Kozak, Lynn. "Introduction: Binge-watching the *Iliad*." *Experiencing Hektor: Character in the* . London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017. 1–22. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781474245470.0006>>.

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Introduction: Binge-watching the *Iliad*

One of the things that I like about the show myself, and it might be the same as the crowd who watches it, is that it is not trying to be fast. It's not trying to be flashy. It takes its time and it's all leading to one specific thing and it's about these people's relationships . . . And there are so many details and it's so elaborate, what's happening, and you have to wait a long, long time sometimes to get the payoff of something that's been planted like a little seed in the corner. And I think that that appeals to certain people. And for that reason they become addicted in a different way, that they are not getting the dish served and they eat it and they forget about it, but that it's something that is served, but not fully, that it will be served a little more next time, and I think that appeals to these fans.

Mads Mikkelsen, on *Hannibal* (NBC, 2013–15)¹

I am addicted to stories. And the story that I am addicted to the most is the *Iliad*: I read it or listen to it or watch it performed or perform it over and over and over again, and I weep (usually for Hektor), and still I can't wait to experience it again. When I work, mostly on the *Iliad*, I watch television. Hours and hours of television. Strangely, but not so strangely, these two addictions developed at around the same time in my life, when I found myself shifting my devotion from Greek tragedy to epic and slipping from 'film buff' to 'TV addict'. This book explores these addictions through the shared poetics of the *Iliad* and contemporary television, and how serial narrative uses characterization to 'hook' its audiences, just as the *Iliad* has caught me with its Hektor.

The *Iliad* stands as a coherent piece of oral (or orally-derived) poetry with a narrative structure that shows it to be a product of aesthetic intent,² whether it was created by many voices or by a single composer/poet,³ whether over a long period of time or in a single period of composition.⁴ Performers deliver (or would have delivered) the *Iliad* both episodically and sequentially, as a *serial* narrative.⁵ Episodes within this serial performance contain important narrative events like the death of Patroklos, the death of Hektor or the ransom of Hektor's

body: the order of these scenes matters as much as what they contain. An audience might consider each of these scenes as distinct and disparate from one another, but they cohere into a single long narrative, with a beginning (the rage of Achilles), a middle (battles and battles) and an end (the funeral of Hektor). The *Iliad* is long-form serial performance that we can consume, but not all at once (every performer, every audience member, must take breaks from the *Iliad*).

Serial narratives rely on certain poetics in part because of their length, which places huge demands on an audience's memory (in addition to the memory of an oral poet/performer).⁶ This length consists of both actual narration time as well as breaks between sections of narrative, or 'episodes'.⁷ So before exploring the *Iliad* within the poetics of serial narratives, it is helpful to understand the *Iliad* as a serial narrative, as a temporal experience that consists of both episodes and breaks. The extant *Iliad* encompasses nearly sixteen thousand lines, which a performer would have delivered in sequence over several days with many performance breaks. While it is impossible to know the exact length of any given performance of the *Iliad*, it is nonetheless worthwhile to consider approximate performance times, because they can help place narrative events in relative position to each other within an experience of the *Iliad*'s story. For calculating the amount of time that passes in performance, I use a metric from my own production of *Iliad* 21/22, where the performer, Paul Van Dyck, averaged around thirteen and a half lines per minute in his performance of my English translation of those books, which would produce a total performance time of between nineteen and twenty hours for the whole epic. While using an English translation may seem like an odd choice, this average at least accounts for fluency and movement as part of a performance time.⁸ More, it comes into a comfortable middle ground between the fifteen hours that it took for the 2015 Almeida Theatre presentation of reading the *Iliad* in English,⁹ and the possibly slower times that the Greek requires. In Greek, Katherine Kretler's performance pace comes to between ten and thirteen lines per minute.¹⁰ Stephen Daitz's work with Homer in pitch accent averages out to around nine lines per minute,¹¹ or around thirty hours of performance time. Taplin estimates around twenty-five hours total performance time.¹² These different estimates show the impossibility of capturing a 'real' performance time, so I will use my average simply to give an idea of the total performance time and to create a constant against which relative points in the narrative can be compared.

In addition to the total performance time, we must also take into account that performers would have to take breaks. Most scholars divide the *Iliad* into three separate performance sessions, lasting six to ten hours each.¹³ This might be

possible in terms of *total* performance, but breaks would most certainly have to be taken more often than every six to ten hours, given the physical demands on both the performer and the audience.¹⁴ Ancient evidence points to shorter parts of the *Iliad* being performed: these might suggest ‘episodes’ from performances of the whole.¹⁵ Observational studies of ‘analogous’ singer traditions put breaks at every half hour or so,¹⁶ or whenever the singer might get tired.¹⁷ Having worked with performers, and having sat through several longer shows, I would say that performance chunks could reasonably be between a half hour and an hour and a half, with total performance time coming to twelve hours a day *including* regular, and sometimes longer, breaks.¹⁸ While these thoughts on time are purely speculative, they provide a working framework within which to consider the *Iliad* as a serial narrative.

Previously on . . . The *Iliad*

While the length of the *Iliad* alone implies a complex narrative, that complexity manifests itself in multiple features of the epic across its storyworld, characters, events, settings and temporalities.¹⁹ What Mittell says of television serial can be said of ancient epic: the serial ‘creates a sustained narrative world populated by a consistent set of characters who experience a chain of events over time.’²⁰ This can be applied to many storytelling forms, but serial narratives are unique in that they balance the episodic and the continuous in such a way that maintains audience engagement over great lengths of time and multiple breaks from the narrative.

