I INTRODUCTION: BACKGROUND AND PROBLEMS

1. History, myth, poetry

EPIC
I have lived in important places, times
When great events were decided, who owned
That half a rood of rock, a no-man's land
Surrounded by our pitchfork-armed claims.
I heard the Duffys shouting 'Damn your soul'
And old McCabe stripped to the waist, seen
Step the plot defying blue cast-steel—
'Here is the march along these iron stones'
That was the year of the Munich bother. Which
Was more important? I inclined
To lose my faith in Ballyrush and Gortin
Till Homer's ghost came whispering to my mind
He said: I made the *Iliad* from such
A local row. Gods make their own importance.[1]

Patrick Kavanagh's short poem confronts the reader with a number of questions which will preoccupy us in this survey. The Homeric poems show us a world which in many respects seems primitive and remote; even if the expedition of the Greeks against Troy really happened, even if it took place on the scale which the *Iliad* asserts, and lasted the full ten-year span, it would still be 'a local row' compared with later historical conflicts, ancient or modern. Can the bad-tempered disputes of warrior chiefs, the violent revenge of a savage and undisciplined soldier, the lies and posturing of a vagabond rogue, still move or excite an audience today? It will be necessary to show here some of the ways in which Homer gives the conflict at Troy, and the homecoming of Odysseus, a timeless importance, so that these mere episodes in the vanished heroic age – long past even for the poet and his audience – become microcosmic images of human life. The vast subject of Homer's influence upon later western literature cannot be even

[1] Kavanagh 1964: 136.

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superficially addressed here; but occasional comparisons and illustrations may help to show how much subsequent poets and artists have found in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* to enlighten and inspire their own work.

'I made the *Iliad* from such / a local row.' But what was the local row about, and where and when did it happen? The Greeks always assumed that the war was an authentic historical event, and modern faith in this was strengthened by the landmark excavations in mainland Greece and at Troy by the archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann and his many successors. On the one hand, a glorious civilization had existed in Greece in times far earlier than the classical age; on the other, a city with mighty walls had existed near the Hellespont, had been rebuilt many times, and at some stage had been destroyed by fire. Supporting evidence seemed to appear in Hittite documents, which mentioned a people called the Ahhijawa, a name which could be an earlier or foreign form of 'Achaeans'; and there were other possible correspondences – most intriguingly, evidence of a monarch ruling in 'Wilusa' (Ilium) who bore a name transmitted in documents as Alaksandu, which strongly resembles 'Alexandros', the alternative name for the Trojan Paris. It was tempting to suppose that the legends were substantially true, that a great force of Greek invaders attacked and sacked the city now called 'Troy VIIA', and that some time later the fall of the Mycenaean civilization brought an end to this prosperous era; later mythology saw this in terms of an age of heroes followed by subsequent decline. The discovery that 'Linear B', the language of the Mycenaean age, was in fact an earlier form of Greek, made it possible to hypothesize a continuous tradition of poetic narrative, which preserved a record of these great days through the Dark Ages.[2]

Bold and imaginative reconstruction has continued, with the advance of archaeological and linguistic research. A picture emerges of large-scale conflicts between Mediterranean communities and the societies dominating the eastern seaboard in the late second millennium.[3] Yet caution is still in order. If there was a continuous tradition

[2] Page 1959 provided a learned and highly readable discussion of the earlier progress of these debates, but is now seriously out of date. For an authoritative account see Latacz 2004 (translated from a 2002 German work; it should be noted that subsequent German editions include updating). The annual journal *Studia Troica* publishes the results of the ongoing excavations at the site of Troy. See also the brief overview in M. L. West 2011b: 97–112.

[3] See especially the collection of essays edited by Foxhall and Davies 1984; also Mellink 1986; Kirk 1990: 36–50. For a penetrating essay which combines archaeological and literary finesse, see

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from Mycenaean times, we cannot assume that the tradition was free of distortion or misunderstanding (for instance, those who do not dismiss the Wooden Horse as pure fiction sometimes suppose it to be a confused echo of an Oriental siege engine). Some features of the tradition are, in any case, implausible: the thousand ships, the ten years spent far from home are surely epic exaggeration; nor can even the most romantic of readers suppress doubts about a national campaign fought to recover one leader's wife. Overseas raids and adventures are a familiar part of the epic repertoire and probably of the real-life background, as many passages in the *Odyssey* suggest. In the *Iliad*, Nestor recounts his own exploits as a young man in a cattle-raiding expedition against the people of Elis (11.670–762): as has often been suggested, this may well give a more accurate idea of the scale of warfare in early Greece than the vast assemblage of peoples listed in the Catalogue of Ships.[4] At all events, even if some general account survived from Mycenaean times, it is hardly likely that any details of the course of events were preserved.[5]

Whatever the historical facts behind the *Iliad*, they are separated from the epic itself by a gap of at least four hundred years (the traditional date for the fall of Troy was 1183 BC, and archaeologists currently place the destruction of Troy VIIA not far from that date).[6] The *Odyssey*, being a tale about an individual's fortunes and an island community of little prominence in Mediterranean history, is still less likely to preserve much in the way of historical reality. A great deal of the *Odyssey*, in any case, is set in a world of magic and monsters, remote from authentic history or geography. The poems do contain elements of an older tradition: the wealth of Agamemnon, lord of Mycenae 'rich in gold', Ajax's tower-like shield, and Odysseus' boar's-tusk helmet are examples. Sometimes these memories are blurred or conflated with later conventions: for the most part the warriors carry two thrusting-spears, but the single heavy spear, a Mycenaean weapon, is

Sherratt 1990. A very different approach is adopted by Fehling 1991, who seeks to recover the original core of the *story*, dismissing historicity.

[4] On Nestor's narrative, see Bölte 1934; Hainsworth 1993: 296–8. Frame 2010 is a 600-page monograph on Nestor.

[5] Much historical information is painlessly presented in Morris and Powell 1997 (esp. Bennet 1997 on the Bronze Age; Morris 1997 on the Iron Age is less rewarding).

[6] 1183 is the date accepted by Eratosthenes and Apollodorus, but many other dates were canvassed; it is certainly hard to see how any could have been supported by proof. Burkert 1995 discusses ancient dating-systems and the theories about the Trojan war, concluding that none of the dates suggested has any historical basis.

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occasionally recalled, in some passages to arouse awe and a sense of latent power (see *Il.* 16.140–4). Certain verbal phrases and formulae also clearly have a long history, and it has been argued that many of these go back to Mycenaean times or even beyond: this would imply a long and continuous tradition of poetry on heroic themes.[7]

Later ancient criticism assumed that the Greek epics preserved historical tradition, but it was always recognized that the poet had enhanced or embroidered what he inherited: Herodotus remarked that Homer in the story of the abduction of Helen had selected from various versions one which seemed more appropriate to epic storytelling (2.116.1, referring to the *Cypria*), and Thucydides commented that it was natural for a poet to exaggerate the importance of the events he described (1.10). Much has been made of the distinctions between different types of story, such as 'saga', which is conceived as more realistic, though concerned with heroic combat, and 'folk tale', an elusive term often applied to more fantastic or magical narratives; definitions are difficult, and the relation of both terms to 'myth' is unclear.[8] In general it would seem that both Homeric poems include folk-tale or magical elements, but the *Iliad*, with its military theme and firm geographical setting, is more like saga, while the *Odyssey*, especially in its first half, is closer to folk tale.[9] But any strong contrast of this kind swiftly breaks down on closer analysis: the *Iliad* includes a cap of invisibility, a talking horse, a warrior who fights with a river god, and a body magically preserved against decay; the *Odyssey*, in its own way, shows us more of social and domestic 'realities' than the more sombre and dignified *Iliad* will admit. Moreover, the presence of the Olympian gods in both poems, but more prominently in the *Iliad*, makes Homer a peculiarly special case: these colourful and potent figures, intervening freely in mortal affairs for good or ill, seem to belong to neither saga nor folk tale, but transcend such categories.

[7] On the cultural amalgam, see Kirk 1962: 179–92; on inherited diction, M. L. West 1988 (earlier Page 1959, ch. 6). On religion, see M. P. Nilsson 1932; Burkert 1985, ch. 1 (but p. 46 offers a warning: 'Startling correspondences with the later Greek [religious] evidence stand side by side with things totally unintelligible. Greek religion is rooted in the Minoan–Mycenaean age and yet not to be equated with it.')

[8] R. Carpenter 1946; Kirk 1970, 1974; Bremmer 1994: 55–7; Hansen 1997, 2002, esp. introduction (10–12 on problems of definition).

