles, the focalization shifts to Achilles through the use of direct speech, allowing his perspective to come to the forefront (De Jong, 2014).

488–491. In this passage, Achilles seemingly rejects Odysseus' assumption that he is happy in the Underworld. He explicitly states that he would prefer to be a much humbler man among the living than to reign over the dead. This strong denial reflects Achilles' emotional state and underscores his longing to return to the world of the living.

This perspective paves the way for interpreting these words as a peak moment, following the vivid and intense expression of his aversion to Hades and his opposition to the ideals of happiness previously mentioned by Odysseus. Achilles' emphasis on the value of life, even in a more humble form, highlights the profound disconnect he feels with the notion of happiness in the afterlife.

Discussion – Conclusion

In this analysis of the dialogue between Odysseus and Achilles in Rhapsody λ of Homer's *Odyssey*, we observe a rich interplay of narrative techniques and emotional depth that significantly enhances the thematic resonance of the text. The use of varying tenses, particularly the transition from the Aorist to the Present, underscores the duality of Achilles' past glory and his current state as a shadow in the Underworld. This temporal layering allows for a profound exploration of heroism, as Odysseus navigates the complexities of memory and loss while engaging with the heroic ideals represented by Achilles.

The structured progression of the dialogue, marked by direct addresses and the use of demonstrative pronouns, emphasizes the intimacy of the exchange between the two heroes, highlighting the contrasts between their experiences and perceptions of life and death. The shifting focalization between Odysseus and Achilles provides a nuanced understanding of their respective emotional landscapes, enriching the narrative's complexity.

Moreover, the interplay of deictic elements and the careful orchestration of the narrative space contribute to a heightened sense of immediacy and engagement. The use of specific formulaic expressions reinforces the connections between the characters while also echoing broader themes of fate and divine influence within the mythological framework.

In summary, the passage illustrates a sophisticated integration of narrative techniques, temporal shifts, and structural elements that collectively deepen the emotional intensity and thematic richness of the *Odyssey*. Through the intricate portrayal of Odysseus and Achilles, Homer crafts a compelling

dialogue that resonates with the enduring complexities of heroism, mortality, and the quest for identity within the context of the afterlife.

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