Serial narrative as a form has historically emerged through a range of media, from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century serialized novels,²¹ to radio serials, to comic books, to contemporary television. Television has seen ebbs and flows in its commitment to seriality, and scholars draw a distinction between *serials* and *series*: series are designed to run indefinitely, and might include shows like *ER* (NBC, 1994–2009), *NYPD Blue* (ABC, 1993–2005), or soap operas like *Coronation Street* (ITV, 1960–). A serial, on the other hand, is ‘usually fixed to a limited number of episodes with a clearly defined beginning, middle, and end’, and so, in many ways is ‘an expansion on the creative coherence of the single play.’²² Shows within this genre include *Breaking Bad* (AMC, 2008–13), *Sons of Anarchy* (FX, 2008–14) and *Game of Thrones* (HBO, 2011–present), but perhaps even more particularly, anthology shows like *American Horror Story* (FX, 2011–) or *True Detective* (HBO, 2014–): these serials have a clear ‘end point’ that they

aim for, either from its beginning, or from a mid-point within the narrative.²³ Sometimes, just as with the *Iliad*,²⁴ certain events, characters, and even the serial's end are based on 'traditional' source materials,²⁵ ranging from novels to comic books to other television shows and films: consider *Hannibal* (NBC, 2013–15), *Game of Thrones* (HBO, 2011–), *Gotham* (FOX, 2014–) or *Sherlock* (BBC, 2010–). Shows can also determine and reveal their own end-points, which the narrative then works towards, like *How I Met Your Mother* (CBS, 2005–14). The contemporary television serial as a long-form closed narrative is now nearly ubiquitous, driven in part by technological advances that allow viewers to 'binge-watch' entire seasons or shows at a time, feeding their addictions.²⁶

Of course, the experience of watching a single performer of the *Iliad* over several days differs drastically from the experience of watching a television serial over several days (or weeks, months, or even years). Temporally, we might stretch our analogy to think of the epic cycle as a mirror for serial anthology programmes, where each 'season' correlates to an epic poem in the cycle. But still television undeniably differs from epic performance. Television works as a visual and aural medium that uses multiple physical locations and embodied actors to tell stories usually written by several authors within a format that is (usually) temporally and commercially constrained (i.e. each episode can be forty-two minutes long, with a budget of one million dollars), though there are, as I will show, exceptions to this production mode. Nevertheless, both ancient epic and contemporary television serials (or radio serials) are non-literate narrative forms that both work harder to construct and are more reliant on audience memory than literary serial narratives like novels or comic books. So contemporary television serial poetics can provide a helpful analogue to those of the ancient epic.²⁷

Poetics, more than other literary theories,²⁸ consider the text alongside its producers' strategies and its audience outcomes. Poetics can be historical,²⁹ but I will use them to examine the analogous structures and strategies that allow for sustained audience engagement in serial narratives. Michael Z. Newman's article on the poetics of serial television, 'From Beats to Arcs: Toward a Poetics of Television Narrative', discusses television serials as having three distinct levels – beats, episodes, and arcs (to which I would add 'sequences' between beats and episodes) – within its long-form structure that I will show can also be seen in the *Iliad*.³⁰

At each level, I will also address character, and how narrative strategies and audience response combine to construct characters within serial narratives. Character exists as a constructed analogue to a person,³¹ or a fictional being,³² rather than a sign, symbol, or even a type.³³ This fictional being emerges through

‘all information associated with a character in a text’³⁴ (whether directly or indirectly associated) and audience engagement with that information: the narrative strategically provides a constellation of character information that we as the audience connect into a whole. The term ‘identification’ has often defined this kind of relationship between audience and character, but Murray Smith’s model of film character engagement feels more experientially accurate,³⁵ as it describes the audience’s recognition, alignment, and allegiance with characters.³⁶

Recognition ‘describes the spectator’s construction of character: the perception of a set of textual elements ... as an individuated and continuous human agent’.³⁷ Narratives promote audience recognition of character by providing a character’s physical cues along with their names, roles, and relationships, all of which the audience can latch onto. At the same time, the amount of time and information that a narrative gives a character allows the audience to recognize how central that character is within the story.

Once a narrative has established character recognition in its audience, it can begin to build what Smith calls ‘character alignment’.³⁸ As Smith says, ‘Structures of alignment are produced by two, interlocking character functions, cognate with narrational range and depth: *spatio-temporal attachment* and *subjective access*’.³⁹ Mittell sums up these two aspects of alignment: ‘Alignment consists of two key elements: *attachment*, in which we follow the experiences of particular characters, and *access* to subjective interior states of emotions, thought processes, and morality’.⁴⁰ Both epic and television serials give their audiences many opportunities to attach to characters, showing us what characters do or say. Access is trickier. Scholars have often lamented over a perceived lack of interiority in the *Iliad*’s characters,⁴¹ but television, too, rarely gives direct, interior access to its characters. With the exception of shows that feature first-person voice-over, like *Dexter* (Showtime 2006–13), *Peep Show*, (Channel 4, 2003–) or *Mr. Robot* (USA, 2015–), the majority of contemporary television programmes give little interior access to their characters. Likewise, the *Iliad* occasionally gives us access to a character ‘talking to their own heart’, in a kind of externalized form of inner monologue.⁴² But for the most part, both television serials and the *Iliad* allow audiences to infer their characters’ interior states through ‘an accumulation of external markers’,⁴³ like character appearance,⁴⁴ gesture, dialogue,⁴⁵ and explicit narrative. Audiences then use these markers to guess as to what a character’s motivation might be,⁴⁶ which aids in alignment. Once an audience aligns with a character, they are open to character allegiance, which means that the audience morally judges them, and will feel either sympathy or antipathy with them in part based on those judgements.⁴⁷ So Smith’s model, which Mittell adapts for

television character, clearly describes audience experience of character over time: we come to recognize a character (recognition), then we spend time with that character and get to know that character (alignment), and finally, we come to like or dislike that character (allegiance).

