

Homer, *Iliad* 1–6

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No-one knows, or probably will ever know, who Homer was, or even if he – the gender is assumed – was one person or a kind of team producing a joint effort. The stories he tells in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are very old and various different parts of them had been passed down orally for a long time before finally someone brought them together into the long epic poems, each linked by an overarching coherent theme, that have eventually come down to the modern world.

Some five hundred years pass between the events of the Trojan War depicted in the *Iliad* and the composition of the poem. Some parts of the poem are very ancient and have come down to Homer’s time through the oral tradition, handed down (as it were) from poet to poet, and the world has changed a good deal in the meantime; and the poems therefore contain various anachronisms. Some of the things Homer depicts are from his own world, his own time, not from that of the Mycenaean Age in which the poem is set. Bronze, for example, much referred to in terms of weaponry, was not much used by Homer’s time; but the iron used for weapons in Homeric Greece sometimes finds its way into the text (e.g. 4:123, 4:185) and, since iron had not yet been discovered at the time the poems depict, this is anachronistic (out of its historical time). Some of the fighting methods are problematic for Homer: in his time, the method of fighting from a chariot had died out and it is clear that the poet misunderstood how it worked. In some places (e.g. 4.226ff), he describes the chariot as a kind of taxi service, taking the warrior across the battlefield towards the man he wants to fight; when the warrior arrives, he does not fight from the chariot, but dismounts and fights on the ground. Nestor’s description of fighting directly from a chariot (4.301 ff) is a much more accurate depiction of Mycenaean practice, and thus reflects material that Homer inherited from the oral tradition (Finley 1978).

Homer’s story is set in the past, a past when men are heroes – stronger, braver, better than those of Homer’s own time; and one challenge for modern audiences is that the poet tells his tale in a way that makes it clear that he expects his listeners to be familiar with the story, the characters and the events he describes. The poet’s skill, then, is not in inventing a story, but in recounting it in his own way (cf. medieval narratives). Homer received his story from a tradition of oral storytelling; his own art is in how he retells this story.

Beginnings and endings are always important in literature. How does a poet start his work? What does he flag as important? What expectations does he create at the outset? How far does the way the poem ends match those expectations? In Lattimore’s translation, Homer’s *Iliad* begins: ‘Sing, goddess, the anger of Peleus’ son Achilleus’ (I:1). This version of the opening line seems to prioritize the goddess

– the muse – and the act of singing; but in the original Greek, the word ‘anger’, *menin* (accusative), comes first. Anger, *menis*, is the key to the poem, and while various characters will be angry at times, it is Achilles’s anger and its consequences – Achilles’s anger as a catalyst of events – with which the poet is chiefly concerned.

This opening also makes it clear that the *Iliad* is not primarily about the Trojan War and will not recount the story of the Trojan War. In fact, the poem narrates events that occur over some fifty days in the tenth, and final, year of the war. This temporal setting, however, is diffused by two techniques which allow the poet to describe earlier and later events. These are called prolepsis and analepsis. Analepses are what we today would call flashbacks; they fill in relevant past events that we need to understand events taking place in the poem’s present. Prolepses are what we might call flashforwards, depicting or alluding to events which will happen later, beyond the end of this story’s timeframe. Prolepses often describe events connected with the end of the war, such as deaths of key figures, and events that take place after the war is over. Analepses look back at events or actions earlier in the war or even before the war begins.

Sometimes Homer needs to remind his audience of what is going on or provide relevant backstory, but these passages, like analepses, demand that the audience, particularly a reading audience, suspend disbelief. Take, for example, the scene in Book 3 when Helen and Priam are watching events on the battlefield from the city walls. In this episode, called a *teichoskopia* (the view from the wall), Helen’s Greek husband, Menelaos, is about to fight Paris, the Trojan whose abduction of Helen is the cause of – or at least the excuse for – the war. Priam asks Helen to identify some of the warriors on the battlefield. He asks in particular about three warriors, who turn out to be Agamemnon, the high king of the Achaians, and Odysseus and Telemonian Aias, key heroes on the Greek side. Logically it makes no sense, in the tenth year of the war, for Troy’s king not to know who these men are; but such questions become logical within the immediate context where it is Helen’s recognition of these Greek heroes, and of her first husband, that is important. It is the audience’s need for information that is met at this moment; but the scene also heightens the emotional register, giving Helen the opportunity to express her feelings about events which concern her closely, but which are the property of men, warriors. Here, Homer provides a moment of poignancy and dramatic irony, as Helen, gazing over the plain, is puzzled to see no trace of her brothers, Kastor and Polydeukes, who are, as the audience knows, already dead. This technique, a kind of bending of narrative logic, works together with analepses and prolepses to fill in the backdrop of the immediate story or scene.