[9] Woodhouse 1930; Calhoun 1939; Page 1973a; Hölscher 1989. Csapo 2005 is a sophisticated account of definitions and theories of 'myth', including discussion of folk-tale theory as expounded by Vladimir Propp and adapted by many classical scholars (e.g. Burkert 1979): see e.g. Csapo 2005: 57–67 on the Cyclops in the *Odyssey* and parallel versions.

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Comparative studies have shown that, even when narrative poetry of a heroic type deals with events closer in time than the Trojan War, and better documented, startling distortions may be introduced.[10] The Song of Roland recounts an episode in the campaigns of Charlemagne, and a Latin chronicler records the death of 'Hruodlandus' (i.e. Roland) in battle in 778; but the battle in question, an attack by Basques, was of no historical importance. In the heroic style, the poet turns it into a huge conflict between Christian and Infidel, and Roland is slain by a mighty Saracen; the whole poem embodies the spirit of the twelfth-century Crusades.[11] Similar transformations and intermingling of history and imagination can be found in other traditions: the *Nibelungenlied*, for example, or the Serbian epics.[12] The Norse Saga of the Volsungs moves from pure myth – the tale of Sigurd the Dragon-slayer, rich in magic and close to the world of the Norse gods – into a more historical era, with Atli (Attila the Hun) in conflict with the Burgundian Gunnar (Gundaharius); the legends here have connections with those in the *Nibelungenlied*. But even here the saga is demonstrably remote from history, and combines characters who could never have met. Obviously, the fact that modern historians can identify errors does not prove that historical accuracy is impossible in heroic epic. It has been suggested that the broader background may often be more accurate (though less precisely described) than the central incidents;[13] but the probable limitations of this kind of evidence need to be recognized. It may be that the Homeric epics tell us more about the attitudes and outlook of the Ionians of the eighth or seventh century BC than about the actions of the Mycenaeans of the twelfth.

The bards of Homer's age and earlier were concerned to preserve the *klea andrōn*, the 'glorious deeds of men'; it would seem that they believed these men to have existed in time long past, but recognized that they could not guarantee every detail of their accounts. Homer invokes the Muses in terms which admit his dependence on tradition and inspiration: 'you are goddesses, you are present, you know all; we only hear the glorious tale, and have no knowledge' (*Il.* 2.485–6). We may doubt whether Homer had authority in earlier poetry for

[10] Vansina 1965, 1985; Henige 1974. For outstanding applications to archaic and classical Greece, see Thomas 1989, esp. chs. 1–2; also O. Murray 2001.

[11] Bowra 1957: 520, 530–7; cf. Finley et al. 1964; Hainsworth 1984, 1993: 32–53. See also Taplin 1992: 26 n. 24.

[12] Finley et al. 1964; cf. Finley 1973, ch. 1, 'Myth, Memory and History'.

[13] Hainsworth 1984, esp. 117, 121.

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every warrior whom he names in the *Iliad*; names came into his mind, and seemed to fit – a sign that the Muses were at his side, smiling upon his work. The borderline between adaptation of tradition and creative development, here as elsewhere, is impossible for us to draw, and may have been as hard for the original poet. The poet, then, is not primarily a chronicler. Nor does he attempt to connect the tale he tells with the present day, whether by offering certain characters as exemplary figures for his own age, or more explicitly by tracing the genealogy of royal families or particular patrons back to the heroes of old – a practice easily paralleled in other poetic traditions, and most influentially followed by Virgil in the *Aeneid*. Genealogy is important in the *Iliad* (less so in the more individualist *Odyssey*, where the hero is not competing among equals), but principally in self-assertive speeches, in which the heroes can declare themselves and define their status. There is little sign that Homer's audiences found special satisfaction in the exploits of their supposed ancestors. The most plausible case is the reference to the future destiny of Aeneas' descendants (picked up and developed by Roman readers), which has been read as addressed to self-styled Aeneadae in the Troad.[14] But this example is most notable for its isolation. For Homer and his predecessors, the glorious past mattered more than reflected glory in the present.[15]

2. Poems behind poems

A major issue is whether the Homeric epics are representative or exceptional. The question can also be posed in chronological terms: do they represent the mature and typical form of the epic tradition, or a glorious final flowering? It is at any rate clear that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* presuppose, and were preceded by, other poems on a wide range of epic themes.[16] This is evident from references within the poems themselves. We may distinguish references to other episodes in the Trojan War and its aftermath – the abduction of Helen, the wound of Philoctetes, the gathering at Aulis, the first embassy to the Trojans, the death of

[14] *Il.* 20.306–8; cf. *h Aphrod.* 196–7; P. M. Smith 1981 (against historical reference) and Faulkner 2008: 3–7 (in favour). Other possible cases are much less plainly marked: see e.g. Janko 1992: 19, 382, etc., arguing for disguised compliments to families claiming heroic descent; M. L. West 1997a: 628–9. On later, similar claims, see Thomas 1989: 100–8, 173–95.

[15] For early genealogies and lists see Jeffery 1961: 59–61; Hornblower 1994: 9–12.

[16] For a survey of these, see now M. L. West 2011c: 28–37.

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Achilles, the suicide of Ajax, and so forth – from allusions to other heroic tales which are less closely related to the Trojan War: amongst these are the story of Bellerophon, the wrath of Meleager, the war of the Seven against Thebes, the birth of Heracles and his many labours in service to Eurystheus, and the Argonautic expedition.[17] Within the Trojan saga, it is assumed that the audience knows what the situation is, why the armies are at war (see esp. *Il.* 1.159), and who the characters are: thus Achilles storms away in anger 'with Menoitios' son and his comrades' (1.307), that is, with Patroclus, who is mentioned shortly afterwards without the identification being made explicit.[18]

In a different category come stories about the gods. Again, it is obvious that the Olympians are familiar to the poet's audience, and that this familiarity derives not only from cult worship and visual representations but from previous song. The poems present the divine order as well established, with a clear hierarchy of power and division of provinces (1.533–5, 581; 15.185–217); we see not only from Hesiod's *Theogony* but also from a number of brief allusions in the poems that this was not an eternally fixed condition. There had been wars among the gods in earlier times: the overthrow of Cronos and the destruction of rival powers such as the Titans and Typhon are mentioned, but only in passing: the emphasis is on the security of Zeus's reign. The permanence of the gods in the *Iliad* ('happy and existing forever', 24.99) provides the essential foil to the short-lived and suffering mortals. Elsewhere, in the references to Zeus's adulteries and the complaints of Calypso, we catch hints of a freer intermingling of gods and mortals, with regular amatory encounters involving even the king of the gods (cf. Hes. *Theog.* 535; *Cat.* fr. 1.6–7). Again the Homeric epics are selective: of the leading figures only Achilles is the son of a divinity, and that privilege brings him little advantage: son of a goddess and a mortal, he stands between the two worlds, not wholly belonging to either.

Homer not only cited or alluded to other poems and stories but adapted them to play a part in his own work: for instance, a tale such as the death of Agamemnon, repeatedly cited but never retold at length in the *Odyssey*, is not evoked merely for the sake of digression, or even to advertise the range of the poet's repertoire; it is there to provide a

[17] *Il.* 6.155–202; 9.527–99; 4.370–400; 19.95–133 (cf. 14.249–61, etc.); *Od.* 12.69–72 (not an exhaustive list).

[18] But for a different approach to such references, see Scodel 2002: 90–123.

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contrast with the central story of Odysseus.[19] Other passages, such as the references in the *Iliad* to Heracles' experiences, can also be ingeniously brought into relation to the larger themes of the poem. Occasionally we may surmise that unusual or obscure versions are the inventions of the poet, to suit the argument of a particular speaker (e.g. *Il.* 1.396–406).[20] Moreover, we can see that the epics make use of a number of themes which might be used elsewhere with other heroes: heroic wrath, the wanderer's return, the descent to the underworld, the forging of divine armour, are all paralleled elsewhere in the Greek tradition, though in some cases the other texts may be echoing Homer. One case in which the borrower seems clearly to be Homer concerns the wanderings of Odysseus, and particularly the perils of the Clashing Rocks. In *Od.* 12.69–70, Circe warns the hero that only one ship has ever passed through these Rocks safely, 'the Argo, known to all men, sailing back from Aeëtes' (70) – known, presumably, through poetry. There is good reason to think that other characters and events in these books of the *Odyssey* have also been taken over from the Argonautic saga: Circe herself, sister of Aeëtes and Medea's aunt, seems to belong to that world.[21] None of this deprives Homer of originality; rather, it shows him as an active participant in a tradition which thrives on competition and constant reworking of well-established themes.

