

The Odyssey

by HOMER

IN ANCIENT GREECE professional storytellers traveled through the country reciting stories of war and adventure. Legend has it that Homer—blind, old, poor, and wandering from place to place—was such a traveling poet. Perhaps there was such a man. Few, if any, facts about his life have been established. Even the Greeks themselves knew little about him. One writer—assuming that anyone who described the battles of Troy so vividly must have seen them for himself—placed him in the twelfth century B.C., whereas another, perhaps more accurately, put him in the ninth.

In any case, the Greeks regarded Homer as their first and greatest poet. By the fifth century B.C. *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, the two poems attributed to Homer, were the basis of Greek formal education and cultural life. They supplied the Greeks with knowledge and wisdom, gave them rules for moral behavior, furnished arguments to settle disputes and precedents to support territorial claims. Homer was the source of inspiration for all poets, the model for all accomplishment in literature. Professionals toured the cities reciting his poems and providing exhibitions; and recitals from Homer, state-controlled, were a part of the periodic festivals in Athens.

THE "HOMERIC QUESTION"

For more than two thousand years Homer has been recognized as the first truly great literary figure of Western civilization. His stature has not been diminished by the passage of centuries even though we do not know whether there actually was such a man. But attempts to find who the author was, and whether *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* are the work of one poetic genius or of many, have given rise to what is called the "Homeric Question."

Numerous reasons have been advanced to sustain the argument that the poems are the result of multiple authorship. It has been maintained that Greek was not written before 700 B.C.; that Homer lived about

50

850 B.C.; that the poems are too long to have been transmitted orally; and that they are too full of contradictions and inconsistencies to be the work of a single individual. Those who advance these theories believe that in the middle of the sixth century B.C.—between about 560 and 528 B.C.—traditional poems were gathered together and unified by a group of scholars. It has even been suggested that *The Iliad* is actually eighteen separate poems, each by a different author. Others hold that a small, original core is by Homer, the inconsistent parts being later additions.

The most widely accepted current opinion is that Homer used many sources, consolidated them, and reworked them into two great poems. It is very likely that there were some later additions. The differences in style and language between the two poems are explained by the belief that *The Odyssey* was composed much later than *The Iliad*; the discrepancies in tone and language within the poems themselves are believed to be due to Homer's having varied the language and mood to suit the particular event he was narrating, or to accommodate the type of audience he was addressing. Oral transmission of the poems is now considered quite possible, but it is likely that they were not put into writing later than the middle of the sixth century B.C.

THE ILIAD

BECAUSE HOMER COULD ASSUME that the background events were known to his audience, he never bothered to "fill in." He began his story at the point which interested him. The adventures related in *The Odyssey*, however, are preceded and prepared for by the much earlier action of *The Iliad*. Consequently it will be helpful if we review briefly the subject and theme of *The Iliad*, as well as some of the story that precedes that poem.

One day, while Paris, the handsome young son of Priam, King of Troy, is tending sheep on Mount Ida, he is asked to judge among the three great goddesses—Hera, Aphrodite, and Athena—each of whom claims a golden apple marked "For the Fairest." He awards the apple to Aphrodite after she promises him as a wife the fairest woman on earth. On a visit to Sparta, with Aphrodite's aid Paris prevails upon the beautiful Helen, the wife of King Menelaus, to leave her husband and child and go with him to Troy. Menelaus and Odysseus, King of Ithaca, go to Troy and formally request the return of Helen. But their petition is refused. Thereupon Agamemnon, brother of Menelaus and King of Mycenae and Argos, summons all the leading princes of Greece, as well as the great warrior Achilles, to join in an armed

51

pedition against the city of Troy. Under the command of Agamemnon they sail for Troy in an armada of a thousand ships, and for ten years besiege the city.

In *The Iliad*, Homer does not tell this part of the story, nor does he describe the ten-year siege or the eventual fall of Troy. The action of the poem is concerned only with some events during the last few weeks of the last year of the war. Homer is not concerned with the history of the war, but with the characters of men.

THE TRAGIC THEME

"O Goddess! sing the wrath of Achilles, Peleus' son; sing the deadly wrath that brought woes numberless upon the Greeks, and sent to Hades many a valiant soul, and left their bodies a prey to dogs and birds; and the will of Zeus was fulfilled—on the day when they first quarreled, Agamemnon, king of men, and great Achilles."

In these first few lines Homer sets the tragic theme of his poem. He will sing in *The Iliad* of "wicked arrogance" and "deadly wrath," of great men of noble character whose fatal flaws bring disaster upon themselves and others. He will tell of men who are great, but human and imperfect, of brave men who succumb to the anger of pride.