The opening books show the key settings of the *Iliad*: the plain in front of the city of Troy and the city itself; although sometimes the action moves to Olympos, the home of the gods. The earthly settings offer the backdrop to various scenarios featuring men and gods: fighting on the battlefield, religious ceremonies in the city, business meetings (the assembly) in both. To contrast with the bloody battles, the

poet also describes domestic scenes, in Troy, in the Greek camp and on Olympos. Book 6, for example, offers a poignant scene between the Trojan hero Hektor and his wife, Andromache. Here, their baby son, Astyanax, fails to recognize his father in battledress, and weeps with fear until Hektor removes his helmet:

So speaking glorious Hektor held out his arms to his baby,
who shrank back to his fair-girdled nurse's bosom
screaming, and frightened of the aspect of his own father,
terrified as he saw the bronze and the crest with its horse-hair,
nodding dreadfully, as he thought, from the peak of the helmet.
Then his beloved father laughed out, and his honoured mother,
and at once glorious Hektor lifted from his head the helmet
and laid it in all its shining upon the ground. Then taking
up his son he tossed him about in his arms, and kissed him. (6:466-74)

Everyday life, the peaceful peacetime world away from this long war, is also seen in many of the similes that occur in great numbers in the poem (of which more later).

The characters of the poem are mortal and immortal: men, women, gods, goddesses; some have speaking roles, others do not. The structure in the divine and the mortal worlds reflects ancient society, both of Homer's own time and the older culture he depicts. It is a violent world and men are all-important. The family unit is hierarchical, and women are, of course, inferior. How can they be otherwise in a society where power ultimately means physical strength? The physically weaker women are thus socially inferior too. They have little value as ancestors: while fathers are frequently named, mothers are usually mentioned only if they are immortal. Sometimes female value is expressed in purely economic terms; women are often presented as spoils of war. Some women do, however, have key roles in plot and motivation, acting as catalysts: the declared reason for the Trojan War is, after all, Paris's abduction of Helen, wife of Menelaos; and this triangular structure, men fighting over a woman, is echoed in Book 1 by Achilles's loss of Briseis to Agamemnon, a catalytic event with tragic consequences. This episode also demonstrates that the women's own wishes are irrelevant: Briseis does not want to leave Achilles and weeps as she is led away. Yet, despite their lack of power and social importance, women are often portrayed sympathetically by Homer and they have a key role in humanizing the war. Andromache explains to her husband her fears for herself and her son:

'your own great strength will be your death, and you have no pity
on your little son, nor on me, ill-starred, who soon must be your widow;
for presently the Achaians, gathering together,
will set upon you and kill you; and for me it would be far better
to sink into the earth when I have lost you, for there is no other
consolation for me after you have gone to your destiny –
only grief; since I have no father, no honoured mother.
It was brilliant Achilles who slew my father [...]
Hektor, thus you are father to me, and my honoured mother,
you are my brother, and you it is who are my young husband.
Please take pity upon me then, stay here on the rampart,
that you may not leave your child an orphan, your wife a widow [...]' (6:406-14, 429-32)

This speech expresses in clear terms the customary gender roles of this warrior-based society: men – heroes – fight, while women wait in fear to learn the outcome of battle, to discover their own futures;

women are much less prominent than men. In the *Iliad*, lower-ranking people, male or female, scarcely feature at all, except sometimes in domestic similes, and they are clearly of no interest in this war-focussed story. (Cf. medieval romance, the world of knights, in which the aristocratic male is all-important, his womenfolk much less so, and the lower classes scarcely appear.)