Most serial narratives rely on broad ensembles of characters. This means that serials frequently shift audience alignments, allowing the audience to attach to one character or another, so that audiences often have multiple allegiances and almost always know more than any one character knows,⁴⁸ in what Smith terms a 'melodramatic structure of alignment'.⁴⁹ When the audience knows more than any individual character does,⁵⁰ they will then guess at and watch for character reactions to those events as much as for further narrative progression.⁵¹ Most contemporary television serials rely on this dynamic, and scholars now recognize that shows like *The Wire* (HBO, 2002–8) and *Lost* utilize melodramatic alignment structures to great effect.⁵² Smith equates melodrama with the 'expressive tradition',⁵³ sidestepping its gendered connotations with a focus on character expressivity. 'Performance expressivity endows the narration with great depth, which, in combination with a pattern of multiple attachment, produces the distinctive alignment pattern that we have termed the melodramatic structure of alignment.'⁵⁴ Complex serial narratives like ancient epic and contemporary television serials use characters, their emotional responses to events, and our emotional responses to those characters, as the basis for their narrative structures. Now I will return to those narrative structural levels to demonstrate how these fundamentals of character construction work from beats, to episodes, and finally, to arcs, with some consideration of sequences.

Beats

The smallest structural unit of serial television that Newman identifies is the 'beat',⁵⁵ which can sometimes (but not always) be the same as a 'scene'. In a beat, something happens; a scene (in television) usually implies a switch of location.⁵⁶ Alex Epstein gives the example of a car chase, which is a single action or plot point (beat), but can take place across multiple scenes; likewise a party at a beach (or, for the *Iliad*, a battle), might contain several beats, where diverse events or conversations take place in the same scene.⁵⁷

The *Iliad*, like a television serial, consists of a long series of often very short beats.⁵⁸ In television, beats are usually less than two minutes long,⁵⁹ and so move the action along at a fast clip:⁶⁰ exceptions are often deliberate, and can either

mark a particular scene (or rarely, of a whole show) as unconventional. *Daredevil*'s second season introduces popular comic book character The Punisher/Frank Castle as a main antagonist for Daredevil/Matt Murdock (Netflix, 2015–). His character's import (and the possibility of a future spin-off show) both mean that his first dialogue scene with Daredevil comes in at almost a full six minutes,⁶¹ two to three times longer than the other beats in the episode. This length allows the episode to set up the primary conflict between the two characters that will drive their story arcs in the coming episodes. We can see something similar in the *Iliad*, in the beat that establishes the conflict between Agamemnon and Achilles, which, in their first exchange, would last nearly seven minutes of performance time (1.101–87). But most beats are much shorter. The previous beats in Book 1 last from less than a minute (the proem, 1.1–7), to about two and a half minutes (the exchange between Kalchas and Achilles, 1.69–100).⁶²

Beats generally focus on either characters or events, but the two always work in tandem: events involve characters, while characters also discuss or respond to events. Within this relationship, beats are essential in building character recognition, alignment, and allegiance.⁶³ In terms of recognition, every beat takes the time to establish (or re-establish) the identities of its characters through their names, roles, and relationships to one another. Newman includes this recognition strategy in serial television's general tendency to recap:

(Recapping) takes many forms, one of which is the perpetual naming of characters: in every beat, characters address each other by name, often several times in a two-minute segment. Along with naming comes role reiteration: *Alias* (ABC, 2001–) constantly reminds us that Jack and Irina are Sydney's parents; Giles is always reminding Buffy (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, WB, 1997–2001) that he is her watcher; Joel on *Northern Exposure* (CBS, 1990–5) is often called 'Dr Fleishman,' even away from his practice, and his favourite leisure activity, golfing, reinforces his role stereotype.⁶⁴

The *Iliad*'s oral/aural narrative similarly creates character recognition through the repetition of names, patronyms, and epithets⁶⁵ in each of its beats.⁶⁶ The narrative does not just repeatedly name Hektor, but it augments his identity with repeated, metrically appropriate and often context-specific epithets: he is 'shining' (φαίδιμος) or 'man-killing' (ἀνδροφόνος).⁶⁷ The poem also enforces his role as the son of Priam, usually through his patronymic (Πριαμίδης, cf. 2.817, 5.684, etc.). These repetitions remind the audience who characters are while also reinforcing their relationships and social roles, both within the epic and within a larger tradition.

Just as beats work to establish and re-establish characters, they also work to establish and re-establish setting, time, and events.⁶⁸ These elements contribute to character alignment, as the narrative allows the audience to 'attach' to a character through their physical surroundings, and gives 'access' to that character as they participate in or respond to events. Allegiance builds as we judge characters' actions, but also as we judge their responses to other actions, events, and characters. Beats build this allegiance by using character dialogue to recap previous events, in what Mittell calls 'diegetic retelling'.⁶⁹ Whichever character re-tells an event gives his or her perspective on that event, just as whichever character (or characters) are told about an event react to that event:⁷⁰ these character responses to events effectively build character allegiance as much as (if not more than) events themselves. So beats constantly recap significant narrative events and provide new information about the emotional or real consequences those prior events have for characters.

Beats do not confine themselves to recapping past narrative events. In beats, characters frequently discuss past actions that have happened outside of the narrative's timeframe,⁷¹ which creates character backstories and provides further opportunity for audience allegiance. Backstories deepen characters and create a history of the storyworld that other characters can share in, which contributes to the illusion that the storyworld and its characters are 'real'.

At the same time, character dialogue or actions in beats often look forward to future events.⁷² This is particularly true of beats that establish 'missions', a common device in serial narratives, which can structure a beat sequence (Jon Snow tries to retrieve the dragonglass during the battle of Hardhome in *Game of Thrones*, S5E8), an episode (Carol and Maggie try to escape from the Saviours in *The Walking Dead*, S6E13), an arc (Brienne of Tarth vows to protect the Stark girls in *Game of Thrones*, from S2E8 onwards), or even a series (Battlestar Galactica tries to find 'Earth'). The 'mission' can give all of these levels an end point that the audience can anticipate and look forward to, and obstacles for characters to overcome along the way.⁷³ Missions commonly appear in the *Iliad* as well, and serve similarly to keep the audience engaged. Helenos's telling Hektor to go back to Troy in at 6.86–118 naturally creates audience expectation that Hektor will go to Troy in a future beat (he arrives in Troy at 6.237); just as surely as Zeus's accepting Thetis's 'mission' to help Achilles by giving glory to the Trojans creates anticipation for how that will play out (1.517–27; cf. 15.47–77; 18.70–7).⁷⁴