But to relate the actions of heroes, he must also depict the arena in which they perform. And so, with majesty and grandeur Homer describes battle scenes, gives a precise roster of the slain with details of their ancestry, notes where the spear went into the body and, at times, just where it came out. He shows us the forging of shields, soldiers at their banquets, old Priam comforting Helen, warriors parting from their wives and children as they leave for battle.

THE ODYSSEY

HOMER EXPECTS US TO KNOW ALL THIS when he starts *The Odyssey*. So again, with no preamble, he just begins. He assumes we know that during the Trojan War Athena and Poseidon, ruler of the sea, had been the greatest allies of the Greeks, but that when Troy fell their attitude had changed. In the madness of victory, the Greeks had forgotten what was due the gods; they had even desecrated Athena's temple. In punishment, the goddess and Poseidon, filled with wrath, decided to give the Greeks a bitter homecoming.

When *The Odyssey* opens, nine years have passed since the end of the Trojan War, and nineteen since Odysseus had sailed for Troy from his native island of Ithaca. All the other warriors are either dead or they have returned home and re-established themselves after much

hardship. Only Odysseus has not returned. By now, except for Poseidon, every god feels sorry for him, Athena most of all. *The Odyssey* begins, then, with a council of the gods. Poseidon has gone off to Ethiopia; if all the gods decide now upon a certain course, he alone cannot stand against them. The gods decide that Odysseus has suffered long enough, and they arrange to bring him home.

THE DESIGN OF THE ODYSSEY

Homer's problem in *The Odyssey* is to get Odysseus home, to have him meet his son and rejoin his wife, to drive her suitors out of his lands, and also to tell us the adventures Odysseus has experienced in the nine years since he left Troy for home. Homer solved his problem with a skill that has never been excelled, and rarely equalled.

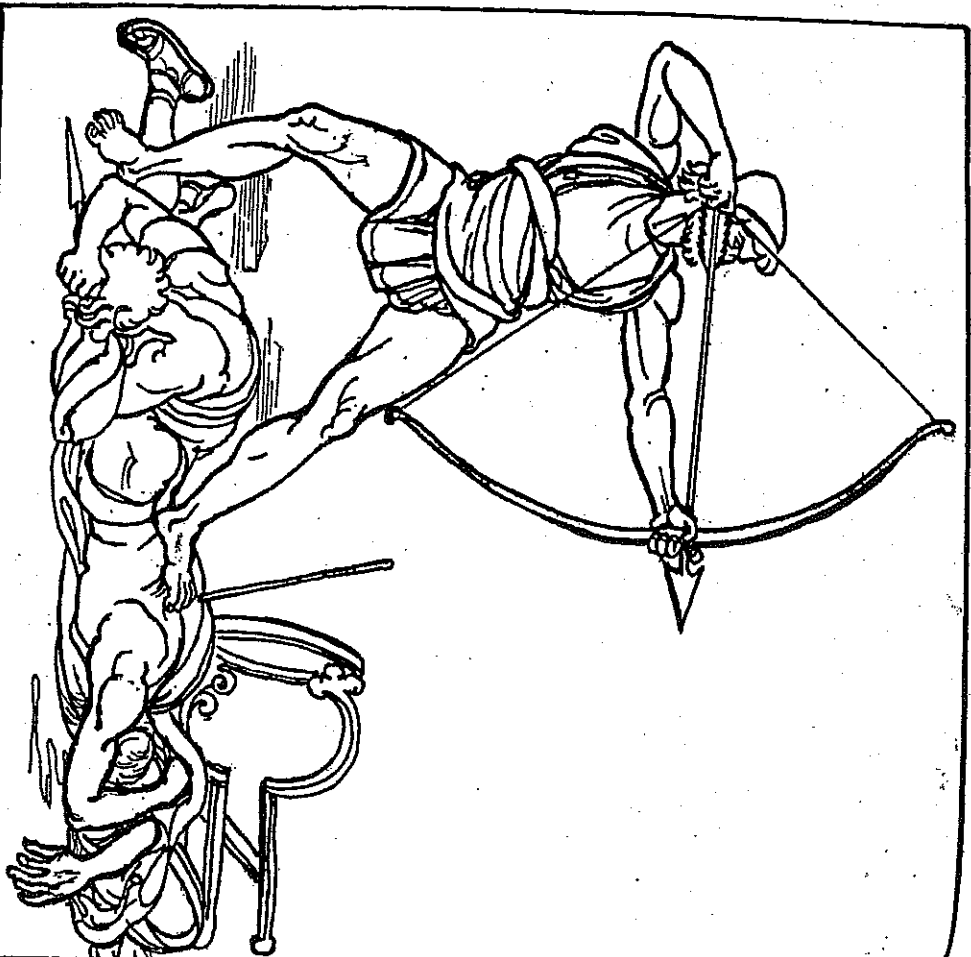
He always begins by choosing a central theme, stating it, and then around this theme, massing all the relevant material. This was comparatively easy in *The Iliad* where he was concerned with only a few weeks of action occurring at one place. But in *The Odyssey* he had, somehow, to cover nine years. The obvious way would have been to begin at the beginning and then work through the events in chronological order. But Homer does not string his episodes one after the other like so many beads upon a string. The architecture of *The Odyssey* is remarkably complex; yet in the end it seems to be the only way the story could have been told.

