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HOMER



THE
ODYSSEY

TRANSLATED BY EMILY WILSON



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INTRODUCTION

The Odyssey, composed almost three thousand years ago, is an epic poem: "epic" both in the sense that it is long, and in the sense that it presents itself as telling an important story, in the traditional, formulaic language used by archaic poets for singing the tales of gods, wars, journeys, and the collective memories and experience of the Greek-speaking world.

Modern connotations of the word "epic" are in some ways misleading when we turn to the Homeric poems, the texts that began the Western epic tradition. The Greek word *epos* means simply "word" or "story" or "song." It is related to a verb meaning "to say" or "to tell," which is used (in a form with a prefix) in the first line of the poem. The narrator commands the Muse, "Tell me": *enn-epe*. An epic poem is, at its root, simply a tale that is told.

The Odyssey is grand or (in modern terms) "epic" in scope: it is over twelve thousand lines long. The poem is elevated in style, composed entirely in a regular poetic rhythm, a six-beat line (dactylic hexameter), and its vocabulary was not that used by ordinary Greeks in everyday speech, in any time or place. The language contains a strange mixture of words from different periods of time, and from Greek dialects associated with different regions. A handful of words in Homer were incomprehen-

sible to Greeks of the classical period (in the fifth and fourth centuries BCE). The syntax is relatively simple, but the words and phrases, in these combinations, are unlike the way that anybody ever actually spoke. The style is, from a modern perspective, strange: it is full of repetitions, redundancies, and formulaic expressions. These mark the poem's debt to a long tradition of storytelling and suggest that we are in a world that is at least partly continuous with a distant, half-forgotten past.

But in some ways, the story told in this long piece of verse is small and ordinary. It is a story, as the first word of the original Greek tells us, about "a man" (*andra*). He is not "the" man, but one of many men—albeit a man of extraordinary cognitive, psychological, and military power, one who can win any competition, outwit any opponent, and manage, against all odds, to survive. The poem tells us how he makes his circuitous way back home across stormy seas after many years at war. We may expect the hero of an "epic" narrative to confront evil forces, perform a superhuman task, and rescue vast numbers of people from an extraordinary kind of threat. Failing that, we might hope at least for a great quest unexpectedly achieved, despite perils all around; an action that saves the world, or at least changes it in some momentous way—like Jason claiming the Golden Fleece, Launcelot glimpsing the Holy Grail, or Aeneas beginning the foundation of Rome. In *The Odyssey*, we find instead the story of a man whose grand adventure is simply to go back to his own home, where he tries to turn everything back to the way it was before he went away. For this hero, mere survival is the most amazing feat of all.

Only a portion of the twenty-four books of *The Odyssey* describes the magical wanderings of Odysseus on his journey back to Ithaca. These adventures are presented as a backstory partly told by the hero himself (in Books 5 through 12). The poem cuts between far-distant and diverse locations, from Olympus to earth, from Calypso's island to the palace at Ithaca, from the underworld to the cottage of the swineherd. Sometimes the setting feels entirely realistic, even mundane—a world where a mother packs a wholesome lunch of bread and cheese for her daughter, where there is a particular joy in taking a hot bath, where men listen to music and play checkers, and lively, pretty girls have fun

playing ball games together. At other moments, we are in the realm of pure fantasy, inhabited by cannibals, witches, and goddesses with six barking heads, where it is possible to cross the streams of Ocean (the mythical river that encircles the known world), and come to the land of asphodel, where the spirits of dead heroes live forever. Different characters tell their own inset stories—some true, some false, of past lives, adventures, dreams, memories, and troubles. The poem weaves and unweaves a multilayered narrative that is both simple and artful in its patterning and composition.

The story begins in an unexpected place, *in medias res* ("in the middle of things"—the proper starting point for an epic, according to Horace). It is not the start of the Trojan War, which began with the Judgment of Paris and the Abduction of Helen and was fought for ten years. Nor does the poem start at the beginning of Odysseus' journey home, which has been in progress for almost as many years as the war. Instead, it begins when nothing much seems to be happening at all; Odysseus, his son, and his wife are all stuck in a state of frustration and paralysis that has been continuing for years and is becoming unbearable.