In looking backwards (*analepsis*) or forwards (*prolepsis*),⁷⁵ beats do not revisit every past event,⁷⁶ nor do they anticipate every future event.⁷⁷ Nevertheless, these narrative glances in both directions keep the audiences hooked, reinforcing

or revealing new aspects of what the audience already knows about events and characters, while they build anticipation for what comes next.⁷⁸

Beats, of course, do not exist on their own: they are always incorporated into and contribute to the larger structural units of serial narrative. While I will wait to discuss beat structure in episodes as it pertains to character below, it is worth noting here the strategies that both serial television and the *Iliad* use to transition between beats. Most beats correspond with a change of scene, so there is simply a direct cut to a different character, in a different location. These transitions become more diverse in more complicated scenes with multiple characters, like battle scenes, which are often made up of multiple beats that focus on a few key characters: a 'beat sequence'. *Game of Thrones*' magnificent episode 'Hardhome', for example, ends on an eighteen-minute battle sequence at Hardhome between the wildlings, the men of the Night's Watch, and the 'walkers'. As Erik Adams writes about the episode,

... Miguel Sapochnik overcomes initial frenzy to lay out an attack depicted in beat-by-beat intricacy. He's helped by the characters that [writers] David Benioff and D.B. Weiss have sent over the wall: Unlike 'Blackwater' and 'The Watchers on the Wall' [other 'battle' episodes], we only have to keep track of Jon Snow and Tormund Giantsbane after the dead breach the gates. (The author now recognizes and acknowledges the delegates of the Eddison Tollett Fan Club, so I guess there are technically three entry points into the fracas.) This keeps the sequence's ambitions in check, but makes sense out of the hack-and-slash chaos. It also drives home the predicament facing our protagonists: The dread sinks deeper because 'Hardhome' makes its centerpiece feel like a handful of warriors facing an army of thousands.⁷⁹

In addition to these three main characters, 'Hardhome's battle beats also track a wildling giant, a tall, bald, wildling leader, and a wildling woman named Karsi, as well as the head of the army of the dead, known among fans as 'The Night King'. So the scene does not change, but the sequence involves many beats that move back and forth between these main characters, and some minor characters as well. Transitions between these beats occur through cuts (a sharp move from one character to another, with intermittent birds-eye views), following a character (the camera tracks Jon Snow as he runs through the fighting in the camp), or following a gaze or perception (the Night King watches Jon Snow from above the battle). These beat transitions compare easily to Scott Richardson's breakdown of what he calls 'scene changes' (but I would argue are beat transitions) from the *Iliad*,⁸⁰ which include 'physically following a character', 'following the perception of a character', and 'cuts between different characters who are at different locations'.⁸¹

Episodes

Sequential beats build into the next larger structural unit of serial television: the episode.⁸² Considering episodes seemingly presents the most difficult challenge in using the poetics of serial television to better understand the *Iliad*. Commercial interests generally compel television episodes to be a certain length and to appear at a certain frequency. Even on cable networks and in online venues, television serials tend to follow the conventions of having a pre-determined number of episodes in a season that are around the same length.⁸³ But ‘television’ is changing, morphing both creatively and formally beyond traditional constraints. The *Iliad*’s irregular ‘episodes’ might find a closer parallel with Louis C.K.’s online show *Horace and Pete* (louisck.net, 2016–): its episodes vary in length from thirty to sixty-seven minutes, and its narrative progress continued without giving any hint to how many episodes there would be. The show ended after ten episodes, with no indication that the tenth episode would be the show’s finale. One week after sharing the final episode, Louis C.K. wrote in an email to his fans:

Hi. So. That was it. I didn’t want to say, in the last email, that it was the last episode. Because I didn’t want you to know, as you watched the episode, that it would be the last one. But yeah, obviously, That was it . . . I chose to do the show this way, knowing that it would be a quiet and strange experiment and that only a few of us would take part in this stage of it, that has just ended. The creating, unfolding and watching of the show, one episode at a time, from nothing. I am grateful to all of you that took this trip with me the way you did, not knowing what you were getting, how much you were getting or how it would all feel. I was right there with you. I didn’t know how any of this would go or feel.⁸⁴

This kind of ad hoc production style suggests the *Iliad*’s own, possibly additive means of production,⁸⁵ and likewise points to the *Iliad*’s irregular episodes.

Judging the exact irregularity of the *Iliad*’s episodes, or performance segments, has been a central debate in Homeric scholarship, with a primary focus on how the *Iliad*’s book divisions came to be, and how they might correspond to composition and performance.⁸⁶ If we take the *Iliad*’s later-imposed book divisions as correspondent to possible performance breaks,⁸⁷ its whole performance would have twenty-four ‘episodes’, ranging in length from just over a half hour (Book 19, at 424 lines) to over an hour (Book 23, at 897 lines).

If we disregard the *Iliad*’s book divisions and take it as a whole poem that would have different breaks in its original performances,⁸⁸ then the poetics of

serial television can aid a more critical consideration of its possible performance breaks. The *Iliad*, like serial television, has a number of episodes where certain problems play to their resolution, while other strands of the narrative are left dangling. This creates different kinds of pleasures for the serial's audience: immediate pleasures for resolution within an episode, but anticipatory pleasure (and greater delayed pleasure) for the resolutions of those storylines left open.⁸⁹ Audiences rely on immediate pleasures not just because they help us through a longer narrative, but also because not everyone will stay for the *whole* story, when the whole story is many hours (or days, or years) long. So serial narratives balance closure and aperture, allowing the closure of a single, central issue in each 'episode', while maintaining several open story strands that keep audiences looking forward to resolutions in later episodes.⁹⁰