The complexity of Homer's relation to his 'sources' may be illustrated in more detail from the story of Meleager, as told by Phoenix to Achilles in Book 9 of the *Iliad*.[22] Phoenix comments that, until now, no-one could have found fault with Achilles' anger at Agamemnon, but if he still holds out in his refusal to accept the compensation, he may suffer the fate of Meleager, who persisted too long in a similar resentful resignation from war, and lost all chance of gifts in the end. The narrative of Meleager includes a number of parallels with the sequence of events in the *Iliad* itself: in particular, the name of the hero's wife, who eventually persuades him to abandon his wrath, is given as Kleopatra (though reference is also made to another name), apparently an anticipation of the parallel role of Patroclus, who will succeed in persuading Achilles to relent.[23] The motif

[19] *Od.* 1.29–43, 298–300; 3.193–8, 248–312; 4. 512–37; 11.387–434; 24.20–2, 95–7, 198–201; Garvie 1986: ix–xii.

[20] Willcock 1964, 1977; Braswell 1971. This position is opposed by Lang 1983; also by Slatkin 1991, ch. 2, discussing the specific case in Book 1.

[21] See Meuli 1921: 87–115; Page 1955: 2; Braswell 1988: 6–8; M. L. West 2005.

[22] For bibliography on this speech, see Reichel 1994: 111 n. 1; Alden 2000: ch. 7.

[23] J. T. Kakridis 1949: 11–42; March 1987: 27–46.

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of Meleager's anger, which is not found in other versions of the tale, appears to be Homer's invention, in order to bring the story into line with the main plot of the epic. A further point is that, in later versions, Meleager dies on the battlefield as a result of his mother's magical revenge for the slaying of her brothers: it is disputed whether Homer suppresses this finale (which would be ill-suited to Phoenix's persuasive task), or whether the version is a later addition to the story.[24] It is, in any case, clear that Phoenix's narrative performs several functions. Like other 'paradigms', it offers an argument to show why the listener, here Achilles, should follow the speaker's advice. But Phoenix's perspective is limited, in two respects. First, he assumes that the worst thing that can happen is for Achilles to lose the chance of the gifts now being offered. In fact, in Book 19, Achilles will receive the gifts anyway, despite his persistence in anger; but they will be meaningless to him because of the far greater anger and grief aroused by the death of Patroclus. Second, in the more theological passage which precedes the Meleager tale, Phoenix advises Achilles to respect the spirits of Prayer, the Litai, or he may suffer the consequences (9.502–14). This simple moralizing has sometimes been taken as endorsed by the poet,[25] but that reading seems to give undue importance to the words of a minor character; nor does Phoenix's ideal picture of divine justice receive much confirmation elsewhere in the poem. If Achilles is 'punished' for excess, it is in a more subtle and less overtly moralizing way. Finally, if the poet is indeed aware of some version in which Meleager's wrath ends in death, it is natural that Phoenix should suppress so grim a conclusion, but it is possible that the audience, alert to the omission, may anticipate the analogous fate of Achilles and relish the irony of the characters' efforts to evade the consequences of this parallel.[26]

3. Poetic language

The traditional nature of Homeric poetry is also clear on the level of language.[27] The poems are composed in a version of Greek which

[24] Bacchyl. 5.94–154; Aesch. *Cho.* 594–601; Ov. *Met.* 8. 260–546; Apollod. 1.8.2. Bremmer 1988 argues that this version is post-Homeric.

[25] Bowra 1930: 19–23; similarly Hainsworth 1993: 56–7.

[26] See further Schadewaldt 1938: 139–42; Rosner 1976; Bannert 1981; Swain 1988; Griffin 1995; and Alden 2000, ch. 7.

[27] The standard work is Chantraine 1948–53; see also Monro 1891. More accessible are Palmer 1962, 1980: 83–101; Janko 1992: 8–19; Horrocks 1997; Colvin 2007: 49–53, 192–201; Willi 2011.

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was never spoken by a single people or in a single place: it is an amalgam of several dialects. Of these the predominant is Ionic, spoken by the Greeks of Asia Minor (Turkey), on some of the Aegean islands, such as Chios, and elsewhere. Second place goes to Aeolic, the form of Greek spoken by the people of northern Greece (Boeotia, Thessaly) and on Lesbos. Of lesser importance are the elements of diction perhaps originating in southern Greece in Mycenaean times and labelled Arcado-Cypriot (because this dialect survived in Arcadia and Cyprus in historical times).

How, when, and where this amalgam evolved is obscure to us. Its advantages to the poets are somewhat clearer. Ionic and Aeolic offer alternative words and morphological forms which coexist in the Homeric text, and these are usually of differing metrical shape. Thus we find five metrically differing forms of the verb 'to be' (εἶναι, ἔμεν, ἔμμεν, ἔμεναι, ἔμμεναι). The poet can employ these different forms to suit the needs of the metre. The common word for 'ship', ναῦς, has dative plural ναυσί in Attic, but the epic also uses νηυσί (Ionic), ναῦφι (an archaic form scarcely found after Homer), and even νήεσσι, an artificial combination involving Ionic stem and Aeolic termination. The poems are also inconsistent in using forms which derive from different periods: for instance, the old genitive in –οιο is found alongside the later and more familiar –ου. A key discovery in terms of the 'layering' of Homeric language was Richard Bentley's identification (1732) of the effects of the consonant 'w', represented in some inscriptions by the letter ϝ, digamma. Digammas do not occur in our manuscripts, because the sound was lost in Ionic at an early date (though it survived as a numeral). But many Homeric verses will only scan if a digamma is assumed at the start of a word that in the established Homeric text begins with a vowel (e.g. ἄναξ, οἶκος). Hence lines or formulae that need a digamma are likely to be older than those which are composed without respecting its presence. Bentley's detection of this principle, derided by his contemporaries, is now seen as one of the most brilliant insights in modern philology.

Metrical needs also explain variation between contracted and uncontracted forms of verbs, addition or omission of augment, and similar licences. Words can be modified or used where they are linguistically wrong but poetically convenient (e.g. εὐρύοπα, properly an accusative, is sometimes treated as nominative or vocative). But metre, however important, does not explain everything. Sometimes strange words and exotic forms seem to be used because they have poetic distinction. At

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least some of these will be archaisms, and their meaning was unclear to later Greeks, perhaps even to the Homeric poets themselves; misunderstandings sometimes generated fresh usage.[28] The dual form Αἴαντε, 'the two Ajaxes', seems originally to have meant the brothers Ajax and Teucer, but in some passages is reinterpreted to apply to the greater and the lesser Ajax. Cult titles could become fossils (did Argeiphontes really mean 'slayer of Argos', or is this the guesswork of poets and scholars?). In Aristophanes' time the meaning of the expression ἀμενηνὰ κάρηνα was disputed in the schoolroom (*Banqueters* fr. 233 K-A), and Aristotle refers to the so-called 'glosses', words which could not be understood (διάκτορος, μέροψ, ἐριούνιος are examples) (*Poet.* 1459a9–10).

In short, Homer's language was not the Greek spoken by any of his audience. Nor was it unique to Homer, or even to a single region of the Greek world. The linguistic usage of Hesiod and other early hexameter poets closely resembles that of the Homeric poems. Generations of bards had collectively developed a special poetic language which could be modified for different subject matter but which was characterized by archaism and artificiality. Innovations undoubtedly occurred, but they are hard to plot when so much is uncertain about chronology, absolute or relative.[29] What matters is that the epic style maintained a level of dignity and decorum appropriate to the grandeur of its typical subject matter.

4. Light from the East?

The origins of Greek epic may lie further back, and further east, than dark-age Ionia. Near Eastern texts, not least the famous 'Epic of Gilgamesh', yield remarkable parallels or precedents for Homeric conceptions, episodes, and even phraseology.[30] The cosmogony implied in the account of Oceanus and Tethys (*Il.* 14.201, 302) recalls the Babylonian Enuma Elis, the epic of creation.[31] The conception of the

[28] Leumann 1950 discusses possible cases. For examples, see Palmer 1962: 104–5: e.g. κύμβαχος, 'helmet' or 'crown', correctly so used at *Il.* 15.536, misused at 5.586 (cf. M. L. West 2011c: 164).

[29] Finkelberg 2012; Wachter 2012.

[30] George 2003 is an important new edition of the Gilgamesh epic; more accessible is his annotated Penguin translation (1999). For discussion, see Burkert 1988 and other important papers collected in Burkert 2001; also M. L. West 1988, 1997a; Burkert 1992, 2004.

[31] Foster 2005: 436–86; see also López-Ruiz 2010.