What is a Homeric hero? The term mean something different to Homer than it does now. In the modern world, there's often only a single hero, a single focus of the story, because the word *hero* tends to mean *chief protagonist*. In the *Iliad*, conversely, there are many heroes; the Ancient Greek word *heros* is thought simply to mean 'warrior'. These warrior-heroes are most often descended from a god or goddess: Achilles is son of Thetis, Aeneias son of Aphrodite; Sarpedon son of Zeus. More rarely, a hero may have mortal parents, but be sponsored by a god: for instance, in the *Iliad* both Odysseus and Diomedes are the favourites of the war goddess Athene, who encourages and sometimes protects them. Even heroes who do have an immortal parent, however, are not themselves immortal: heroes know that their fate, their destiny, is not to take their place amongst the immortals, but to die. This, of course, is why winning a name for themselves is important. *Kleos*, reputation, particularly a reputation earned on the battlefield, and *timē*, the value and honour given by society, are all-important: doing memorable deeds means that poets will create poems about you, bards will want to sing about you, and audiences want to listen. For a hero in the *Iliad*, this is the only way to become immortal. When Achilles calls to his goddess mother for help in Book 1 he makes plain the equation between heroic deeds and man's destiny of death:

'Since, my mother, you bore me to be a man with a short life,
therefore Zeus of the loud thunder on Olympos should grant me
honour at least.' (1:352-4)

Later, in Book 12, Sarpedon will describe to Glaukos this same equation, clearly defining the heroes' code of honour, what it means and what it is worth (a key passage in the poem):

'Man, supposing you and I, escaping this battle,
would be able to live on forever, ageless, immortal,
so neither would I myself go on fighting in the foremost
nor would I urge you into the fighting where men win glory.
But now, seeing that the spirits of death stand close about us
in their thousands, no man can turn aside nor escape them,
let us go on and win glory for ourselves, or yield it to others.' (12:323-8)

Heroes, then, must die: but to be heroes, they must first live memorable lives so they will live forever in the poets' songs and thereby gain the only kind of immortality available to them.

Heroes are big and strong and beautiful – watch out, in the Homeric poems, for anyone who is unattractive, for that will identify for the audience a character who is unheroic, even antiheroic. In Book 2 of the *Iliad*, for instance, a soldier called Thersites speaks critically about Achilles; however, although he is only saying exactly what the king and hero Agamemnon said earlier, Homer makes it clear from the outset that it is not Thersites' place to say such things, and he alerts the audience to this by first describing Thersites' physical appearance:

This was the ugliest man who came beneath Ilion. He was
bandy-legged and went lame of one foot, with shoulders
stooped and drawn together over his chest, and above this
his skull went up to a point with the wool grown sparsely upon it. (2:216-19)

This is not the description of a hero: Thersites is ugly, with thinning hair and an oddly-shaped head; his body is imperfect, stooped over and crippled. He can have little place in the thick of the fighting and, through this physical description, Homer's audience knows at once that his opinions will be driven by bitterness and jealousy, his words as twisted as his form.

While heroes are physically superb, they are not perfect people: heroes can, and often do, have failings (although this is not quite the same as the 'fatal flaw' found in Shakespearian heroes, for example): Achilles's anger, for instance, will later be criticized by both men and gods when he takes it too far. Homer's heroes are rather static: they arrive fully developed and, while they occasionally seem to debate within themselves, they tend not to change, not to learn or move forward. In Book 9, Achilles seems to have reevaluated his earlier idea of heroism, to believe that the winning of *kleos* doesn't matter:

'Fate is the same for the man who holds back,
the same if he fights hard. We are all held in
a single honour, the brave with the weaklings.
A man dies still if he has done nothing, as one
who has done much.' (9.318-20)

Yet Achilles does not really mean what he says here: he has not really changed, is never going to change and, indeed, cannot change. His actions show that he continues to believe what he said at the outset: yes, he is mortal and will die, but he certainly does want his honour, his reputation, to live on. (When Achilles appears in the Underworld in the *Odyssey*, the exact same duality occurs: although he first declares he would be better off as the lowliest slave than king of the underworld, that is better to be alive and forgotten than dead and remembered, he immediately afterwards eagerly asks about his son, whether he is a hero, whether he has done great deeds to ensure his own reputation and reinforce his father's. Terry Pratchett encompasses the idea nicely in *Unseen Academicals* (2009, p. 386), when someone says to a new footballing star, the son of a star footballer: 'They [are saying] Dave Likely was your father. ...but they used to say you were his son.')