This tension between episode closure and aperture plays out in different ways in different shows: some shows *always* end on a cliffhanger, like the first season of *Alias*,⁹¹ others prefer to end an episode on the scene that resolves that episode's key problem (like *Sopranos*), or the scene just after a problem's resolution, showing the implication of that resolution moving forward. Defining episodes then requires a look at both at the end of one episode as well as the beginning of the next: does the action pick up where the last left off? Does the beat structure build in recaps of action from the last episode? Most television shows bridge the gap between episodes with a 'previously on . . .' clip before each episode. But some shows, like *The Good Wife* (CBS, 2009–), always start a new episode *in media res* without any 'previously on . . .' clip to place the viewer: this means that all significant information from previous episodes emerges in the present episode through diegetic retelling in character dialogue, or, occasionally, in flashback. *The Good Wife* also quite regularly does not include any of these recaps of previous episodes until after its title sequence, which is often anytime between eight and twelve minutes into the programme.⁹² Most shows alternate techniques in moving between episodes (consider *The Walking Dead*, or *Game of Thrones* or *Hannibal*). These serial strategies from television can be helpful in guessing at where a performer might take a break in the *Iliad*'s serial structure. The glory of live performance means that an *Iliad* performer could choose his own strategy for a given 'episode',⁹³ whether to leave a cliffhanger or resolve a problem. I imagine that a poet/performer would most likely plan out his breaks beforehand, with rough sketches in mind of where breaks might be most affective for an audience. Or, as can happen with live performance, the performer might choose to take a break based on any number of external factors: Are the audience into it? Is it time for dinner? Does he need a drink? Either way, the *Iliad*'s text that

survives, as I will show, certainly implies where breaks *can* happen, based on when and where important recaps occur.⁹⁴

While the sequence of beats that make up an episode generally focus on a single problem that finds resolution at the episode's end, these beats in combination also contribute significantly to character construction. Most episodes follow one central storyline with two to three other storylines simultaneously, switching back and forth between characters and their problems with each beat. So an episode can help audience recognition as it creates a hierarchy of character importance through how many beats it devotes to each character. On one extreme, an entire episode can keep an audience aligned with a single character: Mittell draws attention to *Lost*'s strategy of character-centric episodes, like a 'Kate-centric' episode.⁹⁵ As Mittell says, 'The effect of such centric episodes is to deepen viewers' knowledge of particular characters, providing access to their backstories (or futures) ...'⁹⁶ At the other extreme, some episodes introduce characters only to quickly dispose of them.⁹⁷ In *Star Trek*, it became a cultural gag that if an episode introduced a new character wearing an engineering/operations/security red uniform, he would die that same episode, hence the term 'red-shirts.'⁹⁸ We see something similar along this spectrum in the *Iliad*, where an audience aligns with a character for a length of time in battle, particularly if that character has the backing of a god, in what we call an *aristeia*, or 'time of excellence' (i.e. Diomedes, Agamemnon, Patroklos, or Achilles). But on the other end of the spectrum, many of the *Iliad*'s characters are named only once, and only at the moment of their often-gruesome death.⁹⁹

Beyond simply creating hierarchies of narrative importance, episodes also reveal different aspects of a character in its diverse interactions within a melodramatic alignment structure. Discussing *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999–2007), Anthony Smith writes that in an episode's

multi-plot structure, the juxtaposition of storylines often creates additional meaning,¹⁰⁰ and that 'this multi-plot format contributes towards *Sopranos* characters' much heralded complexities ... by permitting characters to be seen from a multitude of viewpoints, [multi-plot storytelling] brings their complex natures to the fore.¹⁰¹

Smith demonstrates this dynamic with the lead character of *NYPD Blue* (ABC, 1993–2005), Andy Sipowicz, who interacts with both criminals and his family:

Sipowicz ... is both notoriously thuggish, abusive, and prejudiced, yet still a loving family man. The episode construction conventions of television drama

thus help facilitate the comprisal of these characters' perhaps seemingly paradoxical components.¹⁰²

The *Iliad* operates similarly: Hektor stands out as an affecting character precisely because we see him both on the battlefield and with his family, often in the same 'episode' (as in the possible episodes of Book 6, or Book 22).¹⁰³

Besides showing us different sides of a character, the order and diversity of beats in a given episode can also create important juxtapositions that also contribute to characterization. For *The Sopranos*, Smith discusses the frequent jarring juxtapositions between mafia and domestic scenes, which implicitly point to the tensions in character roles between the two worlds, even if the same character does not appear in these subsequent scenes.¹⁰⁴ In discussing soap episode strategies, Robert Allen says 'Because serials cut between scenes enacting separate plotlines, the viewer is prompted to ask not only "Where is each of these plotlines going?" but also "What might be the relationship between different plotlines?"'¹⁰⁵ Character action or dialogue in one beat that establishes allegiance can affect audience allegiance to the characters in the following beat, even if the scenes are seemingly unrelated.

Arcs

While episodes provide closure for specific character problems before a break in the serial's narrative, they usually leave some problems unresolved, or 'dangling',¹⁰⁶ which subsequent episodes take up, to form a character 'arc'. 'Arcs' can last from a few beats to several episodes – some can last for the whole narrative. Newman explicitly understands arcs as character-based: 'arc is to character as plot is to story . . . although each episode, sweeps period, season and series . . . may have its own unity, each character's story can be individuated, spatialized as an overlapping all of these and all of the other characters' arcs.'¹⁰⁷ Character arcs can shift narrative focus from one 'problem' to another, but they are always anchored in the character themselves. For Hektor, the 'episode' that overlaps with Book 6 focuses on his mission to Troy and its resolution. But Hektor's arc stretches over many episodes, from the first time that Achilles mentions him in Book 1 to his death in Book 22, and beyond, to the epic's last line, which summarizes the Trojans' funeral for him.