Odysseus, at the start of the poem, is trapped by the goddess Calypso, who wants to have him stay there as her husband for eternity. He could choose to evade death and old age and stay always with her; but movingly, he prefers "to see even just the smoke that rises / from his own homeland, and he wants to die." Odysseus longs to recover his own identity, not as a victim of shipwreck or a coddled plaything of a powerful goddess, but as a master of his home and household, as a father and as a husband. He sits sobbing by the shore of the island every day, desperately staring at the "fruitless sea" for a boat that might take him back home.

Meanwhile, in Ithaca, Odysseus' wife, Penelope, is surrounded by young men who have forced their way into her home and are making merry with daily feasts, wasting the provisions of the household, waiting for her to agree to give up on Odysseus and marry one of them. Penelope has a deep loyalty both to her lost husband, for whom she weeps every night and whom she misses "all the time," and also to the "beautiful rich house" in which she lives, which she risks losing forever if she remarries.

She has devised clever ways to put off the suitors, but it is clear that she cannot do so forever; eventually, she will have to choose one of them as her husband and perhaps leave the household of Odysseus for a new home. When that happens, either the suitors will divide the wealth of Odysseus between them—as they sometimes threaten—or the dominant suitor may gain the throne of Ithaca for himself. The ambiguity about what the suitors are seeking matches an even more central ambiguity, about what Penelope herself wants. Indefinitely, tearfully, Penelope waits, keeping everyone guessing about her innermost feelings and intentions. As the chief suitor complains, “She offers hope to all, sends signs to each, / but all the while her mind moves somewhere else.” This premise allows for artful resonances with earlier moments in the myth of Troy. Much-courted Penelope resembles Helen, the woman to whom all the Greek heroes came as suitors (Menelaus, her husband, eventually won her hand by lot), and whom Paris, Prince of Troy, later stole away. Like Paris, Penelope’s suitors threaten to steal away a married woman as if she were a bride. Penelope’s house also echoes the besieged town of Troy, when the Greeks were fighting to take Helen back home—but there is here no strong Hector to defend the inhabitants.

Telemachus, Odysseus’ almost-adult son, is in a particularly precarious situation. Left as a “little newborn baby” when Odysseus sailed for Troy, he must be twenty or twenty-one years old at the time of the poem’s action, but he seems in many ways younger. To fight off the suitors and take control of the household himself, he would need great physical and emotional strength, a strong group of supporters, and the capacity to plan a difficult military and political operation—none of which he possesses. Telemachus must complete several difficult quests in the course of the poem: to survive the mortal danger posed by the suitors; to mature and grow up to manhood; to find his lost father, and help him regain control of the house. The journey with which the story begins is not that of Odysseus himself but of Telemachus, who sets out to find news of his absent father. The son’s journey away from home parallels the father’s quest in the opposite direction. The poem intertwines the story of these three central characters—the father, the mother, the son—and shows us how

something different is at stake for each of them, in the gradual and difficult struggle to rebuild their lost nuclear family.

The Odyssey puts us into a world that is a peculiar mixture of the strange and the familiar. The tension between strangeness and familiarity is in fact the poem’s central subject. Its setting, in the islands of the Mediterranean and Aegean Seas, would have been vaguely familiar to any Greek-speaking reader; but this version of the region includes sea-monsters and giants who eat humans, as well as gods who walk the earth and talk with select favorites among the mortals. We encounter a surprisingly varied range of different characters and types of incident: giants and beggars, arrogant young men and vulnerable old slaves, a princess who does laundry and a dead warrior who misses the sunshine, gods, goddesses, and ghosts, brave deeds, love affairs, spells, dreams, songs, and stories. Odysseus himself seems to contain multitudes: he is a migrant, a pirate, a carpenter, a king, an athlete, a beggar, a husband, a lover, a father, a son, a fighter, a liar, a leader, and a thief. He is a man who cries, takes naps, and feels homesick, but he is also a man who has a special relationship with the goddess who transforms his appearance at will and ensures that his schemes succeed. The poem promotes but also questions its own fantasies and ideals, such as the idea that time and change can be undone, and the notion that there is such a thing as home, where people and relationships can stay forever the same.

