

ILIAD 22.60 AND 24.487: PRIAM ON THE THRESHOLD OF OLD AGE*

Few formulas from the Homeric epics are as well-known
and yet as unclear as those which describe “the threshold
of old age”.

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πρὸς δ' ἐμὲ τὸν δύστηνον ἔτι φρονέοντ' ἐλέησον,
δύσμορον, ὃν ῥα πατήρ Κρονίδης ἐπὶ γήραος οὐδῶ
αἴση ἐν ἀργαλήῃ φθίσει, κακὰ πόλλ' ἐπιδόντα,
υἱάς τ' ὀλλυμένους ἐληθεύσας τε θύγατρας
καὶ θαλάμους κεραιζομένους καὶ νήπια τέκνα
βαλλόμενα προτὶ γαίῃ ἐν αἰνῇ δηϊοτήτι,
ἐλκομένους τε νυοὺς ὀλοῆς ὑπὸ χερσὶν Ἀχαιῶν.

(Iliad 22.59–65)

Describing his misfortunes in a moving address to his son Hector, Priam says that he is about to die ἐπὶ γήραος οὐδῶ, ‘on the threshold of old age’. The phrase recurs two books later, when Priam appeals to Achilles for pity and points out that the hero’s aged father Peleus is, like himself, ὀλοῶ ἐπὶ γήραος οὐδῶ, ‘on the baneful threshold of old age’:

μνησαι πατρὸς σοῖο, θεοῖς ἐπιείκελ' Ἀχιλλεῦ,
τηλίκου ὡς περ ἐγών, ὀλοῶ ἐπὶ γήραος οὐδῶ
καὶ μὲν που κείνον περιναίεται ἀμφὶς ἕοντες
τείρουσ', οὐδέ τις ἔστιν ἀρῆν καὶ λοιγὸν ἀμύναι.

(Iliad 24.486–489)

In these two passages Priam is said to be ‘on the threshold of old age’ even though elsewhere in the *Iliad* he is often characterised as a γέρον, an old man – for example at 22.25 and 22.77, just before and just after the speech from which the first passage comes. How is this possible?

A number of explanations have been proposed. According to Eustathius, Archbishop of Thessalonice, τὸ δὲ «ἐπὶ γήραος οὐδῶ» ταῦτόν ἐστι τῶι «ἐπ' ἐξόδῳ γήραος καὶ βίου». ὁ γὰρ οὐδὸς καὶ εἰσόδῳ καὶ ἐξόδῳ ὑπόκειται.² The same line is taken by the bT scholia on Iliad 22.60, and among modern scholars by Kakridis.³ A

*) I would like to thank Gyula Mayer and Glenn W. Most for their helpful comments.

1) Thomas M. Falkner, ‘Ἐπὶ γήραος οὐδῶ: Homeric Heroism, Old Age and the End of the *Odyssey*’, in: Thomas M. Falkner and Judith de Luce (edd.), *Old Age in Greek and Latin Literature* (Albany 1989), 21–67, at 33.

2) Eust. on Il. 22.60 (1257.2f. ed. Rom.); thus also on Il. 24.487 (1360.62–1361.1).

3) Johannes Th. Kakridis, ‘Neugriechische Scholien zu Homer’, *Gymnasium* 78 (1971) 505–524, at 512.

variant of this interpretation is proposed by Ameis and Hentze, who remark that ἐπὶ γήραος οὐδῶ is used at Iliad 22.60 “von der höchsten Stufe des Greisenalters, der Schwelle, die den Eingang zum Tode bildet”.⁴ Another line is taken in Liddell, Scott and Jones’ *Lexicon* s. v. οὐδός: “on the *threshold* which is old age, i.e. perh(aps), on the *threshold* which leads from life to death”. This is followed by Ostwald and Falkner, and by Macleod and Richardson in their commentaries, who interpret γήραος as a ‘defining genitive’.⁵ Finally, Leaf suggests that since the Homeric οὐδός is “a place in the hall where people habitually sit”, someone who is ἐπὶ γήραος οὐδῶ would appear to be “one who has taken up his abode in the halls of eld”.⁶ Which of these interpretations is correct?