Each character in the *Iliad* has an arc: red-shirts' arcs can last just one beat; Achilles' arc lasts the whole of the epic. The *Iliad*'s melodramatic structure

foregrounds different arcs at different times. Moebio Labs has created a visualization of the *Iliad* that perfectly demonstrates this idea of these ‘individuated, spatialized’ character arcs which the narrative foregrounds at certain times, and turns away from at others (see Fig. 1).¹⁰⁸

Fig. 1 Story arcs of the *Iliad*.

moebio.com

With this visualization of Books 1–8, we can see how the *Iliad* maintains Hektor’s arc for the first several books of the *Iliad*, and particularly foregrounds his arc in the episodes that span over Books 6 and 7. But the arc flows freely on either side of those episodes, with Hektor appearing to greater or lesser extent in other episodes.¹⁰⁹

The arc builds a sense of mimetic realism in characters as it creates an illusion of continuity between disjointed beats and episodes. A character can disappear for several beats, or episodes – the *Iliad* withdraws from Achilles for huge chunks of performance time as surely as all of *Game of Thrones*’ season 5 ignores Bran Stark – but the narrative works to ensure that the audience believes that those characters are living a continuous temporal experience while we are away from them. So while the *Iliad* does not *show* us Achilles for more than four and a half hours (between 2.769 and 9.193), the narrators and other characters frequently make mention of him (at least thirteen times over that time period), so that he does not disappear completely.¹¹⁰ In this way, ‘story arcs create an illusion that the characters have existed before and continue living between and after episodes.’¹¹¹ This illusion gives the sense that characters are ‘real’, with pasts, futures, and presents that

extend beyond the narrative itself. These ‘real’ characters provide audiences, through their allegiances, with an emotional anchor that helps the audience track the story as it progresses: as Newman says, ‘we don’t just want to know what’s going to happen but what’s going to happen to Pembleton and Bayliss (*Homicide: Life on the Street*, NBC, 1993–9), Buffy and Spike, Angela and Jordan ...’¹¹²

This ‘reality’ derives from the nature of serial narrative itself, from the length of time that an audience spends with these characters, but also the time we spend away from them. Characters in serial

appear to live continuously between episodes, they grow and change with time, and have active ‘memories’ or previous events ... the constant repetition of a character means that characters ‘live’ in similar time scales to their audience. They have a past, a present, and a future that appear to exceed their textual existence ... they will return tomorrow, or next week, and the end of each episode has built into it the expectation of the next.¹¹³

Again, beats’ character conversations often involve backstories that give the impression that the character has a lived past outside of the narrative framework.¹¹⁴ Hopes or predictions for the future likewise give the impression that the character will live beyond the narrative’s end, even if, like in the case of the *Iliad*’s Achilles, it might not be for long beyond that boundary (cf. 22.365f.).

As we saw in discussing beats, characters also remember and respond to events that have happened within the narrative, and look forward to events that will happen within the narrative. The narrator himself also works to create these kinds of continuities, which also suggest a ‘reality’ for the story’s characters. When the narrative leaves Paris and Helen in Book 3, they are making love (3.447f); when Hektor ‘finds’ them in Book 6, well over two hours of performance time later, they are still in their bedroom, Paris preparing his weapons and Helen ordering the women about the housework (6.321–4). This consistency of space setting gives the impression of continuity, just as the change in activities indicates the passage of time as a shared experience between the audience and the other characters. Both invite the audience to ‘fill in the gaps’, engaging further with the character’s arc.

Character change

It is worth questioning whether this illusion of lived continuity that character arcs create over time can also point towards character ‘change’ or ‘growth’. Critics

of Homeric characterization have complained of epic characters' static-ness, holding them against the bar of the modern novel's 'developed', 'round' characters.¹¹⁵ Television theorists, too, have perceived a lack of character development within the serial form. Pearson describes character elaboration or accumulation, rather than development, in the television serial:

Over the course of a long-running series, the routine augmenting of traits and biographies for novelty purposes can lead to highly elaborated characters. But a highly elaborated character is not the same as a well-developed character . . . it's more accurate to talk about character accumulation and depth than it is to talk about character development.¹¹⁶

Henrik Örnebring considers this dynamic in terms of 'character showcasing', i.e. providing discursive opportunities not to develop and change the character but to let the character do 'what he/she does best'.¹¹⁷ Mittell accepts Pearson's notion of 'character accumulation' or 'elaboration', but he suggests that the serial form itself 'gradually reveals aspects of character over time so that these facets of the character feel new to the audience, even if they are consistent and unchanging character attributes'.¹¹⁸ In other words, serial narratives create character dynamism by revealing new character information over time, particularly through character relationships and 'life' events, rather than 'developing' the character itself.

So serial narratives can create the illusion of character change through these gradual revelations of new character attributes. How this differs from 'real' change is quite hard to know. As Newman says, 'Continuing stories make characters more likely to undergo significant life events and changes. In reaction to these changes in circumstances the characters themselves are more likely to change or at least to grow'.¹¹⁹ We can see this tension between character 'change' and character deepening with a character like *Game of Thrones*' Jaime Lannister. In the first episode, Jaime pushes a child, Bran Stark, out of high window because the boy caught him having sex with his sister. This seemingly establishes Jaime as a 'villain'. But over time, Jaime is captured in war-time (twice), loses a hand, and becomes friends with Brienne of Tarth: these events and relationships reveal new aspects of his character that quickly made him a fan favourite. How can we tell the difference between seeing a new side of a character, or seeing a *real* character change?