Who Was Homer?

The authorship of the Homeric poems is a complex and difficult topic, because these written texts emerge from a long oral tradition. Marks of this distinctive legacy are visible in *The Odyssey* on the level of style. Dawn appears some twenty times in *The Odyssey*, and the poem repeats the same line, word for word, each time: *emos d’erigeneia phane rhododaktulos eos*: “But when early-born rosy-fingered Dawn appeared . . .” There is a vast array of such formulaic expressions in Homeric verse, which suggest that things have an eternal, infinitely repeatable presence. Different things will happen every day, but Dawn always appears, always with rosy fingers,

always early. Characters and objects all have their own descriptive terms in Homer; these are known as epithets, rather than adjectives, because they express an essential quality or characteristic, rather than a trait that the object or person possesses only in a particular moment. Ships are “black,” “hollow,” “swift,” or “curved,” never “brown,” “slow,” or “wobbly.” Chairs are “well-carved” or “polished,” never “uncomfortable” or “expensive.” Penelope is “prudent Penelope,” never “swift-footed Penelope” even if she is moving quickly. Telemachus is “thoughtful,” even when he seems particularly immature. Moreover, many types of scene follow a certain predictable pattern. There is a fixed sequence of events described, with variations, whenever someone gets dressed or puts on armor, whenever a meal is prepared, or whenever a person is killed. Through its formulaic mode, *The Odyssey* assures us that, once we know the patterns, the world will follow a predictable rhythm. This feature of the Homeric poems is a mark of their debt to a Greek oral tradition of poetic song that extends back hundreds of years before the poems in their current forms came into existence.

In *The Odyssey* itself we meet two singers who play the lyre while they give their performances of traditional tales at the banquets of the rich. The first is Demodocus at the court of King Alcinous of Phaeacia, who tells stories about Odysseus himself and the Trojan Horse, as well as about the affair between the god Ares and the goddess Aphrodite. The second is Phemius, who performs under compulsion for the suitors of Penelope. These characters give us some important insights into the composition of the poem, and the person (or people) who composed it. In an obviously self-interested spirit, *The Odyssey* suggests that poets have a particularly honorable place in society. But the singer is also presented as a servant, perhaps a slave, who earns food and a place to rest by giving performances that are enjoyed by wealthy banqueters. Demodocus does not read out his poetry from a script; his inability to do so is underlined by the fact that he is blind (not incidentally, no one in the entire *Odyssey* reads or writes anything). Moreover, Demodocus does not invent an original story of his own composition. Instead, Demodocus is inspired by the Muse to sing the “deeds of heroes”—which are, at least in outline,

already well-known to his audience. The skill and inspiration of these illiterate singers is shown not in the invention of entirely new stories, but in their ability to retell ancient stories, and to transport their audience to the scenes they describe.

But Homer himself—if there was such a person—was not exactly a Demodocus. A blind, illiterate bard could not, by himself, have written the monumental *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Homer is usually described in Greek sources not as a singer (*aoidos*) or rhapsode (“song-stitcher”), but as a poet, *poietaes*—a word that means “maker.” Indeed, a normal way to refer to Homer in Greek is as “the Poet”—the name Homer can be omitted, since there is only one primary poet in the canon.

The Odyssey as we know it is based, like almost all the Graeco-Roman literature we have, on medieval manuscripts. But there is an important difference with this text. The medieval manuscripts of an author like Virgil or Horace are based on earlier manuscripts, based in turn on earlier manuscripts, and so on, each scribe copying the work of a predecessor, and moving back from the medieval codex (a leaved book written on animal skin parchment) to the Byzantine and then ancient papyrus (a scroll written on a kind of thick paper made from papyrus leaves).