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gods as gathered in assembly is frequent in Akkadian and Hittite. The idea of the fatal letter found in the Bellerophon story is first attested in the story of David and Uriah (*Il.* 6.168–70, 2 Samuel 11); the Old Testament also offers a parallel to the failed seduction and revenge of Sthenoboiia (*Il.* 6.160–66; cf. Potiphar's wife, Genesis 39).[32] Even the supremely Homeric statement of the opposition between god and man has precedent in the heroic realism of Gilgamesh:

> The gods, with Shamash [the sun god], they sit forever; as for mankind, numbered are their days. But you here, you fear death? . . . I will go ahead of you. . . If I myself were to fall, let me still set up my name.[33]

Above all, Gilgamesh loses his beloved comrade Enkidu, and grieves for him with Achillean devotion, raging 'like a lioness deprived of her whelps'; elsewhere he journeys to the Underworld, like Heracles and Odysseus in Greek mythology: Gilgamesh, like the Greek heroes, is forced to recognize the limits of mortality.[34] It has long been recognized that prominent features of Hesiod's theology (especially the myth of succession among the gods, and the sequence of the ages of men) are indebted to eastern myth;[35] similarly, the Homeric poems need to be set against a wider background, and recent scholarship has charted some of the channels of communication – migrant craftsmen, diviners, healers, and not least wandering bards.[36]

Yet, for all the gratitude we may feel for this interdisciplinary research, questions and doubts still persist. Though the links with Gilgamesh are generally accepted, many other similarities between the poetry and mythology of the Near East and those of archaic Greece may strike the reader as inconclusive – parallels rather than sources. If warriors in different cultures are compared with wolves or birds of prey, if a king is described as 'like a father to his people', why should we seek a direct connection? Many such resemblances could easily arise independently. Are we dealing with diffusion or

[32] Louden 2011 is a detailed study of parallels between the *Odyssey* and the Old Testament, especially Genesis.

[33] Dalley 1989: 144; George 1999: 110; Burkert 1992: 117–18. Cf. *Il.* 12.322–8, Sarpedon's speech (quoted below, pp. 58–9).

[34] Dalley 1989: 93; George 1999: 65 (cf. *Il.* 18.317); Currie 2012: 551. For his journey in search of immortality, see George 1999: 70–99.

[35] M. L. West 1966: 18–31, 1988; see also Walcot 1966; Kirk 1970: 118–31.

[36] M. L. West 1988; Burkert 1992; Penglase 1994. On modes of transmission, see West 1997a: ch. 12 (to my mind the best chapter of the book); Lane Fox 2008: 376–80 tells a very different story.

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polygenetic development? More fundamental is the question of the effect of those ideas and details which have been imported. How are they adapted and used in their new context? Do motifs or concepts derived from the Near East delight the audience as exotic novelties, or is the effect one of mystery and awe? Some of the chief advocates of this approach have been content to accumulate material, but the critic needs to look harder at the nature of the resulting compound.[37] Again, what actually happens when the mythic structures and motifs of the Near East are combined with those from the Indo-European tradition? Martin West has produced two extraordinarily rich books on these two streams of influence,[38] but the naïve reader asks how we are to understand the relationship between them, and whether Homer and his fellow poets simply drew on one or other stream unconsciously or according to taste.

One episode in which the connections seem particularly clear and persuasive is the Deception of Zeus (though even here sceptical voices are audible).[39] A cluster of suggestive motifs have been found – the references to the division of the universe among the gods and to the love-making of Oceanus and Tethys, and the magical *kestos* (an ornate and seductive feminine garment) which Aphrodite lends to Hera. If the scene involving Hera and Zeus does indeed owe something to the scene in which Ishtar (the Semitic goddess who corresponds to Aphrodite) attempts to seduce Gilgamesh, then the Homeric version has transformed an episode of antagonism and violent rejection into something more delicate and light-hearted: Gilgamesh's jeering list of Ishtar's former lovers becomes Zeus's fond reminiscences of his own amorous career.[40] The direct connections can be questioned, but the comparison is still a revealing one for the understanding of Homer's divine comedy.

Other questions of influence and development arise with the stories that, like the Cyclops tale, are found frequently in other cultures but only in texts of a later date than Homer: do they all depend ultimately on the story as told in the *Odyssey*, do they emerge independently, or are

[37] A point forcibly made by Osborne 1993, reviewing Burkert 1992. See also Dowden 2001, reviewing M. L. West 1997a. Lane Fox 2008 engages polemically with the question of Near Eastern influence, urging the case that Greeks devised many of their myths themselves, partly to account for places and natural features that they encountered in travelling.

[38] M. L. West 1997a, 2007a.

[39] Burkert 1992: 96–8; M. L. West 1997a: 182–4; accepted even by Lane Fox 2008: 353–4. Kelly 2008a denies their conclusions.

[40] *Il.* 14.315–28; Dalley 1989: 77–80; George 1999: 47–50. On this, Kelly 2008a: 289–90 is not entirely persuasive.

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Homer and some or all of the later versions dependent on a common source?[41] It is most unlikely that Homer invented the Cyclopes, who are mentioned elsewhere in the *Odyssey* in more incidental contexts; moreover, he fails to make explicit the chief feature of these monsters, and one which is crucial to the plot: that a Cyclops has only one eye (Hes. *Theog.* 143).[42] There are other ways in which the story seems to have been modified or adjusted to increase tension or to suit the ethos of the *Odyssey*. Here and elsewhere, the comparison with other versions, whether older or younger than Homer, serves to bring out the particular qualities and thematic concerns of the Homeric epics.[43] Whether the perennial fascination of these themes depends on their intrinsic merits as material for exciting stories or on some deeper psychological or anthropological roots is a question which goes beyond the province of the literary critic.[44]

5. Early Greek hexameter poetry

However, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* did not exist in a vacuum. There were other important poets composing in the epic hexameter around the time of the great epics, and it is time to consider how far we can put the Homeric poems in a specifically Greek context.

To do so means giving more attention to several works which have already been mentioned in passing: Hesiod, the Homeric Hymns, and the Epic Cycle. Traditionally these were all seen as chronologically and generically later than the Homeric poems, but this view, while it may be broadly correct, has been challenged and in any case needs refining. We must distinguish between Hesiod's authentic surviving poems (the *Theogony* and the *Works and Days*) and the many other poems attributed to him in antiquity. Of the so-called Homeric Hymns, none can be ascribed to the same poet as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, and many of the shorter items in the collection are much later. As for the Epic Cycle, none of the poems survive and they are doubtless of very varied dates. Finally, just as the Homeric epics spring

[41] Page 1955: ch. 1, 1973a; Fehling 1977: 87–100; Burkert 1979: 156 n. 13.
[42] Page 1955: 14.
[43] See Page 1973a; Griffin 1977; Hansen 1997. See more generally Stanford 1963, on the evolution of the character Odysseus over the centuries.
[44] Burkert 1979: 30–4.

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from a tradition, so we must acknowledge that these other works probably had their predecessors, some of which may have predated the *Iliad*. The world of early hexameter poetry was not restricted to heroic epic: there was evidently also a tradition of theogonic poetry, of wisdom poetry, of hymnic narratives, of catalogue poetry. The example of Hesiod shows that one poet could compose in different hexameter genres. The best approach will be to discuss each of the above categories in turn, relating them to Homer.

Authentic Hesiod

Homer is traditionally paired with the Boeotian Hesiod, the first Greek writer to refer to himself by name (*Theog*. 22). Which poet was chronologically earlier was already debated in antiquity, but it is conventional, on no very strong grounds, to put Hesiod later.[45] Partly this is simply because we feel we know him better: in both the *Theogony* and the *Works and Days* Hesiod has things to say about himself, his poetic calling, and his opinions on morality and religion; he does not maintain the epic anonymity and detachment. Hesiod is clearly aware of the epic tales of Thebes and Troy, and has many phrases and formulae in common with Homer, but this only means that heroic narrative and didactic or catalogue poetry are not mutually exclusive genres.[46] Some passages in Homer closely parallel the catalogue-style of Hesiod (especially the list of Nereids in *Iliad* 18 and Odysseus' account of the dead heroines in *Odyssey* 11); at one time these were regarded as interpolations, but they can as easily be seen as a form of homage to an adjacent genre.[47]

Whether or not there is direct interchange between Hesiod and the Homeric poems, the comparison of their works is enlightening in many ways. Both have a sense of the history of the cosmos, in which the present state of Zeus's reign did not prevail from the beginning: Homer alludes to conflicts among the gods and the imprisonment of Cronos and the Titans, whereas Hesiod presents a detailed narrative

[45] This view has been repeatedly challenged by M. L. West, e.g. 1966: 40–8; 2011b: 194–5, 212–26; and now 2012: 226, with list in n. 3 of passages in which he thinks Homer imitates Hesiod (some of these are very unpersuasive, though I agree that the light-hearted theomachy of the *Iliad* presupposes an earlier and more serious treatment – not necessarily by Hesiod).

[46] M. L. West 1973a: 191–2; G. P. Edwards 1971, ch. 8. More generally on Hesiod in comparison with Homer see Wade-Gery 1959; O. Murray 1980, chs. 3–4; Millett 1984; Rosen 1997; Clay 2003; for many aspects, see Montanari et al. 2009.