Mittell notes how external character markers, like a new haircut or wardrobe, as well as character's own proclamations about themselves and what others say about them can all give the audience access to interior character changes after

major events.¹²⁰ Jaime Lannister was a famous swordsman before he loses his sword hand in captivity—then, when he finally makes it back home, he also cuts his hair: this marks him as a changed man from his experience beyond the physical evidence of the lost hand itself, though he remains recognizably ‘Jaime’. In the same episode where Jaime first sports the shorter hair, his sister/lover Cersei rebuffs his advances, and he says to her, ‘Something’s changed.’ She responds, ‘Everything’s changed! You come back after all this time with no apologies and one hand, and you expect everything to be the same?’¹²¹ So through both external markers and character dialogue, the narrative establishes that Jaime has changed, and so too, then, must his relationship with Cersei. Achilles provides the most obvious *Iliadic* example of this kind of character change: not only does he wear new armour after the death of Patroklos, but Achilles explicitly claims that Patroklos’s death has changed him, when he explains to the Trojan Lykaon that he will kill him rather than ransom him alive, as he would have (and had done) *before* Patroklos’s death (21.99–113).¹²²

But these changes, too, are often not permanent, or representative of what we might think of as ‘character development’. Mittell notes that:

most of such changes in a serial are either temporary, attributed to an external factor that dissipates over the course of an episode or short arc, or only midlevel shifts in behaviors and attitudes, rather than high-level transformations of core morality and ethics that would prompt a change in our allegiances.¹²³

While we have yet to see the totality of Jaime Lannister’s arc which might give us some clue of whether or not his character had truly ‘changed’, the *Iliad* gives us an Achilles in Book 24 that does seem to show a man returning to his own core values.

Character overhaul

In the repertoire of temporary changes that serial narratives can put their characters through, without risking alienating their audience’s core allegiance with a character, one such change is a ‘character overhaul’. Mittell defines a character overhaul as ‘where a character undergoes a dramatic, sudden shift, often tied to a supernatural or fantastic situation.’¹²⁴ Some shows use these interventions as a standard part of their narrative strategies: *Dollhouse* (FOX, 2009–10), *iZombie* (CW, 2015–) and *Sense8* (Netflix, 2015–) all frequently change the personalities of their protagonists through external interventions.

The *Iliad* does this too, when gods possess its heroes for short periods of time, often changing their outward appearance and capabilities during that time known as an *aristeia* (or, 'time of excellence') on the battlefield (like Diomedes in Book 5, Agamemnon in Book 11, and Patroklos in Book 16).¹²⁵ These character overhauls force the audience to reassess their character recognition, but the change rarely lasts long enough to truly challenge audience allegiance.

Character transformation (Stockholm syndrome?)

In rare cases, a television serial will sustain or develop character change over the entirety of its character arc. While I do not believe that this is true of any of the characters in the *Iliad*, examining how allegiance works in these cases can also be helpful for thinking about Iliadic characterization. *Breaking Bad* creator Vince Gilligan set out with a clear goal in mind in creating his show's protagonist Walter White: 'We're going to take Mr. Chips, and we're going to turn him into Scarface.'¹²⁶ Over the course of five seasons, Walter White changes from a sympathetic family man with cancer to a morally reprehensible drug kingpin. But audiences still watched, with the show's finale garnering four times the number of viewers than its premiere had.¹²⁷ Gilligan himself said of his lead character:

I have kind of lost sympathy for Walt along the way . . . I find it interesting, this sociological phenomenon, that people still root for Walt. Perhaps it says something about the nature of fiction, that viewers have to identify on some level with the protagonist of the show, or maybe he's just interesting because he is good at what he does. Viewers respond to people who are good at their job, even when they are bad.¹²⁸

This has obvious implications for how we understand the *Iliad*, whose characters often operate far outside our own moral frameworks. As we acclimate ourselves to the characters' worlds, we form allegiances with those characters not just within *our* moral framework, but also within *their* moral framework. We root for the Iliadic heroes who are good at killing because that is a standard metric of their world.

Jason Mittell discusses Walter White's transformation at length, and he has a slightly different take on why the audience continues to follow him:

(for cuing our allegiance to Walt) . . . we have our own memories of who Walt used to be, as long-term viewers can recall him as being decent and ethical, if

boring and depressed. Our serial memories help sustain lingering allegiance, despite his irredeemable acts along the way.¹²⁹

Mittell suggests that Walt ‘coasts’ on our shared memories with the character, as though we have lived through something together. This means that even if new character revelations contribute to our allegiance shifting away from a character, (my own allegiance had shifted entirely to Jesse, Walt’s partner in crime, by the end of *Breaking Bad*), we still remain emotionally engaged in that character. For better or worse, I still wanted to know what would happen to Walter White. Familiarity breeds allegiance, as do the memories of characters and audiences of that character, even if they contrast with that character’s other behaviours. This applies to many characters in the *Iliad*, but especially to Hektor and Patroklos, as character memories (along with our own) continue to shape our impression of that character alongside or even against our *experience* of that character.

How does this character impression form, through these structural units of beats, episodes, and arcs? While recognition, alignment, and allegiance help to describe how an audience *relates* to a character through the length of its arc, they do not wholly explain how the character exists within the audience’s mind. Recognition necessarily implies categorization, as audiences ‘sort’ characters based on the character’s most obvious identity and role attributes into basic categories that are defined within the audience’s own cultural context, such as gender, age, race, and social role. These categorizations happen nearly instantaneously, but they are culturally conditioned and can be broken down and transformed as the audience’s external norms are slowly merged and adapted to the narrative’s internal norms. We get used to a character as a ‘warrior’ or a ‘drug dealer’ beyond our own prejudices as we move through the narrative. So our allegiances are schema-based,¹³⁰ but malleable. As David Miall says of reader affect, ‘there is also the sequential, experiential aspect of reading which uncovers ambiguity, indeterminacy, and conflict between schemata, and these require the reader’s interpretative activity, during which schemata are shifted, transformed, or superseded.’¹³¹

This process broadly correlates to the social cognition model of impression formation in considering other people. In this process, schemata are used in combination with ‘piecemeal integration’, in both serial and parallel processes. We have seen how serial narrative constructs opportunity for character recognition, alignment, and allegiance. In a nearly mirror process in our real lives, when we meet someone, we initially categorize them, we rate their personal relevance to us, then, if we have the energy, we confirm or negate our previous

categorizations, we re-categorize, and finally, we go through piecemeal integration.¹³² In piecemeal integration, we take in all of the disparate pieces of information that we have about a person and integrate them into a coherent impression, averaging out what we know of the character so that some character attributes that do not fit within the integration are left out. This continuum model of impression formation is a dynamic process that continues up until the point where we have no new information about a person or a character to incorporate into it.¹³³ This piecemeal integration explains why audiences can ‘average out’ some of Walter White’s worse features, or why we tend to view Iliadic heroes as ‘typical’ rather than as the nuanced, messy characters that the *Iliad* actually presents.