He begins by stating his theme: "Speak to me, Muse, of the adventurous man who wandered long after he sacked the sacred citadel of Troy. Many the men whose towns he sought, whose ways he learned, and many a pang he bore in his own breast at sea while struggling with his life and his men's safe return."

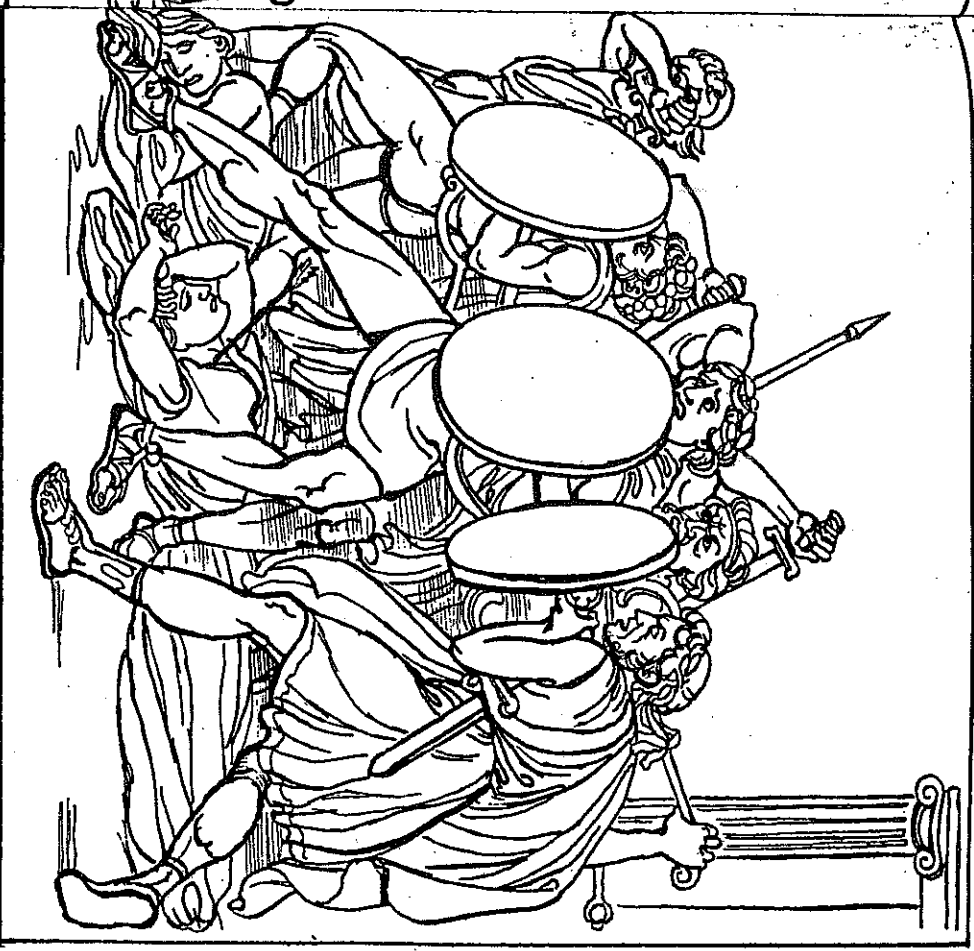
We know now what the story is about: a man, a hero, who has suffered much, who has wandered much, and who has struggled to preserve his own life and the life of others. And then Homer begins, literally, to weave his story.

He divides his story into three main strands: Telemachus' search for Odysseus; the wanderings of Odysseus; and Penelope's troubles with the suitors. He sets out his threads, drops one, picks up another, drops that, goes back to the first—until at the end, all three are artfully woven together to form the conclusion of the poem in Odysseus' successful return and his reunion with his wife.

