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Homer (8th Cent. B.C.)

The story of the Iliad. We open with arguably the greater of Homer's two works, the I*liad*, or the epic about the 'Fall of Troy.' The historic 'Fall'—traditionally located by the Greeks as from the twelfth cent. B.C.—brought together a set of local Greek power lords and retainers, whose interest was in the wealth and shipping control of Troy itself, strategically located on the shores of the Bosporus. A myth, which dominates Homer's account of the Greek commercial/military venture, holds that Alexander, the son of the King of Troy, stole Helen, the glamorous wife of the Greek warlord Menelaus, and carried her off to Troy as his love-toy. The story of the subsequent Greek expedition against Troy, and the defeat of the city and its rulers, would by this myth be a byproduct of commercial adventure; only by Homer's vision transmuted into a powerful story of action, military courage and brutality, sexual passion, and ultimately regions of self-sacrifice that touch the lives of all of us. The *Iliad* can be read as pure absorbing fiction in dactylic hexameters, or as an account of the historical movement of peoples in the mid-second millennium, an account referring back to an event six to eight hundred years earlier than Homer's own time, or, finally—and this is what keeps the tale alive—a story of military adventure, moody and desperate leaders, brutal enemies, and on a rare occasion a challenge—like that to Achilles at the end—to go beyond the self into an act of grace.

The hexameter. The unique importance of this metrical line, in carrying and shaping the entire epic tradition, merits special attention here. We can trace the hexameter wherever the epic appears in Greece, all the way to Apollonius Rhodius (#70). The dactylic hexameter is a long epic line, typically broken in two parts, which served as the vehicle of Homer's creation The hexameter is a line of six cola—six metrical units—of which the basic foot is long/short/short, where length refers to length of time required to produce the syllable in question. We are to imagine the epic typically performed to the strumming of the lyre, and by a highly experienced professional, who measured his success by the muscular acclaim of his all male upper class warrior audiences.

The story of the Odyssey. Among the Greek warriors at Troy were many leaders who felt themselves aggrieved by the 'rape of Helen,' or the 'rape of their commercial vigor,' however the loss is described. Among these independent warriors was Odysseus, lord of the manor on the island of Ithaca. As a supporter of Agamemnon, the overall head of the Greek expedition, Odysseus was a team player, until Troy fell; but after that Fall—once again the date given by the Greeks to the event was the twelfth century B.C., the Bronze Age—the Greek warriors dispersed, heading back toward their homeland and local communities. In the accounts of this return Homer collects memories lodged deep in the Greek folk memory, recollections of periods of naval adventure, seafaring trade, and commercial rivalry; Homer blends these memories into a coherent whole around the half-'real' half-fictive adventures of a warrior whose courage, sense of irony, and passionate life-love have made him for subsequent world literature a brilliant symbol. You will see, as you follow the narrative of *The Odyssey*, that Homer exposes this fictive personage—whose name Odysseus means 'the angry one'—to trials which bring out his character, and with it the salient value traits of the Bronze Age Greek world.

Without spoiling the text by retelling stories here, we may draw your attention to a kind of dimension, prevalent in the *Odyssey*—also in the *Iliad*—which is behind the universal greatness of this text. Odysseus is at one point a guest in the kingdom of the Phaeacians,

an idyllic culture given to dance and music and the gentle life; he has just survived a harrowing battle with the waves at sea. Seated next to the King, at a vast board of victuals, Odysseus is delighted to hear the bard—for there was always musical entertainment at grandee feasts—recount the details of a hero's wandering, a hero who turns out, as the song proceeds, to be Odysseus himself. The reader/hearer of the epic thrills to the dimensionality of the text, where Homer winks at us across the character of Odysseus who is winking at us across the irony of listening in delighted silence to a validating tale of himself at sea, a tale which rescues the hero from all the anonymity of endurance on the fishy brine.