[47] So e.g. Danek 1998: 231.

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of the wars which end with the supremacy of Zeus. The *Works and Days* also contributes to an understanding of mythical chronology (the Myth of Ages); on another front, the stern moralism and stress on Dike (Justice) and hard work has some affinity with aspects of the *Odyssey*, notably the peasant wisdom of Eumaeus.

The Hymns[48]

The collection of so-called 'Homeric' hymns includes considerable variety. Some are very short, some are clearly very much later than the archaic age. The most important are also the longest and probably the earliest – hymns to Demeter (2), Aphrodite (5), Apollo (3; widely believed to be a combination of two hymns), and Hermes (4).[49] Of these the first two are influenced by the Homeric epics or closely related poems; all four are composed in a comparable epic style. The chief difference between these and Homeric epic is that the gods, not mankind, are at the centre of the stage (as the hymnic form makes natural): their birth, youth, powers, and characteristic activities are recounted and celebrated. In the hymns, the realities of cult action and worship in specific shrines are much more prominent: Eleusis for Demeter, Delphi and Delos for Apollo. Aetiology of cultic ritual practice is prominent, and, in general, interaction between gods and mortals is important in all but one of the poems. The hymn to Aphrodite describes the liaison between the goddess and Anchises, from which sprang the line of Aeneas; the hymn to Demeter shows the goddess journeying in disguise among humankind and provides the aetiology (tale of origin) explaining how the Eleusinian mysteries were established; the hymn to Apollo similarly explains the aetiology of the major shrines at which the god was worshipped in historical times. The exception is the hymn to Hermes, which is concerned with the apportionment of privileges between Apollo and Hermes; it is much more light-hearted than the others.[50]

[48] M. L. West has provided an admirable Loeb edition (M. L. West 2003b). For commentaries on the whole collection, see Allen, Halliday, and Sikes 1936 and Càssola 1975.

[49] The fragmentary hymn to Dionysus (1) may be among the earliest, though, because so much is lost, much is uncertain. Like the hymn to Hermes, it presents the resolution of conflicts among the gods (in this case Dionysus and Hera). Recent papyrus publications mean that older editions of this hymn are out of date: see M. L. West 2001a, 2011a.

[50] On the hymn to Demeter, see N. J. Richardson 1974 and H. Foley 1994; on the hymn to Aphrodite, Faulkner 2008; on the hymn to Hermes, a commentary is in preparation by Oliver

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The Cycle and pre-Cyclic material

The Epic Cycle is the collective name which designates the known epic poems recounting heroic myth from early Greece. Apart from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* they survive only in fragments.[51] They were not originally composed to form part of a sequence, but were apparently arranged in sequence (probably with some editorial modifications) at a much later date, perhaps in Hellenistic times. The known titles may be grouped in three categories: poems about Thebes and the Theban wars, poems about the Trojan War, and poems about heroes such as Heracles and Theseus (a relative latecomer to mythology). The evidence is most abundant for the second category, because Hellenistic and later scholars often referred to these poems in commenting on the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, and because an important outline of their content by a scholar called Proclus has been preserved in summary form (it was included as part of the introductory material in our earliest complete manuscript of the *Iliad*, Venetus A, in the tenth century); no such summary survives for the other poems.[52] The summary tells us the number of books into which these poems were later divided; this gives us at least a very rough impression of their scale.[53] In the list below, book numbers or total line numbers, where known, are given in brackets.

Theban poems:
Oedipodeia (allegedly 6,600 lines), Thebaid (7,000 lines), Epigoni ('The sons who came after'; 7,000 lines), Alcmaeonis.
Poems about the Trojan War:
Cypria (11 books), Aethiopis (5 books), The Little *Iliad* (4 books), The Sack of Ilion (2 books), The Nostoi ('Homecomings'; 5 books), Telegony (2 books).
Poems about other heroes:
The Capture of Oechalia, Heracleia (possibly two poems), Theseis.

Thomas. N. J. Richardson 2010 is briefer (covering the hymns to Apollo, Hermes, Aphrodite). More discursive treatments: Janko 1982 (very technical); Thalmann 1984; Clay 1989, 1997; and Parker 1991. A new collection of essays is Faulkner 2011 (note esp. the editor's review of scholarship, 1–25). See also N. J. Richardson 2007 on *Hermes*.

[51] Editions include Bernabé 1987; Davies 1988; and especially M. L. West 2003a (Loeb). See Griffin 1977; Davies 1989; Burgess 2001; Dowden 2004; M. L. West 2013.

[52] Apart from West's Loeb, the summary is translated in Burgess 2001: 177–80, and paraphrased in Dowden 2004: 198–200.

[53] But note that Burgess 2001: ch. 1 argues in detail that the poems as read by Proclus (in the fifth century AD?) may have been significantly shorter than the originals. Proof is lacking, but a case for caution has been well made.

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Aristotle drew a clear distinction between the quality of the two epics which we now ascribe to Homer and that of the rest; thereafter the term 'cyclic' was attached to the other poems and acquired a pejorative sense, almost equivalent to 'second rate'.[54] Traditionally, scholars have considered these poems to be later than Homer, at least partly dependent on his work, and less ambitious in scope and inferior in quality. It was also believed that the Trojan poems were created to fill in the gaps and supplement the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. More recent work has shown that these conclusions are far from certain. Although it is probably right that these epics were mostly later than the Homeric epics, it is clear that they draw on earlier myth and poetry which was also available to Homer.

The Cyclic material gives us precious insight into the broader mythological and poetic tradition. We can recognize motifs and episodes which are comparable or parallel with Homeric examples; but the Cyclic poets also included many events, characters, and motifs which the poets of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* played down or excluded (though they may well have known about them): for instance, cannibalism, pollution, curses, human sacrifice (Iphigenia, Polyxena), or various types of magical devices and exotic creatures. It is clear that the poems of the Cycle strongly influenced visual artists in various media, lyric poets such as Pindar, and the fifth-century tragedians; they drew on them as readily as on the two great epics. Indeed, most of these poems were ascribed indiscriminately to 'Homer' until the fifth century, when Herodotus expressed doubts about their authorship (2.116–17; 4.32). We would be unwise to make assertions about the merits of lost poems; what matters is that they existed, and that they were part of the tradition of tales about the heroic age.

Pseudo-Hesiod

Just as poems of heroic mythology tended to be ascribed to Homer, hexameter works on mythical genealogy were often attributed to Hesiod. These are now lost, but substantial papyrus finds have given us a much clearer picture of some of them. Of these the most important (and clearly the most popular) is the *Catalogue of Women*, also known as the *Ehoiai* (from the recurrent phrase ἢ οἵη, 'or such as she…', which

[54] Callim. *Epigr.* 28 Pfeiffer; Hor. *Ars P.* 132, 136; Pfeiffer 1968: 227–30.

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introduced new sections).[55] This poem, in five books, was constructed to serve as a continuation of the *Theogony*. The latter ends with a catalogue of liaisons between gods and mortals, listing their offspring; the *Ehoiai* recounted a long series of heroic mortal marriages and the resulting offspring. The work had an elaborate structure mapping out the different lines of descent and ethnic groupings in the Greek world, though it clearly did not bring the story down to the poet's own time. Rather, it described the heroic age, which was said to come to an end with the Trojan War (the marriage of Helen and a catalogue of her suitors formed a prominent part of the last book). The *Catalogue* is usually considered the work of an imitator, composing much later than Hesiod (West puts it in the late sixth century), although Janko has argued on linguistic grounds that it may indeed be Hesiod's own work.[56] Even if late, it obviously makes use of older material and may indeed have evolved gradually. Other pseudo-Hesiodic works circulated, some of them very substantial (the so-called *Megalai Ehoiai* must have been a work longer than the Catalogue), but we know much less about them and most of them are not very relevant to Homer.

The *Shield of Heracles* is in a different category, both as a narrative poem and because it survives complete.[57] It begins with the transitional formula 'or such as she…' (introducing an account of Alcmena), and so at least affects to be a portion or offshoot of the *Catalogue*; but the main part of the poem is a duel between Heracles (with his squire Iolaus) and Cycnus, supported by his father Ares. The centrepiece, occupying half the poem, is an extended description of Heracles' shield, which is clearly indebted to the Shield of Achilles but goes beyond it in length, as also in macabre and bizarre detail. With its eccentric form and central ecphrasis, the poem prefigures such later 'epyllia' as Catullus 64.

6. Dating the poems

In discussion of all these texts, chronology presents severe problems. Modern readers do not always realize just how fragile and approximate

[55] West 1985; R. L. Fowler 1998; Hunter 2005; Hirschberger 2004 (reviewed in West 2007b); Janko 2012; I. C. Rutherford 2012.

