**'Tell me about a complicated man' (Homer, Odyssey 1.1, translated by Emily Wilson).
Is complexity an important characteristic of the characters and stories of classical epic?**

There is a certain ambiguity surrounding the nature of 'complexity' in stories and characters, which can have no universal meaning due to the limitless connotations of the word 'complicated'. As outlined by the Cambridge Dictionary, the adjective 'complicated' describes something as "involving a lot of different parts, in a way that is difficult to understand" [1]. Considering the significantly broad range of events that may take place in a story, or the feelings that a character may experience, it seems that the construct or plot of every epic might be considered 'complicated'. However, Janey Tracey[1] suggests that Emily Wilson's translation of '*polytropos*' to mean 'complicated' is more indicative of our "current political climate" than it is of general character complexity, and she demonstrates that the term 'complicated' is fitting for those characters who could also be described as "hypocritical, entitled, or manipulative" [2]. Whilst Odysseus' dubious morality in the eyes of the modern reader may well cast him in a light similar to that of an arrogant 'anti-hero', the term 'complicated' is not limited to such characters, nor is it inherent in all characters of "entitled" or "manipulative" nature. For the purpose of this essay, the definition of a complicated character shall therefore be a character who struggles with an internal conflict, or has contrasting traits or characteristics which become an obstacle in the scheme of the epic. However, when determining the complexity of stories, it seems that the very nature of an epic requires conflicting forces. Therefore, in order for an epic story to truly be complex, there must be significant motivation and stakes for our protagonist's conflict, as well as complexity in the actual narrative (for example by the rotation of perspectives, or the intertwining of parallel plots).

To measure whether or not the complicated natures of characters are 'important' to classical epic, we must observe the extent of their contribution to events of the epic. There are several instances in which the complicated nature of a protagonist has directly caused catastrophic events. One prime example is the refusal of Achilles to fight into the Trojan Wars, which results in the death of a great number of his comrades, and the declining success of the Achaeans in battle. Although the cause of

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[1] Janey Tracey is the author of the critical essay "The Complicated Radicalism of Emily Wilson's The Odyssey" [2].

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this decision is undoubtedly Agamemnon's poor choice to claim Achilles' "blooming prize, […] Briseis" [3] as his own, it is "Achilles' wrath" and pride that led him to abandon the cause. Natalie Haynes describes this decision by Achilles as a "particularly difficult kind of toxic masculinity" [4], which (from a modern point of view) is certainly valid, and causes us to wonder whether Achilles has any redeeming or heroic qualities. Similarly, René Rapin observes that Achilles is "an epitome of imperfections and vices" [5]. So, if Achilles is so imperfect, is he really that complicated? It could be argued that if all of his traits are imperfections, they do not have a positive attribute to conflict.

However, there is evidence to suggest that Achilles must be complicated, for his actions would not have been the same if his character was so straightforward. If Achilles had been a simpler hero, closer to the character of Virgil's Aeneas, perhaps he would have prioritised his responsibility to his men over that of his honour. Pope brings up this very notion in the preface to his translation, stating that Achilles is "not as good and perfect a prince as Aeneas"[2], but also that the "very moral of [Homer's] poem required a contrary character" [6]. Therefore, whilst Achilles' selfish pride is somewhat contradictory to his role as the epic hero, it was this very conflict in his character which constituted the narrative of the play. Without Achilles' stubborn wrath, he would not have taken the strike from war which drove the events of the next seventeen books of the Iliad, and without the attribute of his being 'Greece's Greatest Warrior', there would be no significance for his wrath. Thus, the complicated nature of Achilles' characterisation is integral to the entire premise of the poem.

Virgil's character of Aeneas seems to be a rather simple character, especially considering his moral virtues, which Rapin describes as "piety, […] tendernesse […] and justice, towards all" [5]. Thus, he does not seem to have an overly complex personality, nor does he experience many instances of conflicting emotion. For this reason, many critics might describe him as a 'perfect' character, without vices. However there are a few instances in which Aeneas' morality and humanity appear a weakness, and a source of internal conflict. The most significant example of this is in Dido's unfortunate suicide. Although the initial cause of Dido's attachment to Aeneas is arguably the divine intervention by Aphrodite and Eros, it is Aeneas' abandonment of the queen which makes her feel as

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[2] Pope draws on the conclusions of René Rapin (1621-1687): 'Observations on the poems of Homer and Virgil'.

though she must "get rid of the love he causes" with a "passing sentence of death" [7]. Therefore, it is Aeneas' internal conflict of the commitment to his family and people (weighed against his feelings for Dido) which cause him to flee and leave Dido suicidal. Dido's death is significant not only in the scheme of the epic, but also as an interpretation of history, as it was considered the reason for the long-standing conflict between Carthage and Rome. Therefore, there are instances in which Aeneas is presented as 'complicated' which have considerable impact the legend of history, let alone the epic itself. However, these moments of internal conflict are infrequent, and Aeneas' character remains rather simple in essence, suggesting that complexity was not an important trait in the epic Aeneid's hero.