The other chief characters in epic are the immortals, the gods and goddesses, major and minor. The gods are central to epic's attempts to engage with questions that are important to its audience, notably *Who is to blame for all the manifold evils of human life?* Sometimes this question is openly debated in the text. For example, the ultimate cause of the war is often considered by Homer's characters (and, later, Virgil's). Sometimes Helen is seen as the ultimate cause, but in Book 3 when she and the Trojan elders watch the fighting from the wall, King Priam explains that he sees the fault differently: 'I am not blaming you', he tells her; 'to me the gods are blameworthy/ who drove upon me this sorrowful war against the Achaians' (3:164-5).

The existence and role of the gods, and the interaction between mortal and immortal, are crucial to

epic. On both sides of the Trojan War, the relationship between men and gods is shown to be vital. The action of the *Iliad* begins with Agamemnon's refusal to return the captured daughter of a priest, who prays to Apollo for help. Apollo sends a plague amongst the Greeks until Agamemnon is forced to free the girl. All the rest of the plot develops and escalates from these events. Elsewhere, however, priests are surprisingly unimportant. They have a role in pacifying the gods, but they are not the sole mediators between mortal and immortal, and anyone can speak directly to a god. Agamemnon's treatment of Chryses demonstrates that priests are not necessarily honoured in society or by warriors and kings, and feast-offerings are often performed by a king or hero rather than a priest.

The gods, on the other hand, are ever-present in the human world: Homer refers to the Trojan temples to Apollo and Athene; the Achaians are presented preparing ritual feasts, with offerings to the gods, and there are altars at the centre of the Greek camp (11.807-8, see Osborne 2004: 215)). The gods are very much a part of the everyday life of the mortals. Homer's poems are the earliest evidence of how the Ancient Greeks viewed religion; but as long ago as the late sixth and early fifth centuries BCE commentators viewed the interaction between the gods as problematic (Kearns 2004: 70). This is because the everyday life of the mortals spills over into the gods' world: the immortals have a social and familial hierarchy that reflect the mortals' own. Unlike the mortals, however, the gods lead empty lives, apparently having little to do but influence and interfere in human matters. The fact that heroes often have a god for a parent shows that gods sometimes choose to have relationships with mortals. (In Book 14, Zeus refers to several of his mortal lovers.) The gods oppose each other on either side of the Trojan War, sometimes watching, at other times arriving on the battlefield itself in order to influence events. Zeus and his wife Hera are on opposing sides of the Trojan War: Hera hates the Trojans, but Zeus's mortal son Sarpedon is a Trojan hero. When Thetis goes to Olympos in order to ask Zeus to help Achilles regain his slighted honour, Zeus complains that any attempt on his part to aid the Trojans, and thus make the Greeks have need of Achilles's prowess, will cause problems in his domestic life:

‘This is a disastrous matter when you set me in conflict
with Hera, and she troubles me with recriminations.
Since even as things are, forever among the immortals
she is at me and speaks of how I help the Trojans in battle.’ (1: 518-21)

Domestic squabbles continue and spill over on to the battlefield. In Book 5, Athene – goddess of war, wisdom and handicrafts – directs much of the action, persuading her brother, the not-very-bright war god Ares, to keep out of the way and giving her favourite Diomedes extraordinary powers to perform an *aristeia*, demonstrating the hero's supreme prowess in battle. Athene even gives Diomedes permission to wound her sister Aphrodite, who goes running back to Olympos, crying to her mother Dione.

The gods are also used in the Homeric poems to explain out-of-character behaviour. Hera, for example, puts the idea of an assembly into Achilles's mind in Book 1 (1:35); and it is Athene who prevents him from killing Agamemnon there; she seizes his hair to hold him back and, invisible to everyone else, tells Achilles firmly to abuse Agamemnon only with words (1:193-22). In Book 4, it is

Athene again who, disguised as a fellow Greek, persuades Pandaros to break the agreed truce by firing off an arrow at Menelaos (4:86-104). (The issue of immortals in disguise here is important, for the ability to recognise a god through the disguise is another mark of a hero. In the early books, the main example of this, in fact, is when Helen pierces Aphrodite's disguise as an old woman (3:395-6), but the motif recurs throughout both Homeric poems.)