[56] Janko 1982: 221–5, 1992: 14.

[57] The only modern commentary is Russo 1965. The date of the work is unknown: it is generally put *c.*570 or somewhat earlier (see Janko 1986). For a lively essay on the *Shield*, see Martin 2005.

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the arguments for dating ancient texts usually are. Ancient testimony seldom helps, partly because of the lack of any universal dating system. In the late fifth century the Athenians recorded the victories at the dramatic festivals year by year in inscriptions, and these lists were used by later scholars and editors; hence we have reliable dates for many of the surviving plays. This is altogether exceptional, and nothing like this existed in earlier centuries. For the most part, modern scholarship has constructed a chronology based either on internal evidence – for instance, references to events, practices, or institutions which can be given an approximate date – or on the assumption that one work is definitely later than another (so that even if an absolute chronology cannot be established, some clarity is achieved in relative chronology).

Neither of these approaches is free of difficulties. Hesiod is traditionally dated by his participation (mentioned in *Works and Days* 650–9) in the funeral games for Amphidamas, a warrior of Chalcis in Euboea, which most interpreters associate with the Lelantine War of the late eighth or early seventh century, but we know so little about this war that some scholars have even questioned whether it really took place.[58] It is essentially this datum that leads to Hesiod being given a date in most reference works around 700, and Homer is placed *c.*750–700 because he is generally thought of as being earlier than Hesiod. Our total ignorance of Homer's identity and origins may seem to justify an earlier date, although this largely arises from the anonymity of epic narrative style: how much would we know of Hesiod if he did not talk about himself? Current scholarship divides between those who hold to a date in the eighth century for the *Iliad* (whether *c.*750 or elsewhere) and those who see no obstacle to down-dating that poem to the first quarter of the seventh century or even later.

Archaeological evidence is also invoked, though this is treacherous ground.[59] Agamemnon wields a Gorgon-shield, and the figure of the Gorgon is not found in Greek art before 700, and not used on shields until *c.*680; therefore, it is argued, the *Iliad* must be later than 680. Clearly this is an argument from silence; if another, earlier Gorgon-shield were to be found, its value would be nullified. Some of the other arguments for dating sections of the poem are

[58] Hes. *Op.* 650–9; M. L. West 1995: 218–19 with Janko 1982: 94–8 and Janko 2012: 37. For doubts about the war, see e.g. J. Hall 2007: 1–8, 20–1.

[59] Crielaard 1995.

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unsound[60] or more speculative, but we should attach some weight to the judgement of archaeologists that Achilles' reference to the wealth of Delphi would be improbable much before *c.*700.[61]

An important test case in the argument is the famous cup discovered on Pithecusae (Ischia), off the west coast of Italy, an early Greek colonial site. This cup is inscribed with verses which use formulae from epic: 'I am the cup of Nestor, good to drink from; whoever drinks from this cup, straight away he will be filled with longing for Aphrodite of the lovely garland.' The cup is currently dated *c.*740 BC.[62] We naturally think of the scene in *Iliad* 11.632–7, where Nestor's bond-slave prepares a cup of refreshment, and both the drink and the cup are described in some detail. If the inscription does indeed allude to this scene, the prior date of the *Iliad* is settled; but it can of course be argued that Nestor and his cup may have had a place in much earlier poetry, and that the scene in Book 11 draws on those earlier works.

The arguments for relative dating depend on our ability to detect the influence of one poem on another. Older discussions tended to assume that Homer was the earliest surviving Greek poet, and therefore all later resemblances were imitations of passages in Homer. But 'echoes' of Homeric scenes and lines are often illusory, since the imitation may be of epic material in general, and not of what we think of as 'Homer'. Imitation may indeed be the wrong term, since we are often dealing with 'typical' scenes or sequences, part of the repertoire of bards in general. The very idea of 'quotation' or 'allusion' has been judged invalid by those who prefer to speak in terms of 'traditional referentiality' or 'resonance'.[63] On this model the poet does not refer to other poetic texts but to the poetic tradition in general: no poem has privileged status as a source. There are problems with this position, which seems to assume a steady state, a wonderfully huge and coherent body of tradition, while leaving little room for innovation and diversification. Some parallels and correspondences between extant texts do

[60] For example, the long-standing debate over the presence of hoplite tactics in the *Iliad*, on which see van Wees 1994 (pro) and Janko 1992 on 13.126–35 (contra). See generally Kirk 1960.

[61] *Il.* 9.404–5, with Morgan 1990: ch. 4. The arguments of Burkert 1976 that the *Iliad* must postdate 715 or even 663, based on the reference to Egyptian Thebes in the same speech, are rejected by Janko 1992: 14 n. 20 and by Kelly 2006.

[62] ML no. 1 = *CEG* 1.454 (date misprinted; see corrections in the editor's second volume), with discussions e.g. in Powell 1991: 163–8; Lane Fox 2008: 157–8.

[63] See pp. 30–1 below.

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seem more specific and significant. The *Odyssey* surely does follow and imitate or echo the *Iliad*; the Hymn to Demeter seems influenced by both the *Odyssey* and the Hymn to Aphrodite.[64] Similarities may cluster or cohere in such a way that it is hyper-sceptical to question a direct relationship; but this is a matter of scholarly judgement, and in an area where so little is known for certain, different scholars may legitimately differ in their view of the probabilities.

Richard Janko has scrutinized the language of Homer, Hesiod, and the Homeric Hymns from the standpoint of philology: applying a number of criteria of linguistic change (observance of digamma is one of the more readily understood), he finds confirmation of the 'traditional' sequence of relative dates, with *Iliad* first, then *Odyssey*, then Hesiod's *Theogony* and *Works and Days*, and later still the Hymns.[65] This is reassuringly close to what might be considered likely on other grounds: Hesiod himself in the *Works and Days* refers back to a passage in the *Theogony*, and we shall see that there is good reason to believe the *Odyssey* a later poem than the *Iliad*.

Janko also offered some hypothetical 'absolute' dates, though strictly as illustrative possibilities. That is, if the *Iliad* were dated to 750–725, he believed that his findings would establish, within a margin for error, secure 'absolute' datings for each later work. Unfortunately this argument has been misunderstood as a claim that these dates were indeed established as the definite dates of composition.[66] But even relative datings are valuable, if these statistical arguments are accepted as decisive. Not all have agreed that they are. It is objected that statistics take insufficient account of differences between poets and between different types of passage; that poets of different age or working in different local traditions may have different preferences in the epic linguistic repertoire, regardless of their chronological position.[67] The field divides between those who treat Janko's linguistic arguments with particular respect and those who prefer to give greater weight to other criteria of dating.

[64] Details in N. J. Richardson 1974; see also Faulkner 2008: 38–40.

[65] Janko 1982: 195–6, 200, 228–32.

[66] See Janko 2012, esp. 34–5. In the first edition of this Survey I was one of those who thus misrepresented his position. It must be said that the presentation in his 1982 book does not make the hypothetical nature of the argument wholly clear.

[67] E.g. M. L. West 1995, 2012; Janko replies in Janko 2012: 36–8.

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7. The debate on the oral epic tradition: Milman Parry and his followers

The Homeric epics, whatever their actual date of composition, were at some stage committed to the written form in which they have come down to us. But did the original poets make use of writing, or are we dealing with a purely oral tradition, oral not only in terms of practice and performance but also in the process of transmission? This has been the predominant theme of Homeric scholarly debate through much of the last century.

The Homeric poems themselves portray heroes singing, and poets performing at feasts: Phemius at the court of Odysseus, Demodocus in the land of the Phaeacians. These bards seem not to need written texts: they perform with instrument in hand, a *kitharis* or a *phorminx*, conventionally translated 'lyre', and are probably imagined as chanting rather than singing throughout. They follow the directions of their aristocratic patrons: Penelope asks Phemius to choose another song, and the disguised Odysseus calls for a laudatory narrative of his own exploits in the sack of Troy. Telemachus mentions the attraction of a new song, and Demodocus is described as singing 'the lay whose renown reached as far as broad heaven at that time' (*Od.* 8.74). Fluency and sound organization are admired, in poetry as in rhetoric (*Od.* 8.489; contrast *Il.* 2.213, 246); still higher praise is given for the vividness of the narrative.[68] Odysseus tells Demodocus that he has given a marvellous account of the sufferings of the Achaeans at Troy, 'as though you yourself had been present, or heard it from another' (*Od.* 8.491). Poetry gives delight and enchants: the audience sit spellbound (*Od.* 1.325–6; 17.518–20). It can also arouse grief and pain, particularly when it calls to mind past suffering (1.337–42, 8.521–31); at the same time, the listener should be strong enough to endure this sadness and reflect on the meaning of that suffering (1.353–5). The scenes involving bards and song can be combined to yield a coherent and subtle conception of poetry and its function.[69] These representations of singers at work, honoured in their society and rewarded with a good cut of meat, may well bear some similarity to the situation of

[68] Minchin 2001 explores the storytelling and structural techniques by which the oral poet gives his song an organized form and compelling power.