Eustathius, the bT scholia, Ameis and Hentze, and Kakridis translate ἐπὶ γήραος οὐδῶ as ‘on the threshold of old age’ and see in it a reference to the exit from old age, that is to say, the end of a person’s life. Meanwhile, LSJ, Ostwald, Falkner, Macleod and Richardson interpret the phrase as ‘on the threshold that is old age’, since old age itself separates life from death. According to both interpretations the threshold in question is the point of exit from life. But this raises two problems. First of all, these interpretations would be at odds with the context of ἐπὶ γήραος οὐδῶ at Iliad 22.60. There the phrase stands within a pathetic speech with which Priam tries to move Hector to pity, telling him that he will die a horrible death ἐπὶ γήραος οὐδῶ after having seen his palace plundered, his sons and grandsons killed, and his daughters-in-law dragged to slavery. It would be oddly bathetic if Priam were to suggest that a man of his age would soon die anyway, as would follow from these interpretations. Moreover, thresholds are associated in popular thought not with exit but with entry, so it would be very surprising to find the image used in the *Iliad* for a metaphorical point of exit.⁷ We should look for a less problematic interpretation of ἐπὶ γήραος οὐδῶ.⁸

Leaf interprets the phrase in a radically different way to mean ‘having sat down’, ‘having taken up abode in the halls of eld’. There are indeed three Homeric passages where people sit down onto the οὐδός. However, they in no way imply that people regularly sat there: those who do so are either freshly arrived

4) Karl Friedrich Ameis, rev. Carl Hentze, *Homers Ilias*. Für den Schulgebrauch erklärt von ..., vol. 2.4 (Leipzig und Berlin ⁴1906), on 22.60 (p. 7).

5) Martin Ostwald ap. Falkner (above, n. 1) 58 n. 42; Falkner (above, n. 1) 33–34 and ff.; C. W. Macleod (ed.), *Homer: Iliad Book XXIV* (Cambridge 1982) on 24.487 (p. 127); Nicholas Richardson, *The Iliad: A Commentary, Volume VI: books 21–24* (Cambridge 1993) on 22.60 (p. 112).

6) Walter Leaf, *The Iliad*, edited, with apparatus criticus, prolegomena, notes, and appendices by ... (London ²1900–1902), on 22.60 (vol. 2, p. 434).

7) Compare the metaphorical uses of the words meaning ‘threshold’ in modern English, French (‘seuil’), German (‘Schwelle’), Hungarian (‘küszöb’) and Italian (‘soglia’), as well as in Latin (see OLD s. v. *limen*, 4).

8) It may also be a problem that in the second interpretation γήραος is taken to be a ‘defining genitive’, the genitive used in phrases of the type ‘the city of Rome’. There may be no Homeric parallels for this construction that do not involve a proper name: the interpretation of θανάτοιο τέλος at Il. 3.309 is controversial (cf. LSJ s. v. τέλος and Kühner / Gerth II 1, 264 f.); however, Falkner (above, n. 1) 34 also compares μοῖρα θανάτοιο and δλεῖθρου πείρατα.

strangers awaiting to be welcomed (Od. 10.62 f.: Odysseus arriving at the house of Aeolus with his companions; Od. 17.339 f.: Odysseus reaching his palace in disguise) or a distraught Penelope who is overcome by grief to such an extent that she sits down, as is explicitly stated, not onto one of the many chairs (δῖρροι) present in the room, but rather onto the threshold (Od. 4.716–719). Under normal circumstances Homeric characters sit not on the threshold, where they would be an obstacle to others, but on chairs, stools and similar pieces of furniture. In short, Leaf's interpretation can be ruled out as well. We must look for a different solution.

After the *Iliad* the expression γῆραος οὐδός is used again three times in the *Odyssey*, and then once each in eight other texts.⁹ In one of the Odyssean passages its meaning is clear beyond doubt. At Od. 15.348 Odysseus tells Eumaeus that he left his father Laertes ἐπὶ γῆραος οὐδῶ, to which Eumaeus replies that it is the subsequent death of his wife that put him into the state of γῆραος, i.e. that turned him into an old man (15.356 f.). Here ἐπὶ γῆραος οὐδῶ must mean 'at the threshold, at the beginning of old age'. In all other places where the phrase is attested from the *Odyssey* onwards this interpretation either appears likely or is at any rate possible. Furthermore, it would be in line with the association of thresholds with beginnings, and it would conveniently treat γῆραος as a simple possessive genitive.