At the same time, piecemeal integration implies extraordinary audience engagement: we only make it to this stage if we have already rated a character significant enough to try to accommodate their multiple facets. We can apply this process in tandem with Smith’s levels of character engagement to our own experience of characters in serial narratives. The narrative takes time to establish character, through repeating and reinforcing names, roles, and relationships, so that we recognize that character and how they fit into the story. This recognition forces character categorization, and, as the narrative progresses forces re-categorization, as we acquire the narrative’s internal norms. Re-categorization and evaluation also happen through character alignment, as the narrative then attaches to that character’s behaviour, and provides access to their inner thoughts. This time ‘getting to know’ a character, both in relation to our own cultural schema and to the storyworld’s schema, finally invites audience allegiance to the character. Then we become emotionally invested in what happens to them, rooting for some and against others, usually in accordance with the rules of their storyworld. Characters can change and can display diverse or even ‘inconsistent’ behaviours, but these changes and inconsistencies often serve to further engage audiences and, through that engagement, can increase audience allegiance. The *Iliad*’s serial narrative aims then, not for character consistency,¹³⁴ but for coherence,¹³⁵ as it challenges character recognition and constantly switches character alignments, but all the while inspires character allegiance.¹³⁶

Experiencing Hektor

This book will explore how the *Iliad* constructs Hektor’s character through a serial analysis of the *Iliad* itself, with sub-sections determined by beats, sequence,

or episode transitions as they are most relevant to Hektor. The object of the book is not to determine who Hektor is, but rather to demonstrate where the epic invites its audiences to think on who he is. The body of the book divides into three main parts: *Enter Hektor* explores the *Iliad*'s establishment of its storyworld and how it slowly introduces Hektor and constructs audience recognition, alignment, and allegiance with him; *Killing Time* looks at the middle section of the epic's narrative, and shows how alignment and allegiance shift and change through character absence, re-introduction, overhaul, and re-establishment; finally, *Ends* looks at how the narrative starts to resolve its story arcs, with some special focus on how the narrative uses character memory to leave lasting character impressions. The book then mirrors the *Iliad*'s own serial strategies, peeling back its many layers of character information that it imparts piece-by-piece over the length of its narrative, examining how each beat engages audience recognition, alignment, and allegiance. This approach stems from my own endlessly frustrating and addictive experience of Hektor.

Hektor has generally been the character that I respond to most strongly in the *Iliad*, but that alone has given me little insight into his character. Hektor is, of course, the defender of Troy,¹³⁷ but he fails in that role. What might be said about Hektor? He is brave.¹³⁸ He is a coward. He is a great fighter. He is a mediocre fighter.¹³⁹ He makes mistakes.¹⁴⁰ He goes mad.¹⁴¹ He is civil.¹⁴² He is a gentle man.¹⁴³ He is cruel, boastful and vindictive. He is delusional.¹⁴⁴ He is tall, handsome.¹⁴⁵ He is constrained by his own masculinity.¹⁴⁶ He is connected to femininity.¹⁴⁷ He is a type.¹⁴⁸ He is a character.¹⁴⁹ He exists only as a foil for Paris.¹⁵⁰ He serves as a 'whipping-boy for the Greeks'.¹⁵¹

I am not sure that any of these arguments matter: some of them might be true, some of them are certainly true, some of them are certainly true only in specific scenarios or character relationships. I have been working on Hektor for nearly a decade now, and still I feel that he is unknowable and still I want to know him more. Perhaps this is because he is drawn so well in all his different facets that jut out at odd angles, depending on the situation he is in or the other character(s) that he is with. As the above paragraph shows, I have never found a clean paradigm that I can fit Hektor into, nor a list of traits that I can easily ascribe to him.¹⁵² Hektor resembles Cy Twombly's painting of his shade: he has a form, but it is petalled, blurry – solid, and yet indistinct.¹⁵³ Hektor exists, but always in between: in between what he says and what he does and how someone else responds; in between the moment that I experience him and the impression that I hold of him in my mind.

The challenges of understanding Hektor speak to the challenges of serial narrative. Any audience member that experiences a serial narrative must build

and rebuild their understanding of both character and story throughout their experience. Each beat of the narrative might add new information, or recap significant past information, or reshape that past information in ways that contributes to characterization and builds anticipation for future events. Episodes resolve and leave us satisfied, but dangling story lines keep us coming back for more. Throughout, the *Iliad* uses its melodramatic alignment structure to keep shifting audience alignment between different characters, building a complex network of audience allegiance to diverse characters. As our allegiances grow, we become more invested in character arcs so that we keep coming back to find out what happens to our favourite characters next.¹⁵⁴ Breaks between episodes can also change our understanding: at a performance, we might ask our neighbour if they remember a detail we have forgotten, or find out who their favourite character is, which might influence our own views. In between television episodes, we might talk to our colleagues, or scour the internet for commentary and reviews, looking for interpretations that reinforce or challenge our own. Serial narratives become interwoven with our lives, their length and their focus on characters and character responses ripe for social and parasocial modes of cognitive engagement.¹⁵⁵

So this book will not account for who Hektor is, but will demonstrate the incredible way that the *Iliad's* serial poetics construct him within a melodramatic alignment structure, in all his ambiguity and multiplicity, in all his coherence and continuity, for audiences to engage with. The greatest beauty of the *Iliad* is that it encourages so many character alignments to always keep us engaged: we root for multiple characters, even when they are against one another. When asked about the complexity of his characters in his novels that make up the series the *Song of Fire and Ice*, the inspiration for HBO's *Game of Thrones*, George R.R. Martin said

I've been always very impressed by Homer and his *Iliad*, especially the scene of the fight between Achilles and Hector. Who is the hero and who is the villain? That's the power of the story and I wanted something similar to my books. The hero of one side is the villain of the other side.¹⁵⁶