The Odyssey and *The Iliad* are different, not only because they are older than other ancient texts, but because of the specific difficulties of understanding how these poems were created—not, or not simply, from the mind of an individual creator, but also from a long oral tradition, which has been transformed into two monumental written texts. How exactly did this process happen? Did a single, particularly talented folk-poet learn to write? Or did an illiterate singer collaborate with scribes? Was there one creator, or many? At what time in the process of composition did writing enter the picture?

This takes us to what is known as the Homeric Question, which is really a whole cluster of questions about the composition of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. The Question is given a capital Q, because scholars still disagree on some crucial issues even after a couple of centuries of discussion. How exactly did the Homeric poems as we have them emerge from the oral tradition that preceded them? Who was Homer? Was there a single

author of *The Odyssey*, or several? Did the same person produce *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*? When exactly did the poems get written down, and how? Can we trace earlier and later parts of the poems, or tie particular passages to different geographical locations? And to what extent do the poems reflect real historical events, cultures, and peoples—a real Trojan War, or the real Mycenaean civilization of late Bronze Age Greece (which existed from the sixteenth to the twelfth centuries BCE)? Most generally, how exactly did multiple people over hundreds of years across the Greek-speaking world work together to create this magnificent, challenging, and coherent work of poetic storytelling? Design “by committee” has a very bad name, and yet *The Odyssey* seems like an unexpected success. How was it done?

During the Renaissance, when the Homeric poems were rediscovered in Europe, Homer was assumed to have been a writer, in the same way that Virgil or Dante were writers—albeit a writer from an ancient time. But in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, dissenting voices began to emerge. In 1664, the Abbé d'Aubignac attacked Homer, arguing that *The Iliad* and *Odyssey* were incoherent, immoral, and tasteless poems, cobbled together out of an oral folk tradition. A generation later, the British scholar Richard Bentley studied Homer's language, and proved that it was much earlier than classical (fifth- and fourth-century) Greek, because it still showed traces of a letter of the alphabet that dropped out of the language: the digamma. Bentley argued that “Homer” was a prehistoric oral poet of about 1,000 BCE, whose disparate and rambling songs were not gathered into the epics we have until the late sixth century. Scholars began to apply new methods of historical and linguistic analysis, and to ask new questions about how and when these texts were produced. In his *Prolegomena to Homer* of 1795, a pioneering work in this “new philology,” Friedrich August Wolf argued that the Homeric poems were transmitted orally, and that they had undergone a long period of change and adaptation, through multiple oral reperformances and multiple reformulations by literate editors to suit changing contemporary tastes. He suggested that the poems, which he saw as the product of “the whole Greek people,” were forged into their state of apparent unity only at the stage of tran-

scription. Wolf's new vision initiated a fresh discussion of how the original Homer, or the original building blocks of the poem, might be uncovered out of the text as we have it.

During the nineteenth century, Homeric scholarship was divided between the Analytic and Unitarian schools. The Unitarians opposed Wolf's ideas, largely on literary grounds, and argued that the poems as we have them are not an aggregate of earlier, shorter compositions, but were composed by a lone author with a single overarching structure in mind. The Analysts, by contrast, argued that the epics were produced by many different hands. There were multiple theories about how exactly the compilation took place, and what the original kernel might have been. Some argued that there was an original core narrative, an *ur-Odyssey*, which had been encrusted with many later and clumsier accretions; their scholarly task was to strip away the layers of later sub-Homeric narrative and restore the original purity of the poems. Others believed that the poems as we have them are a compilation of originally separate folk stories welded together. The Analysts shared the view that the earlier, more original layers of the poems were superior to the later additions and edits, although they disagreed about where exactly the original Homer could be located in the poems as we have them. Even in more recent times, Homerists have been slow to shake off the notion that earlier means better, as well as to rid themselves of the hope that one might chisel a more perfect poem out of the rough marble of the text we have.