We have already seen that in the *Iliad* this otherwise straightforward interpretation would contradict Priam's known status as a γέρον. The interpretations discussed so far rested on the assumption that such a contradiction could not be admitted. However, this need not be the case. It was already recognized by Kakridis that (ἐπὶ) γῆραος οὐδ(ῶ) is formulaic – and a poet with an oral background may find it convenient to use a formula that is readily available even where it is slightly out of place. This makes sense especially if there is a good reason to use the formula in that particular context.

In the *Iliad* ἐπὶ γῆραος οὐδῶ is used in two pathetic speeches by Priam, where the old king tries to move someone to pity. Why is the threshold of old age worth mentioning in such a context? It matters because γῆραος, old age, matters.¹⁰

9) Od. 15.246, 15.348 and 23.212; Hymn. Hom. Aphr. 106; Hes. Op. 331; Ps.-Phoc. 230 Bergk (PLG ii, p. 475); Hdt. 3.14.10; Pl. Rep. 328e6; Lycurg. 40; Hyp. Dem. 22.13 f. (from frg. 5) Jensen = frg. 6.24 Kenyon; Menander frg. 852.1 K.-A.

10) For a study of old age in the Homeric epics see Falkner (above, n.1). However, I disagree with his interpretation of ἐπὶ γῆραος οὐδῶ, and thus with his view of old age as a 'threshold'; and I believe that his focus on social structures and power relations may obscure the extent to which the poet(s) of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* empathise(s) with the subjective experience of old people. Some old men in the epics are powerful and respected, others are not, but all have to come to terms with the diminishing of their physical faculties and the pains and physical discomfort caused by aging. The empathy of the poet(s) for their experience is shown by phrases such as the formula γῆραϊ λυγρῶ (used 4x in the *Iliad*; see further Falkner, 27–28). It is not the case that "old age is demeaned by its association with death" (Falkner 35), as an association with death does not in itself render something sinister in the epics: fighting, war and weaponry are not presented in a comparably negative light. The problem of the poet(s) with old age is not that it is associated with death, but simply that it can be unpleasant as a condition.

Age, in itself, can bring experience, status and recognition, as it has done to Priam. Old age, on the other hand, makes one lose much of what has made one's life enjoyable and dignified, before the advent of modern medicine even more so than today. Its evils receive much comment in ancient literature of all sorts after Homer.¹¹ The threshold of old age, then, marks its onset and as such it is life's turning-point: it is the moment when the upward curve of even the most successful life is bound to be interrupted by the sufferings allotted to one by nature. It is highly pathetic, then, to encounter adversity and especially to suffer injustice at this point. Accordingly, Hesiod, *Op.* 331 threatens divine punishment for the man who quarrels with his parents when they are at the threshold of old age, Lycurgus 40 describes the pathetic impact of the news of a defeat on Athenian citizens of this age-group, and Menander frg. 852 K.-A. declares outright that it is most pitiful when a decent person is assailed by unjust fortune 'on the threshold of old age'. Others pray or wish that they or somebody else may arrive 'to the threshold of old age' (*Od.* 23.212, *Hymn. Hom. Aphr.* 106, *Ps.-Phoc.* 230): the implication is that it is not worthwhile to pray for what follows.

In the *Iliad* Priam is an old man, but he is still active as the leader of his people. When he claims to be 'on the threshold of old age', the understatement is not conspicuous – and he has good reasons to use such a pathetic phrase. In Book 22 he describes to his son Hector the evils that await him as he is *ὄλοϜ ἐπὶ γήραος οὐδϜ*, 'on the baneful threshold of old age'.¹² The default course of events would be bad enough, but he knows that more awaits him than mere physical decline: his city is fated to fall.

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11) See the impressive section on the subject in Stobaeus' anthology (4.50: 86 items!) and esp. *Mimn.* frg. 2 West and *Anacr.* frg. 395 PMG (cf. frg. 358). Cicero goes against the trend when he argues in his *Cato Maior de Senectute* that old age is not so bad after all.

12) For the negative epithet compare Hes. *Op.* 331 *κακϜ ἐπὶ γήραος οὐδϜ*.