[69] Marg 1956; Maehler 1963; Griffin 1980: 100–2; Macleod 1983; Ford 1992; Halliwell 2012: ch. 2.

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Homer himself. Ancient readers already made this assumption, suggesting that the blind Demodocus was a mirror image of Homer.[70] Without embracing the biographical approach, modern scholars naturally scrutinize these scenes in the hope of recovering some picture of the poet's original setting. By combining the slender indications of the poems with later Greek texts on music, imaginative scholarship has even offered a reconstruction of the original 'tune' with which the poet accompanied his song.[71]

All of this may be justifiable, but we should remember that Homer's bards are performing in a heroic world, and that the *Odyssey* in particular seems deliberately to elevate the status of the poet (e.g. *Od.* 22.344–9; cf. 17.383–5). These are idealized images of the poet and his audience, particularly the picture of Demodocus in the fairyland world of Scheria. We should not draw too close a connection between the poet himself and the singers in his poem. To take only the most prominent difference, the songs of the bards in the *Odyssey* are very short; Demodocus sings three in the course of a crowded day and still leaves plenty of time for Odysseus' own tale. By contrast, it is hard, perhaps impossible, to find an occasion on which the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey* could actually have been performed: even in an age which was accustomed to long poetic recitations and appreciated the singer's art, how could such lengthy works ever have been heard in their complete form? A major festival event, perhaps the Panionia at Mount Mycale near Ephesus, could have provided a suitably grand occasion,[72] but even this context hardly explains the sheer size of the epics. Yet the cumulative evidence for close integration and careful planning of both epics as monumental unified works compels us to accept that the ideal performance context would be one which allowed for total recitation of the entire poem.

We do not know who Homer was, and ancient biographies, largely fanciful in the manner of the genre, are no help; the fact that there was even speculation as to the origin of the name proves that antiquity was no wiser than we are about the man behind it.[73] In the early period,

[70] See e.g. schol. EV on *Od.* 8.63; Hardie 1986: 54–5.
[71] M. L. West 1981.
[72] Wade-Gery 1952: ch. 1; Webster 1958: 267–75. Cf. Taplin 1992: 39–41.
[73] Fairweather 1974; Lefkowitz 1981: 12–24. On the traditions about the poet's name and career, see Allen 1924: 11–41; Schwartz 1940; and other material cited in Burkert 1987: 57 n. 1. M. L. West 1999 has argued that the name is a fiction, derived from a word referring to 'an assembly of the people with which poetic contests were associated, a sort of eisteddfod' (375). The traditions about Homer are discussed in detail by Graziosi 2002.

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as we saw, many other poems were attributed to Homer (even Thucydides assumes his authorship of the Hymn to Apollo), and it may be that the name was simply applied to all or most of the songs preserved by the group known as the Homeridae ('sons of Homer'), who claimed descent from the great bard.[74] Later readers became more discriminating; by the fourth century it could at least be asserted that he had composed only the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* (Xen. *Symp.* 3.5). This became the standard view, although the so-called 'separatists' had their doubts.[75] It remains convenient to use the name 'Homer' as shorthand for the creator of both epics, even if one supposes that the *Odyssey* is in fact by a later imitator.

Equal darkness covers the place and date of composition of the epics. Notoriously, different cities and islands of the eastern Mediterranean competed for the honour of being Homer's birthplace (this dispute is the subject of various epigrams in *Anth. Pal.* 16.293–99). The Ionian coastline or the island of Chios, with its later association with the 'Homeridae', have strong claims; by the time of Simonides (early fifth century BC), Homer could be cited as 'the Chian' (fr. 19 West^2). Some of the descriptive passages in the *Iliad* concerning places near Troy probably rest on first-hand experience: in particular, the poet knows that Poseidon could have seen Troy from the topmost peak of Samothrace, though the island of Tenedos might have been thought to obstruct his view.[76] That the *Odyssey* poet had similar knowledge of Odysseus' kingdom, the island of Ithaca, is less likely, given the geographical difficulties; and his acquaintance with remoter regions such as Egypt, important though these are in the *Odyssey*, was extremely hazy.[77]

The question of the date of composition of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* is bound up with the problem of the process of creation and transmission.[78] In antiquity the Homeric poems were seen as literary creations: that is, readers supposed that they had been created with the aid of writing, as was the work of later poets. Although the Jew Josephus declared that Homer was illiterate, this was for no good critical reason but formed part of a polemic in which he denigrated the

[74] On Homeridai, see Pind. *Nem.* 2.1–5 and scholia; Pl. *Ion* 530d, *Resp.* 10.599e. See further Allen 1924: 42–50; Burkert 1972; Fehling 1979 (total scepticism); Graziosi 2002: 201–17.

[75] Kohl 1917.

[76] *Il.* 13.11–14; cf. Janko's note in Janko 1992; Kirk 1962: 273.

[77] M. M. Austin 1970; Braun 1982; S. West 1988: 65; Boardman 1999: ch. 4.

[78] See Dodds 1968; Myres 1958; Davison 1962b; Hainsworth 1969: *passim*; A. Parry 1971; Heubeck 1974; H. W. Clarke 1981.

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classic texts of paganism in contrast with the authority and dignity of the scriptures (*Against Apion* 1.12). In modern times it was F. A. Wolf in his *Prolegomena* (1795)[79] who set forth the fundamental objections to the hypothesis that Homer wrote his poems down, in the way in which we normally imagine a poet at work in a study. The arguments partly concerned the history of writing in early Greece – how early was the technique available, and how readily would the necessary materials come to hand? – and partly exploited the inconsistencies of language, style, and construction which Wolf and his successors believed that they could detect in both epics. Hence arose the long-standing conflict between the 'analysts' (those who cut up or separated the poems into layers or independent lays) and the 'unitarians' (those critics who opposed this procedure and insisted on the fundamental unity and quality of both epics).[80]

Although the concept of oral composition was current from the time of Wolf,[81] it was the work of Milman Parry which gave this notion a central place in the interpretation and study of Homer.[82] He addressed the question of what made Homer's poems so different from later epic, and his answer was that these poems were not simply the creations of an individual but the poems of a people, in that they were oral creations, drawing on a poetic tradition which went back over several lifetimes, even centuries. The evidence for this was above all linguistic, and Parry's most important work focused on the repetitions and variations in linguistic phrases or repeated 'formulae' which recur in the Homeric texts. 'Much-enduring godlike Odysseus' is an obvious example, tied to a particular character; another, which can be used in contexts involving many characters, is 'He, wishing them well, addressed them and declared. . .' (*Il.* 1.253, etc.). These recurring formulae most commonly

[79] Wolf 1985. Wolf was partly anticipated by Robert Wood (1769) and others: see A. Parry 1971: x–xiv.

[80] I intend to say little about the problems or objections raised by the hardline analysts, many of which now seem pedantic and trivial. Some cases which remain problematic are discussed in later chapters. For a pre-Parryist treatment, see Bowra 1930: ch. 5; Page 1955: *passim*; and a more recent survey by H. W. Clarke 1981: ch. 4. Van Thiel 1982 and 1988 document analytic criticism exhaustively; Dawe 1993 also maintains an analytic position with reference to the *Odyssey*. West 2011c and elsewhere argues that the analysts correctly identified problems but erred in explaining these by multiple authorship rather than gradual revision and rewriting by the master poet.

[81] A. Parry 1971: x–xxi.

[82] M. Parry 1971 (Milman Parry's collected papers, with invaluable introduction by Adam Parry) remains fundamental. His followers are too numerous to list here, but see the bibliography in J. M. Foley 1988. For clear summaries of his theories, see Page 1959: 222–5; Hainsworth 1968: ch. 1.

