HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Frederic Will, Ph.D.

HOMER

(8th-early 7thcentury B.C.E.)

Works

major oral epics (small parts of the now fragmentary epics, of The epic cycle, are attributed, but very shakily at that, to Homer)

Iliad (8thcentury B.C.E.; earlier than *Odyssey*)
Odyssey (early 7thcentury B.C.E.; later than *Iliad)*

(Written versions 8thor early 7thcentury B.C.E.; oral origins of two epics may precede written form by several centuries)

Biography

Dates We have little to go on, when it comes to Homer's life and dates, and therefore we are at a loss to attribute any firm biography to him. Was he one great genius, living near or at the time of the Trojan War (arguably around 1184 B.C.E.), as some think, and kept in vivid memory by a minstrel and ballad tradition? Do his observations of heroic society seem precise enough to date him as their contemporary, in the late second millennium? Or was he far more nearly a modern man, living in the first millennium, even—as some said—as late as the early seventh century B.C.E. There are unmistakeably archaic elements in his creation, but they could be relics embedded in his text, or, for that matter, conscious archaisms. He could still be the relatively modern man we just mentioned. Were Homer's dates to be correctly targeted on so late a time as the seventh century B.C.E., Homer would come to us on the brink of writing, democracy, and commerce—on the brink of all those trademarks of the new face of ancient Athens. He could be a modern man either recollecting ancient tales or, arguably, reshaping and remaking them. The options here are very wide, and there are proponents of many dates for Homer in between two extremes—in between the twelfth and the seventh centuries B.C.E.

The bardic tradition The two epics we attribute to Homer were undoubtedly created in an epic-making environment, in which the values of feudal society were highly prized, and in which tales of past regional greatness were of supreme interest to the descendants of those events. In this epic-minded society the dactylic hexameter meter found wide and effective use, among a sodality of epic singing bards, whose business, it seems, was providing traditional entertainment to the land-owning feudal nobility of the Greek coast. Little literary material besides Homer's remains to us from this creative milieu; fragments of epics, references in later Greek authors.(Some titles, all involving events of the Trojan War, remain from the so-called 'epic cycle': the *Cypria*, the *Aetheopis, the Little Iliad*, the *Iliupersis*, the *Nostoi* and the *Telegony*—titles with little meat on their bones, except for the regular reminder of the importance, to them, of the memory of the Trojan War--titles which remind us of the perspective of the whole epic cycle; the literary accumulations of later Iron Age thinkers as they looked back on the Mycenean Bronze Age, the Dark Age of Greece.) Therefore we cannot even speculate on the narrative and prosodic innovations Homer himself may have introduced to the epic materials of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* and we have no reason to assume that Homer's work was without precedent. Or rather, we have only the all surpassing popularity of the Homeric epics, always at the forefront of any account of ancient Greek art, to underline the likelihood that Homer was the leader of the epic tradition.)

Literary innovation

To estimate Homer's level of innovation, we would need to know in terms of whose and what work he was creating. Regardless of this issue in the history of literary innovation, we can safely claim that Homer

builds crowning achievements into the world's literary canon; that he brings innovation to the whole body of literature, which was to follow him. What does he bring to the world literary stage?

The language of poetic epic He brings a sharp sense of the prosodic powers of the line—to enjamb, to elide, to compress, to harmonize with lyre and song—which may have been the byproduct of his closeness to the *writing* world. (if, that is, he was the 'modern man' discussed above.) We know, from the comparative scholarship of Milman Parry and Albert Lord, that Homer's uses of poetic formulae, diverse kinds of enjambment, and diction levels rising to grandeur and falling to assault, are parts of world epic tradition, but nowhere do we find such a diverse and powerful register of styles as in Homer.

