

Prior to any form of autobiography as a “written” text, the telling of first-person narratives arose in an oral medium, with many of the best examples appearing in Homeric poetry. Such narrative presentations of the self exhibit already in their earliest known forms many of the features of later, stylized autobiography. In particular, I argue, Homeric autobiography has an ethical function: Homeric heroes create their identities through the performance of autobiography, and from these identities flow expectations for how a hero is to act in order to receive praise or blame.

In Homer, a hero identifies himself by telling the story of himself—but already in these earliest examples of autobiography the self is highly manipulable. Guests present themselves in a ritualized but flexible autobiographical form that allows for modification of their identity to the greatest advantage before their hosts. The most elaborate example of this is Odysseus’ over 2000 line long *apologoi* that he tells to identify himself to Alcinous and win favor for his journey home. This identifying story encompasses by allusion his whole life, from his parentage and land of birth (*Od.* 9.21–36) to his eventual death (*Od.* 11.134–37). Heroes may even present outright false autobiographies, such as the various false identities that Odysseus assumes in Ithaca before revealing his true self.

Such autobiographical expressions of identity are not peripheral or derivative modes of self-definition, but actually central modes of conception and formation of the Homeric self. A hero’s identity, as both he and others understand it, is his reputation (Dodds 1951; Adkins 1960). Narratives, such as autobiography, form and mediate reputation and, hence, identity. Following the model of narrative ethics of Alasdair MacIntyre (1981; 1988), I argue that the process of identity formation happens through narration. In the first instance, a hero grapples with the complexities of his experience and struggles to make the world as he faces it morally intelligible. To aid in this process, he has inherited through mythic poetry certain forms of life, exemplified by heroes (or villains) of the tradition, that serve as examples for how to understand what kind of person he is (and ought to be) and what meaning the events of his life have.

But a hero’s autobiography is more than simply a descriptive or even tendentious account of his life, more than simply his reflection *ex post facto* on his experience. Rather, autobiography is a lived, ever renewed act of making one’s life take the form of an exemplary narrative. A morally astute hero takes a timeless, 3rd person narrative into his own life as a model of action, transforming myth into autobiography: e.g., Telemachus learns from the pattern of Orestes how he as the son of a dishonored father can take his revenge and thereby, like Orestes, obtain *kleos* (*Od.* 3.196–207). For Telemachus, who aims to inscribe his story into the epic tradition of generations to come, heroic life is enacted narrative, lived autobiography.

I argue in this paper for a broader definition of autobiography as the narration of one’s life in both word and deed. This model of autobiography prevails in Homeric epic, where heroes perform their life-stories, becoming, as it were, their own poets who compose their identities through both spoken and enacted narrative.