Up until the start of the twentieth century, scholars took the oral roots of Homeric poetry more or less for granted, not fully understanding the degree to which they can help us explain important features of Homeric style and narrative technique. The emergence of Homeric poetry from folk traditions explained its “primitive” style, but the generic and stylistic structures of oral poetry and folk traditions were not examined in a systematic way. The state of Homeric scholarship changed radically and permanently in the early 1930s, when a young American classicist named Milman Parry traveled to the then-Yugoslavia with recording equipment and began to study the living oral tradition of illiterate and semiliterate Serbo-Croat bards, who told poetic folk tales about the mythical and

semihistorical events of the Serbian past. Parry died at the age of thirty-three from an accidental gunshot, and research was further interrupted by the Second World War. But Parry's student Albert Lord continued his work on Homer, and published his findings in 1960, under the title *The Singer of Tales*. Lord and Parry proved definitively that the Homeric poems show the mark of oral composition.

The "Parry-Lord hypothesis" was that oral poetry, from every culture where it exists, has certain distinctive features, and that we can see these features in the Homeric poems—specifically, in the use of formulae, which enable the oral poet to compose at the speed of speech. A writer can pause for as long as she or he wants, to ponder the most fitting adjective for a particular scene; she can also go back and change it afterwards, on further reflection—as in the famous anecdote about Oscar Wilde, who labored all morning to add a comma, and worked all afternoon taking it out. Oral performers do not use commas, and do not have the luxury of time to ponder their choice of words. They need to be able to maintain fluency, and formulaic features make this possible.

Subsequent studies, building on the work of Parry and Lord, have shown that there are marked differences in the ways that oral and literate cultures think about memory, originality, and repetition. In highly literate cultures, there is a tendency to dismiss repetitive or formulaic discourse as cliché; we think of it as boring or lazy writing. In primarily oral cultures, repetition tends to be much more highly valued. Repeated phrases, stories, or tropes can be preserved to some extent over many generations without the use of writing, allowing people in an oral culture to remember their own past. In Greek mythology, Memory (*Mnemosyne*) is said to be the mother of the Muses, because poetry, music, and storytelling are all imagined as modes by which people remember the times before they were born.

It is now generally agreed that, in broad terms, Parry and Lord were right. Many features of the Homeric poems are indeed formulaic (such as those standard "epithets" and those formulaic "type-scenes" of arming or eating), and must have originated from an oral tradition. But there is still a very wide range of opinion about how, exactly, the words of many gen-

erations of illiterate and semiliterate bards turned into the written texts of Homer that we have. Several essential factors need to be accounted for by any viable theory. Most obviously, the Homeric poems are written texts, not oral performances. Writing must have played a central part in the process of composition, so it is very misleading to describe *The Odyssey* simply as an "oral" poem, as is far too often done. It is a written text based on an oral tradition, which is not at all the same as being an actual oral composition. Moreover, these texts are far too long for any singer to perform them on a single occasion, and far too long for any individual to hold in memory without the use of writing. Songs that had an influence on the Homeric poems were sung for hundreds of years in preliterate Greece; but none of them was *The Odyssey*.

These are written texts that display the legacy of a long oral tradition. In important ways the poems are a patchwork. The language is a mish-mash of several different dialects, which marks the fact that the Greek singers and storytellers lived and developed their legends in multiple different locations across the Greek-speaking world. Moreover, there are small inconsistencies in the narrative itself, which usually pass unnoticed by the casual reader (such as a slight confusion about how many cloaks Eumaeus possesses, and an apparent switch in who sets up the axes for the contest in which the suitors and Odysseus compete for Penelope's hand). The inconsistencies could mark the text's emergence from multiple different earlier versions of the story of Odysseus, or they might suggest multiple stages of composition and revision, by one poet or by many. Yet despite their mixed language, and despite the few inconsistencies, both *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* display striking structural coherence. There is a grand architecture to the storytelling, which might seem to imply the careful planning of a single architect, or architects.