Narrative build-up Homer masters the sense of narrative build-up in both of his epics. In the *Iliad* we marvel at Homer's gradual portrayal both of Achilles' wrath, and of the hero's ultimate willingness to yield; at Homer's ability to characterize the whole range of human passions, from the blind fury of Diomedes in the middle of battle to the spoiled child sulkiness of Achilles playing the lyre with his comrades; at Homer's unique sensitivity to the challenges of male competitiveness and the adolescence of such princes as Agamemnon and Achilles. Homer takes us through the adventurousness, romance, and in the end rare fidelity, which intersect in an Odysseus maturing as testily as his brother Achilles had matured. Odysseus must 'work through' Circe and Calypso, to make the ultimate commitment to Penelope.

The overall wholeness of an epic work Homer foresaw the powers of narrative song, and developed them to the max, as can be proven by the unique significance occupied by Homeric epic, to this day, in the western literary tradition. To speak of our daily—academic and personal—efforts to make sense of literature, simply turn to the sequence of translations of Homer which besiege us every year. We are hungry to know how to say the world the way Homer did—how to catch his tone, how to follow the arc of his imagination. It is of course not just day by day that we keep up with Homer. In fact, the greatest shapers of our own literary imaginations have followed in the footsteps of Homer. Dante, Goethe, and a great modern epic writer like Nikos Kazantzakis, whose *Odyssey* shows how fiercely Homer's brilliance can be translated into our own present imagination.

Characters

Narrative and character interweave flawlessly in Homer's epic. Yet as the three character snapshots below indicate, each of those characters also forms part of a whole, itself and the bundle of traits that establish it. There are many kinds of rounded characters in great literature: one could distinguish among those of Homer and the character of Don Quixote or Falstaff in Shakespeare. Homer's greatest characters are deeply part of the narrative development of their plots, are consistent but limited in characteristics, and carry with them an edge of rigidity—the ancient touch. Mr. Pickwick would be lost in the company of Homeric characters.

Achilles Achilles, half immortal, is the spoiled darling of the Greek forces; a musician, a fiery temper, a lover—of his favorite, Patroclus, a furious counter attacker, and in the end perhaps a mortal touched by divine grace. (Counterpoised against his rival leader, Agamemnon, Achilles is fascinating and free spirited.) In vengeance Achilles is formidable; when Patroclus—disguised in the armor of Achilles-- is killed by Hector, Achilles sets out in furious pursuit of this Trojan murderer. He chases his victim three times around the Walls of Troy, then finally catches and slaughters him. Achilles' revenge, however, is more complex than that kind of heroics, for in the end, when Hector's dad comes to beg for the return of his son's corpse, Achilles concedes to return the body, a mark of graciousness which confers an unheard of compassion on this hero's vengeance. Achilles finds in his own heart, as no other of the Greek heroes could, a strain of universal humanity.

Odysseus Odysseus is a package of traits—bold, adventurous, ingenious, witty, and above all open, ready to take on what comes —which he ignites by the spark of self-awareness. He not only is all of these vigorous personal styles, but he knows just what he is. When he fences with his guardian goddess, Athena, they trade long lying stories in order to tease out the other's identity. They understand each other as partners in craft. When Odysseus' sailors urge him to avoid listening to the song of the Sirens, he scorns their timidity, and laughs at them. When Nausikaa, the maiden daughter of the King of Phaeacia,

comes upon Odysseus resting naked in the bushes, after a desperately hard sea passage on his way home, he flirts with her fascinatingly, holding a transparent branch of olives over his private parts. But he is not waylaid; he pushes ahead with determination.

Agamemnon Agamemnon **is a** deliberate and professional military man—Americans might think of Douglas MacArthur or Dwight D. Eisenhower. The collateral ancient literature, which surrounds the tale of sacrifice at Aulis, suggests a man with insufficient human savvy—a natural victim of his wife, who will kill him and his girlfriend, a dad fumbling at Aulis with the dictates of a cruel fate—yet one who, in the end, makes it through, and when absolutely obliged gives in to the demands of fate, and prevail**s**. All that is 'deliberate and military' about Agamemnon is most clearly exposed by contrast with the mercurial brilliance of Achilles, who by preference lives by his own laws.