The predominance of the heroic code requiring brave and memorable deeds means that this society is based on a shame culture, and the key values explored by the poem all emphasize this. There's a focus on *kleos*, honour in terms of renown, based on the accomplishment of great deeds, usually in battle; *timē*, honour in terms of value, a public acknowledgement of glory often expressed through the awarding of prizes; *arete*, excellence, social virtue (according to context), the best possible; and *aristeia*, the prowess of a warrior as demonstrated through excellence in battle. The focus on reputation and publicity means that shame or loss of face is problematic, and can sometimes set up a conflict between a character's personal and social needs: thus in Book 1, Achilles feels forced to withdraw from battle when his honour is publicly slighted by Agamemnon, who is himself attempting to regain the honour he feels he lost with the loss of Chryseis. The text often underlines the contrasts of honour *versus* shame, courage *versus* cowardice, and these themes are frequently expressed in characters' words, such as when a hero stirs other(s) to fight using insults and aspersions of cowardice.

The Components of Oral Epic

It is still not clear exactly how the poems were performed in the oral tradition; obviously they are too long to be sung in a single performance, but there are still academic debates about whether oral poems were memorized in their entirety. The general consensus, however, is that the oral poet recreates his work each time using certain components. The most fundamental of these is the plot, which is fixed: even if he wanted to, Homer could not change the outcome of the Trojan War, could not make the Trojans win. Added to plot, however, are various other elements, the tools of the oral poet, which involve much repetition and act as mnemonic devices. These include themes—prayer, supplication, journey by ship, divine visitation, assembly, sacrifice &c. (Jones 2003: 21)—as well as what are known as 'type scenes': 'recurring situations which are narrated according to a more or less fixed pattern', including battle-scenes, social intercourse, travel, ritual, speeches and deliberation (Clark, 2004: 134). There are similarities between the type-scenes as they recur, but they are never identical (e.g. the warrior arming himself, *Iliad* 3.328-38, 11.15-44, 16.130-54, 19.364-424).

Another feature of the epic is the formulaic phrases which occur everywhere. Examination of these is common enough now, but it is interesting that the Homeric formulae were not recognized until Milman Parry identified them in the 1930s; he defined the formula as 'an expression regularly used, under the same metrical conditions, to express an essential idea' (qtd. in Clark 2004: 119). The poem consists of

hexameter lines, each of which breaks down into smaller units, often completed with formulae, identical or similar in construction to each other. The formulae used as metrical fillers in single lines are frequently adjectives or adjectival phrases known as epic epithets. These can be selected and adapted to the length required: *dios Odysseus* ('godlike Odysseus') consists of a dactyl (*dios Od*) and a spondee (*ysseus*) and will supply two complete metrical feet in the hexameter line. The epithet can be adapted to fill the metrical gap, for example by substituting the adjective, or adding further adjectives (see Lattimore's introduction to his edition of the *Iliad*, 1951: 37-40; cf. Clark 2004. For the basics of Ancient Greek and Latin scansion, see Curley 1999-2000).

Some of these epithets are specific to a particular character, for example 'Agamemnon king of men' and 'swift-footed Achilles'; but rather than supplying an occasional reminder of a relevant character trait, the inclusion of epithets is dictated by the necessity of metre, to fill the hexameter line, rather than a need for interpretation; it is hardly necessary to the epics' meaning to repeat the epithet 'Agamemnon king of men' thirty-seven times across the Homeric poems, and 'swift-footed Achilles' thirty-one times (Clark, 2004: 117-18); and, in fact, the repetitions tend to reduce any meaningful aspect the epithet might have had. After all, the audience knows from myths outside the *Iliad* that Achilles is 'swift of foot', without being told it repeatedly; and sometimes an epithet seems to work against itself: as Peter Jones asks, 'what use is "swift-footed" Achilles if he spends most of the time sitting in his hut?' (2003: 14). Other epithets indeed are applied to so many characters as to lose any meaning, for example *dios*, 'godlike', which is applied to thirty-two different heroes (Clark, 2004: 128).

