WHO IS COUNTING?
APPRECIATING THE PEER,
DESPISING THE OTHER.
Social relationships in Homeric Communities from an alterity study*

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Abstract
In this work, we aim to study different scenes within the Iliad and the Odyssey in order to understand what kind of relationships appear governing connections with the “contemporaneous others”: those with whom the heroes share time and community, whether one understands this as a small-scale local group or in a broader sense as the whole group of Achaeans. We also question what sorts of formerly unrecognized groups can constitute “Others” in Homer. First, analyzing how members of the aristocratic warrior group related to each other. Secondly, focusing on the relationship between the aristocratic social group and the commoners, known as κακοί. Throughout a detailed analysis of different episodes

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of the Iliad and the Odyssey, we show how the relationships among characters reveal a hierarchical and asymmetrical reality perfectly recognized by us, similar of that of many places in the world today.

**Keywords**
Homeric poems | alterity studies | asymmetry | social relationships

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**I - Introduction: theoretical considerations**

In the world depicted in the Homeric poems,¹ the dominant identity resides in a particular group: those who are males and belong to the aristocratic warrior group.² They were the ones who took an active part in shaping Greek society, through their participation in the political body of each independent community, the assembly, as well as through their role as leaders during wartime. This participative power is what gave them the authority to shape their world and being, as those who had the power to take themselves as a universal human being paradigm.

The main goal of this paper is to study the relationships among these aristocratic men themselves, as well as relationships with those that did not belong to that dominant identity: the commoners – beggars and day laborers too. The aristocratic group³ shared with them two characteristics, namely being free males and Achaeans, though they belonged to a distinctly separate group.

To analyze these relationships, I make use of the theoretical framework developed by the Spanish philosopher G. Bello Reguera,⁴ very close to Levinas’

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¹ The issue about the composition of Homeric poems has been broadly discussed. A complete analysis of this question could be found in the work of I. Morris, “The use and abuse of Homer”. I consider that Morris (1986) is right when he says that Homer must have been describing his own society rather than an ideal past. According to him, this society must be dated in the eight century B.C. The contrary opinion is maintained by Cartledge (2009, 32), who following mainly Myres and Snodgrass, points out that the world depicted in the Homeric poems could have never existed outside the poet’s imagination.

² See Redfield 1975, 99: “Thus heroism is for Homer a definite social task, and the heroes are a definite social stratum. […] This is the Homeric governing class, the propertied class, and also the class on which the burden falls of maintaining the community”.

³ I will avoid, as much as possible, the use of the term “class” to refer to social groups depicted in the Homeric poems. For a further reading of this topic, see, for instance, Calhoun 1934, Thalmann 1998, and Rose 2012.

⁴ For more information about the different kinds of temporal relationships with the “Other”, see Bello Reguera
ethical thought. In his framework, there are four main concepts: symmetry/asymmetry and positive/negative. By conjugating these terms, we obtain a complex and theoretical framework which shows four possible sorts of relationship with the contemporary Other.\textsuperscript{5}

The first one is the symmetrical-positive relationship, this is the relation between two Selves who recognize each other as equals and neither tries to dominate the Other.

The second kind of relationship is due to symmetrical but negative criteria and arises when two Selves fight in order to impose their own identity and dominate the other.

The third concept is the asymmetrical-negative relationship that occurs when a Self takes its own identity as normative and tries to impose it as the universal identity. In this sort of relationship there are usually two kinds of approaches or treatments towards the Other: in one, the Other is excluded from the dominant identity by dehumanizing it socially and politically, or in the second approach, the Other is pressured to assimilate into the main identity, by denying the Other its own.

Finally, there is the asymmetrical-positive relationship between a Self and the Other. The former, realizing the vulnerability of the Other, assumes responsibility for the Other. The last kind of relationship with the Other is what the Lithuanian philosopher Emmanuel Levinas considered as the ethical approach towards the Other. According to Levinas, the relationships with the Other should be based on the responsibility of the I with the Other and not in the domination (the I over the Other).\textsuperscript{6} Using the work of G. Bello Reguera and E. Levinas as a theoretical framework, I study different scenes of both the \textit{Iliad} and the \textit{Odyssey} to see 1) how are dominant groups related to those characterized by otherness? 2) which role did the different males in the poems play?

\textsuperscript{5} “Contemporaneous Others” are those with whom the heroes share time and community, whether one understands this as a small-scale local group or in a broader sense as the whole group of Achaeans. This kind of Others is significantly different from the way we usually think of the Other. Namely, as an outsider, as who exits outside the group whether culturally, geographically or due to gender restrictions, etc. Given the setting of both the \textit{Iliad} and the \textit{Odyssey}, one may expect the foreigners to be the Others par excellence. They, of course, are. Nevertheless, analyzing the relationship with the Others as foreigners is not the aim of this article.

\textsuperscript{6} In relation to the Other in Levinas’ thought see, for instance, Levinas 1979, 1998 and 2003.

\textsuperscript{7} English translations of the \textit{Iliad} and the \textit{Odyssey} are from Lattimore’s version, \textit{The Iliad of Homer}, and \textit{The Odyssey of Homer}.