It is possible, as Albert Lord argued, that an oral poet worked closely with a literate scribe or scribes over the course of many days, weeks, or months. On this model, the composition of *The Odyssey* may have been not so different from that of *Paradise Lost*, composed by a blind poet who dictated his work over a long period to a number of amanuenses. Lord and Parry thought that the composer of the poem could not have

been literate, because in the Yugoslavian context, singers who acquired literacy tended to lose their ability to compose oral poetry. But it has now been shown that oral traditions, or "orature," can interact with literacy in a number of different ways, and they are not necessarily driven out as soon as literacy arrives; in Somalia, for example, oral poets have been able to continue their oral compositions even after acquiring literacy. Oral literature is more diverse than Parry, with a single point of cultural comparison, could discern.

Some scholars argue that *The Odyssey* was composed by a single person who was well acquainted with the oral tradition but had become literate. This is certainly possible, but there is really no evidence one way or the other. Alternatively, perhaps the poem was composed when one particularly talented illiterate or semiliterate poet (or several) teamed up with a scribe or a group of scribes. Perhaps the scribe or scribes were entirely passive in the process of writing down what the poet composed; or perhaps there was an ongoing collaboration between two or more members of a group. Again, it is difficult to adjudicate between these various possibilities, in the absence of any solid evidence, or a time machine.

The same person could, in theory, have composed *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, though many scholars believe that different individuals wrote the two poems, because they are notably different in terms of language as well as narrative content. It certainly seems likely that the person or people who composed *The Odyssey* were aware of *The Iliad*, since *The Odyssey* supplements but does not repeat any incidents from *The Iliad*—which is unlikely to have happened by chance.

Scholars who claim that *The Odyssey* was composed by a single person acknowledge that this poet drew on a long and complex set of earlier poetic and folkloric traditions, and that the initial composition underwent considerable alteration in subsequent years, decades, and centuries. Homer—whoever he, she, or they may have been—composed this definitive version of the homecoming of Odysseus with a deep awareness of multiple different versions of the story, as well as a deep knowledge of multiple other parallel folk traditions and myths. For instance, there were probably versions of the story in which Penelope was aware

of Odysseus' plans to slaughter the suitors at a much earlier stage, and thus proposed the Contest of the Bow in full knowledge that it would help further her husband's plot. *The Odyssey* is also influenced by other related archaic legends, originating both around the Mediterranean and the Near East; for instance, the ancient myth of Jason and the Argonauts seems to hover behind the story of Odysseus and his wanderings.

Maybe an individual genius, a "Homer," had a particularly important role in the creation of *The Odyssey*. But we should question the notion that a unified structure and coherent creative product must necessarily be seen as the result of an individual's work. Scholars have tended to assume so, because many long-form narrative genres that we are familiar with, like novels, are produced that way. However, we are also familiar with long narratives that do not have single authors. Many movies, for example, are the product of a team. Most contemporary long-form television drama series are put together by multiple people, even if there is a single creator who came up with the show's initial premise. It may be helpful to think in these terms when considering the authorship of *The Odyssey*. Perhaps we are more prepared than readers of the past to approach *The Odyssey* as a poem that exists as a mostly unified whole, but which was created by multiple different people, over a long period of time.

When Was *The Odyssey* Composed?

The date of the poem, no less than its authorship, is a matter of serious disagreement. In the middle of the eighth century BCE, the inhabitants of Greece began to adopt a modified version of the Phoenician alphabet to write down their language. The Homeric poems may have been one of the earliest products of this new literacy. If so, they would have been composed some time in the late eighth century. But some scholars have suggested a significantly later date, in the early, middle, or late seventh century BCE; others, less plausibly, have suggested even later dates of composition. The near consensus is that, at some point between the late eighth and late seventh century, a hundred-year-long window, *The Odyssey* was composed.