Occasionally an epithet will seem completely inappropriate to the context: for example, when Aphrodite, wounded in battle by Diomedes, runs weeping to her mother Dione for comfort, she is called Aphrodite 'the sweetly laughing' (*Iliad* 5.375), which is plainly nonsense in the context. These inappropriate epithets have been considered problematic since antiquity, although, as Frederick M. Combellack observes (1982: 361), the ancients devised a solution: 'not at that time, but by nature', a reference to the character's usual personality or key trait.

Formulae can also be much longer: sometimes whole passages are repeated verbatim, or almost verbatim, as in the descriptions of sacrifice and feast:

And when all had made prayer and flung down the scattering barley
first they drew back the victims' heads and slaughtered them and skinned them,
and cut away the meat from the thighs and wrapped them in fat,
making a double fold, and laid shreds of flesh upon them.
The old man burned these on a cleft stick and poured the gleaming
wine over, while the young men with forks in their hand stood about him.
But when they had burned the thigh pieces and tasted the vitals,
they cut up all the remainder into pieces and spitted them
and roasted all carefully and took off the pieces.
Then after they had finished the work and got the feast ready
they feasted, nor was any man's hunger denied a fair portion... (vv. 1.458-68; cf. 2.421-31)

These repetitions help the poet to move from one section of his story to another.

Another feature of oral epic is digression. Digressions can be used to heighten tension by putting off

the moment of action. One example comes from *Iliad* 4 (86ff), when Athene causes the Trojan Pandaros to break the truce agreed between the enemies by firing an arrow at Menelaos. 'Straightway he unwrapped his bow,' says the poet, whetting the audience's expectation for immediate action; but instead Homer describes the history of the bow:

Straightway he unwrapped his bow, of the polished horn from
a running wild goat he himself had shot in the chest once,
lying in wait for the goat in a covert as it stepped down
from the rock, and hit it in the chest so it sprawled on the boulders.
The horns that grew from the goat's head were sixteen palms' length.
A bowyer working on the horn then bound them together,
smoothing them to a fair surface, and put on a golden string hook.
Pandaros strung his bow and put it in position... (4.105-112)

It takes eight lines for the narrative to move from 'Straightway he unwrapped the bow' to Pandaros actually stringing it, eight lines of suspense, which also, in their detail, evoke the peacetime world of weapons created and used for hunting, as well as for battle.

Digressions can be more than simple ways of making the story longer or heightening tension. Ruth Scodel observes of Homer's own audience: 'Everyone knew that a digression marks the significance of the action' (2004: 50); thus it underlines the moment. Digressions often take the form of what Maureen Alden calls 'para-narratives': 'secondary narratives related by the poet's characters, and also interludes related in the voice of the poet himself, which do not advance the progression of the main narrative'. While such additions may not progress the plot, they are relevant to the interpretation of events in their immediate context or of the main narrative or both (Alden, 2000: 1). A key example comes from *Iliad* 24, where Achilles recounts to Priam the story of Niobe, who, despite her grief at the death of her children, still eats to survive; the story is intended to persuade Priam, grief-stricken over the death of his son, Hektor, to eat. Similarly, Athene's support of Diomedes in battle in *Iliad* 4 and 6 will be echoed in her support of him in the Funeral Games in Book 23.

The simile is another feature of the Homeric poems, particularly of the *Iliad*. Similes can be brief, but frequently extend into lengthy, leisurely passages. Like the digression of Pandaros' bow, similes often evoke the natural world or the agricultural/domestic world the heroes have left behind, thus providing a contrast to the setting of war. Similes can be simple, like the image of Thetis emerging 'like a mist from the grey water' (1.359); but the poet frequently creates more complex images. In *Iliad* 4, Athene protects Menelaos from the full force of Pandaros' arrow, brushing it aside 'as lightly as when a mother/brushes a fly away from her child who is lying in sweet sleep' (4.130-1); but there is a wound, and the simile here is elaborate and digressive:

As when some Maionian woman or Karian with purple
colours ivory, to make it a cheek piece for horses;
it lies away in an inner room, and many a rider
longs to have it, but it is laid up to be a king's treasure,
two things, to be the beauty of the horse, the pride of the horseman:
so, Menelaos, your shapely thighs were stained with the colour
of blood... (4.141-7)

(Note here, too, that the poet, unusually, addresses his character directly.) *Iliad* 2 contains one of many descriptions of men in terms of the natural world:

Like the swarms of clustering bees that issue forever
in fresh bursts from the hollow in the stone, and hang like
bunched grapes as they hover beneath the flowers in springtime
fluttering in swarms together this way and that way,
so the many nations of men from the ships and the shelters
along the front of the deep sea beach marched in order
by companies to the assembly... (2.87-93)

Unlike other passages in the poems, the similes display very little repetition: even similar similes contain minor variations, like the lion similes in *Iliad* 11.113-21 and 172-8 (Buxton, 2004: 146).

The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are also filled with dialogue: more than half of Homeric epic is made up of speeches by characters, and, as Jasper Griffin observes, this is in contrast to Virgil's (literary) epic, in which there are no extended conversations (Griffin, 2004: 156). The speeches affect the delivery of the performance and serve to provide some characterisation (Griffin, 2004: 158-9). The first book of the *Iliad* displays a wide range of Homeric speeches: short, long, threats, prayers, attempts to restore peace, in soliloquy and in conversation with others. *Iliad* 1 also describes the effects of speeches on other characters, and their reactions: fear, anger, sorrow and so on (Griffin, 2004: 166).

Classicists still debate vehemently as to how early the poems were 'fixed' in their final form: 'fixed' refers to an unchangeable, final version, as in a printed book. Did the poet recompose the poem at each telling? Did the poet recite from memory, like an actor? Did Homer learn to write and then record the epics himself, or dictate them to an amanuensis (see Fowler 2004; Janko 1998)? This question, as David Bouvier points out, is a modern phenomenon: the ancient Greeks 'never recognised the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey* as going back to a distant past and transforming previous mythological stories. Homer was for them a composer of fixed poems' (2003: 59).

The majority of scholars do not support the theory that the original *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were 'fixed' or 'memorized'. Rather, the repeating elements of type-scenes, and formulae, repetitions and similes make up what many scholars view as 'building blocks' available to the trained oral poet. The bard begins with the outline of the story he plans to tell, and he extemporizes using the 'building blocks' at his disposal. Thus, according to Richard Janko, oral poetry is 'improvised in the sense that jazz is improvised – by using pre-existing blocks of material and skilfully putting them together or modifying them in new ways' (Janko, 1998: 4).

Homer's epics were not originally intended only as entertainment. Oral poetry has an important function in preliterate societies, like that of Homer and before Homer: before writing was discovered, or used widely, oral poems carried the traditions, beliefs, laws and values of a society from one generation to the next. Franz H. Bäuml describes the purpose of epic in preliterate, tribal societies as 'encyclopaedic': 'It was the repository of the knowledge necessary for the function and cohesion of preliterate society. The heroes and their deeds were the vehicles for the illustration of the tribal mores.

This essential didactic content, moreover, had no existence independent from the performance, the recitation of the epic. This is one of the most important distinctions between the function of literature in an illiterate, or preliterate, society and its function in the context of literacy: a piece of writing has an independent existence; it can be put aside, gone back to, checked and rechecked, and it will not change if it is forgotten; the content of an oral epic lives only in the performance and the memory. The energies of preliterate societies were therefore spent in the effort to *preserve* the continuity of their cultures' (Bäumel, 1975: 27-8, original emphasis).

Performance is a key issue here: as Homer's epics show, story-telling, both by professional bards and as a non-professional pastime, has an important role in Achaian society. On one level, the stories entertain; on another they can provide models, paradigms, of ways to behave or not to behave. (In the *Odyssey*, the story of Orestes' revenge of his father, Agamemnon, is told again and again, and each time its intended message and focus are different (Olson 1990)). Performance also relates to the hexameter line and the heightened language of the poetry: this is not the language of the everyday, but the formal poetics of ritual.

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