The first few books set the stage for Odysseus' return to his native island. Then we accompany him on his last great adventure: he is shipwrecked, but finally, with the help of the gods, lands on the coast



of Phaeacia, where he is received with kindness at the Court of King Alcinous. Here we encounter a piece of ancient etiquette that Homer uses skillfully in heightening the suspense of the story. According to the rules of primitive hospitality, a stranger must not be pressed to give his name and history until a polite interval of time has passed, which may be either hours, days, or weeks, during which he is enter-



"... we know there is only one man who can bend Odysseus' bow . . ."

tained by his hosts. Homer uses this interval to whet our appetite for the time when Odysseus finally begins to relate his adventures. This is the most famous part of *The Odyssey*, and this method, which we now know as the "flashback," enables Homer to bring his story up to date. Thus, in a highly compressed fashion, but in a remarkable and vivid personal narrative, Homer covers nine years of wandering.

This method of telling a story by introducing a retrospective narrative at appropriate moments is one of the greatest artistic inventions. But Homer uses still another method of suspense: the prospective narration, in which he partially reveals what is to come. He does this, for example, during Odysseus' descent into Hades where he consults the spirit of the holy man of Thebes. Here we learn the events which lie hidden in the future. Homer maintains the suspense to the very end: we know there is only one man who can bend Odysseus' bow, and we know he is right there to bend it, but Homer puts us through a great deal before we can see the feat realized. Such devices not only heighten the suspense and interest of the story; they indicate as well the maturity and magnificent accomplishment of Homer's art.

HOW THE ILIAD AND THE ODYSSEY DIFFER

LONGINUS, ONE OF THE FINEST ANCIENT CRITICS, who lived in the third century A.D., observed that in *The Odyssey*, Homer could be likened to a setting sun whose grandeur remains without its intensity. He was trying to prove that when even a great genius declines old age asserts itself in a love of marvelous tales. This may very well be true; but when viewed from the more objective standpoint of history, the difference in mood between *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* is due to their varying subject matter.

Both poems are epics; that is, they deal with the adventures of a hero or group of heroes. Such poems reflect a society's own view of itself, because they incorporate the tales and legends that had been cherished through generations. The moods of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* differ because they deal with different times in the history of the early Greeks.

The Iliad is full of combat and action, of heroic deeds and noble men, and can almost be read to the accompaniment of a martial rhythm. It sings of the time when the Greeks were victorious conquerors. *The Odyssey*, by contrast, is restrained. It tells of true sons and patient wives, and of justice triumphant. It is the story, ultimately, of the hardships endured by the Greeks during their wanderings over the sea, and their struggles to establish themselves. It has, in fact, contributed a word to our language—*odyssey*: "a long wandering or series of travels."

In *The Odyssey*, we move off the battlefield and onto the sea, into the extreme limits of this ancient Greek world. We voyage round the western coast of Asia Minor, through the Greek islands, where we meet multitudinous perils—Circe, the Sirens, the Cave of the Winds;

on further to the far land of the Lotus-eaters; round the perilous shores of southern Italy, and through the treacherous passage between Scylla and Charybdis. We land in neat seaports, visit kings in their palaces, see well-tended orchards and rich gardens. This is the period when the Greeks are changing from an agricultural people to a trading people and *The Odyssey* is filled with both sailing and navigation, vineyards and farms.

Even the character of the gods undergoes a change in *The Odyssey*. In *The Iliad* mortal men are faced with furiously active gods—a noisy, quarrelsome bunch who constantly interfere, mislead, work at cross-purposes. In *The Odyssey* the gods—except for Poseidon who enjoys his one great last blow—either refrain from interference altogether, or are helpful. Odysseus' obstacles are, after all, mortal, or at worst, the lesser gods.

THE CHARACTER OF ODYSSEUS

THROUGHOUT THE ILIAD, Odysseus had one purpose: to see that the expedition against Troy succeeded. In *The Odyssey* he is dominated by a single purpose again: to get home, to put his house and kingdom in order. To do these things he has had to be crafty, resourceful, daring, even merciless. Odysseus' character differs sharply from that of the other heroes, and perhaps this is why he, of all the warriors, must suffer longest. Achilles had been an intelligent man, but his passions gained control over his reason. Odysseus is a strongly emotional man, but his intellect rules his passion. Odysseus is not as noble as Agamemnon had been, nor as brave as Achilles. But they had flaws which made them act erratically; Odysseus is neither as glamorous nor as grand as the other warriors, but he uses the intelligence he has been given, and for this, he alone survives.