Similarly, the epic Argonautica by Apollonius Rhodius has a relatively uncomplicated protagonist. Jason's character has rather cohesive traits of ambition, wit, and persuasion, and the complications to the plot are primarily caused by minor characters, such as his crewmates, or various selfish kings. In fact, the characters of the epic have been criticised by some for their lack of complexity; D.A. Van Krevelen describes the characterisation of Jason as "extremely weak"[3], and suggests that Medea is the only "commendable exception"[4] to the bland characters [8]. This brings to light the idea that complexity, whilst not a requirement of an epic hero, may still be an important trait for other characters to have. As Van Krevelen highlights, Medea is arguably the more intriguing character as her passionate love for Jason causes both internal and external conflict; it leads her to commit violent acts against others, including her own family. Without Medea's complications of "stormy birth" and "ruthless love" [9] for Jason, she likely would not have acted so rashly as to murder her brother Apsyrtus, which was vital to the couple's escape, and the eventual resolution of the plot. Therefore, whilst complexity isn't necessarily essential for the protagonist (as long as there is still a compelling narrative), it is still important for some epics to have complicated secondary characters in order to advance the plot.

In order to measure whether it is important for the story of an epic to be complicated, it must be determined whether complexity adds something significant to its reception or message, which

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[3] Translated from "Der Führer […] ist äußerst schwach charakterisiert worden" in Van Krevelen's article [8].
[4] Translated from "Nur Medea bildet eine lobenswerte Ausnahme" in Van Krevelen's article [8].

would otherwise be lost. With epic poetry traditionally being aurally received, complexity might be hindering rather than beneficial to a rhapsode of ancient Greece, and to the audience who listens. Epic poetry was not analysed in depth as it is now (in written form), and so the clarity of epic simile and symbolism rang through the stories perhaps more than the series of events themselves. However, the obstacles and stakes that complicate a plot are precisely what make it a riveting story, and so it seems that at least a basic element of complexity is necessary. An example that applies to this theory is Homer's Odyssey, in which Odysseus makes a gruelling journey home. If it were not for the various supernatural obstacles he is faced with (including the two lonely goddesses, Circe and Calypso, as well as monsters such as Scylla or Charybdis[5]), the ten year journey would only have taken a fraction of the time, and there would be no story to tell. Therefore, although involving too many obstacles for the protagonist's ambition in an epic might confuse the story (especially to those hearing it, rather than reading it), a significant amount of complication is important to an epic, as it creates a story worth listening to.

The 'complexity' of the story is also contributed to by the structure of its narrative, which can be in the form of rotating perspectives or simultaneous plotlines. Aristotle points out the significance of this technique, highlighting that "the narrative form" of an epic "makes it possible to include many simultaneous incidents that […] add weight to the poem"[6]. Furthermore, he insinuates that this should be made use of in epic to achieve "grandeur" and offer "variety to the hearer" [11]. One example of complication to a narrative is the way in which Homer writes the Iliad from the perspective of both the Achaeans and the Trojans. This is particularly evident in Book X, when both armies are seen to send out parties to scout the opposing camp in the same "wakeful hours", and they collide when Odysseus and Diomedes hear the "step of hostile feet", which had just previously been revealed as the "swift of foot" Dolon [12]. By rotating the narrative of both sides – even briefly – Homer both creates tension through plot complexity, and dissolves it by unifying the plot once again, which would undoubtedly provide the "variety" to the reader in the way Aristotle describes. Whilst variety is not

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[5] All are found in the Odyssey [10], along with sirens and cyclopes. Most of the gods are also considered opposing forces to Odysseus, especially Poseidon.
[6] See Aristotle's Poetics [11].

necessarily essential to an epic, it would certainly be important to captivating an audience for its reception.

Despite the evidence in the text, Aristotle maintains that the Iliad is not complex, but "simple" [11] – at least in comparison to the Odyssey. However, it must be noted that the Iliad features the exact complications that Aristotle claims "add weight to the poem", for example the "simultaneous" plotlines, which are especially noticeable of the gods in alignment with the people. In Book V, for example, when there is conflict among the gods, the battle amongst the Greeks continues in the "meantime" [13]. The significance of these conflicts occurring simultaneously demonstrates the parallels between the humans and gods: the human-like weaknesses of the gods, or god-like arrogance of the people, which adds another dimension to the storyline whilst implying a greater message. Again, this is arguably coherent with Aristotle's notion of what epic poetry should be; he believes that epic is a "representation in verse of superior subjects" [14]. Therefore, complex parallel plots (and their interactions) are an important element of epic poetry as they can be used not only as obstacles and devices of tension, but for symbolism of a wider message.

Overall, considering the presence of complexity in the very nature of an epic (with its obstacles to the stakes of the protagonist), it goes without saying that this is an important characteristic for epic stories. Although it may be argued by some, including Aristotle, that there are epics which have "simple" stories, there are wider elements of the story to look at, such as its narrative. Whilst the story of an epic may have but one complication, the addition of complexity to the narrative, whether through the rotation of perspectives or simultaneous running of plots, is important to "diversify"[7] the story and thus engage the reader. In contrast, it seems that complexity of character is not essential to an epic, especially one that already has a compelling storyline. Although in some protagonists, such as the aforementioned Achilles, complexity in terms of conflicting traits or emotions becomes a driving force in the plot, there is evidence to suggest that this is not essential; the Aeneid and Argonautica remain perfectly functional epics without complicated protagonists, suggesting that character complexity is unimportant. However, it seems that this can generate

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[7] Yet another point made by Aristotle in his description of "epic" in 'Poetics' [11].

criticism due to "weak characterisation"[8], suggesting that, without complex characters, an epic may become less engaging. Therefore, whilst complexity is arguably unimportant for protagonists of an epic, it seems that the characteristic should feature in at least some secondary characters (such as Medea in Argonautica), or even minor ones, in order to make the epic appeal to the audience, perhaps regarding their own complicated lives. Thus, whilst the characteristic of complexity is highly important for the story of an epic, it is not important so much as desirable for that of the epic's characters.

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[8] As previously mentioned, this is a judgement made by Van Krevelen [8].

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