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consist of whole hexameter lines, or of half-lines beginning or ending at the 'caesura' or pause point in mid-line. In other words, they are phrases created to ease the task of a poet composing in hexameter verse.[83] Homer has often been described as an improviser, a misleading term. On the level of metrical technique and formulaic vocabulary he does indeed work with tools which were devised to ease the process of oral composition; but the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* could not have been produced without long preparation and premeditation. A corollary of this is that the formulae, besides being useful as building blocks, can also have an aesthetic contribution to make: 'what is technically convenient can also be poetically effective'.[84]

The systems of formulaic phrases which Parry analysed were so numerous and showed such economy (in the sense that superfluous or duplicated phrases were kept to a minimum) that it became impossible to suppose that this was merely one poet's linguistic repertoire, all devised for his own use: it could only have been built up gradually by generations of bards. This conclusion was confirmed by philology. The language of Homer is an artificial tongue, never spoken by a single race or state at a given period; it is an amalgam of elements from different dialects and periods. Such a linguistic mixture could not have evolved in a single poet's lifetime; the poetic language was developed by poets over a period of generations. Rather than being the first and greatest of poets, Homer was shown to have composed with a long line of predecessors behind him, all of whom had contributed to the subject matter and diction of his own work. Some have rebelled against Parry's conclusions, feeling that they deny Homer any claim to originality or invention; but this is to misconceive the debate. Any artist imitates or makes use of his predecessors; the relation between tradition and innovation is a subtle and fruitful one, for the literate and for the oral poet.[85] Nevertheless, the Homeric epics, though created in a tradition, stood out even in antiquity as exceptional in quality; this was, after all, the verdict of Aristotle and of Horace.[86]

Parry's researches were published gradually rather than being brought together in a book, and his untimely death in 1935 meant that some time

[83] For more detail on Homer's metre, see M. L. West 1982: 35–9, abridged as M. L. West 1987: 19–23; also M. L. West 1997b (with more emphasis on aesthetic aspects). See also Hainsworth 1969: 27–8; Kirk 1985: 17–37; R. B. Rutherford 1992: 78–85. A readable essay on the subject is provided by Bowra 1962.

[84] Macleod 1982: 38.

[85] Eliot 1932, a classic statement which still demands close attention.

[86] Arist. *Poet.* 23, 24; Hor. *Ars P.* 136f.; but note Garvie 1994: 10–11.

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elapsed before his ideas had their full impact. Nor have they ever influenced continental scholarship as much as they have Anglo-American work on Homer, though there are signs that things are changing. Much has been done to extend and develop his ideas, particularly in the analysis of formulaic systems. Parry was mainly concerned with the noun-epithet formulae ('much-enduring godlike Odysseus' and the like), but made some moves towards the examination of larger sequences in terms of recurrent patterns: motifs, themes, typical scenes, and so forth.[87] Subsequent work in this area, notably by Fenik, has been especially valuable.[88] By comparing a set of arming scenes or scenes in which a stranger arrives and is given welcome, episodes which occur in comparable form in different parts of Homer's work, we can see some of the poet's repertoire and observe how he plays variations on a 'standard' sequence; the overall similarity highlights differences which are often significant.[89] Sometimes we may suspect that the poet is adopting a standard sequence in order to introduce a new or unexpected element, surprising his audience. In general, Parry's methods help to make us more alert to Homer's craft as a storyteller.

In the initial excitement arising from Parry's work large claims were sometimes made about the consequences for criticism: for instance, that the Homeric poems were entirely composed of formulae (a claim that can only be sustained by unacceptably expanding the concept of a formula); that Homer, composing orally and improvising, was incapable of advance preparation or subtlety of design; that oral poetry in any case did not seek the same effects as literary poetry, and could not be judged by the same criteria; that, indeed, a whole new form of 'oral poetics' is required.[90]

There has also inevitably been a reaction.[91] Some of Parry's formulations were clearly vulnerable, and some of his followers went too far in ruling out any kind of traditional 'literary' criticism. On the other

[87] See Arend 1933, with Parry's review, reprinted in M. Parry 1971: 404–7; Hainsworth 1969: 25–6; bibliography given in Schwinge 1991: 485.

[88] Fenik 1968, 1974; also e.g. Krischer 1971, and M. W. Edwards in a series of papers (e.g. 1966, 1968, 1975, 1980, 1987b; also his survey article in 1992). For hospitality scenes see now Reece 1993.

[89] Armstrong 1958; for another aspect see Segal 1971a.

[90] See e.g. Notopoulos 1949, 1950, 1964; Lord 1953, and other paper collected or cited in Lord 1991. A more moderate position is adopted by Hainsworth 1970. For valuable surveys of work on formulae, see M. W. Edwards 1986, 1988.

[91] Note Pope 1963; Hoekstra 1965: ch. 1; Young 1967; Whallon 1969: A. Parry 1972; N. Austin 1975: ch. 1; N. J. Richardson 1987; Shive 1987. See also the discussions cited in A. Parry 1971: xxxiii and xlix n. 3.

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hand, it is evident that the formulaic style, and other features of Homeric poetry which distinguish it from the epics of Apollonius or Virgil or Milton, do need to be taken into account in criticism. At the very least, Parryism can explain the frequency with which lines or phrases are repeated in the poems. It is surely necessary to go further, and to see Homer's narratives as composed for performance. Sometimes inconsistencies and oddities can be explained or excused by this assumption, though perfectionist critics may still be irked when 'Homer nods'.[92] 'Schedios is killed by Hector not once but twice; we do not weep for him. Chromios is killed three times, and innumerable eyes are dry.'[93] Again, if the poets are using traditional plot lines and motifs, the problems or obscurities may sometimes be explained by the blending or juxtaposition of slightly different motifs (the difficulties in *Iliad* 2 concerning Agamemnon's testing of the troops may be an example of this, though characterization also plays a part). Both analysts and oralists should bear in mind that there are many anomalies and inconsistencies in works certainly composed with the aid of writing.[94]

On a verbal level, the analysts had complained that Homer often used language inappropriately, for instance in applying 'stock' epithets where they did not fit (Penelope's 'fat' hand in *Od.* 21.6 was a notorious example), and here the oral theory offered an answer, but an unsatisfying one for many readers. Parry went so far as to claim that the poet used these phrases so automatically that they no longer possessed a real meaning for him. What needs saying here is that the cases of inept use are remarkably rare, and need to be balanced against examples of Homer's conscious and tactful adjustment of formulae to suit a particular situation. A small but telling instance occurs at *Iliad* 16.298, when Zeus, who is often given the epithet 'gatherer of the clouds' (*nephelēgereta*), is described instead as 'gatherer of the lightning' (*steropēgereta*), a variant which is found only here. The reason is clear: the

[92] The expression derives from a famous line in Horace's *Ars Poetica*, in which the Roman poet admits that literary perfection, however desirable, is not always attainable: *et idem / indignor quandoque bonus dormitat Homerus, / verum operi longo fas est obrepere somnum* (*Ars P.* 358–60: 'I even feel aggrieved, when good Homer nods; but when a work is long, a drowsy mood is understandable'). Pope's riposte to this tag should be taken seriously by critics: 'Those oft are stratagems which error seem, / nor is it Homer nods, but we that dream' (*An Essay on Criticism*, 179–80).

[93] Page 1959: 305.

[94] Scodel 1999 is a stimulating account of the question of inconsistency in literature, especially epic and tragedy.

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poet is describing how Zeus *disperses* the clouds, and the normal epithet would naturally jar.[95]

Parry stressed the element of tradition in the Homeric epics, while others have sought to isolate particularly creative uses or modifications of traditional material, or have even maintained that Homer is working against or remoulding the tradition.[96] Another fruitful line of research is to explore the complexity of Homer's diction and styles: whereas Parryism seemed to imply a monolithic formulaic style, recent work has made clear that there are important distinctions between the style of the speeches and that of the narrative; moreover, different speakers may be characterized by different styles.[97] In all these areas, what matters is to recognize that tradition and originality are combined, even if there are limits to how far we can define the relationship between the two.

A different approach, again seeking to vindicate the aesthetic as well as the functional qualities of the formulaic language, makes the traditional nature of that language a major resource for the poet. By using phraseology and typical episodes which he and others have used elsewhere, he evokes these other uses, recalling for the audience a world that they intuitively recognize. 'Traditional referentiality', to quote its chief exponent, 'entails the invoking of a context that is enormously larger and more echoic than the text or work itself, that brings the lifeblood of generations of poems and performances to the individual performance or text.'[98] Formulae and themes metonymically draw on a larger world: '*pars pro toto*' is an expression that Foley has used repeatedly.[99] The approach allows for variation and distortion of the

[95] For Parry's fullest defence of the statement that the meaning of the epithets was unimportant, see M. Parry 1971: 118–72; see also the briefer account at 1971: 304–7. But Parry himself allowed for some cases of deliberate choice or adjustment (1971: 156–61), and the argument is taken further by Hainsworth 1969: 29–30; Macleod 1982: 35–42; R. B. Rutherford 1992: 49–57. For Penelope's fat hand, see Woodhouse 1930: 200–1, who wails 'Oh Homer! How could you?'; defended by N. Austin 1975: 73.

[96] Sale 1963; Russo 1968; Tsagarakis 1982, esp. 32 ff.; cf. Taplin 1992. On technical aspects of the evolution of the formulaic system, see Hainsworth 1962, 1978; and especially the magisterial account in Hainsworth 1993: 1–31; also Finkelberg 1989. For a range of approaches, see Visser 1987, 1988; Russo 1997; Bakker 2005.

[97] Griffin 1986, with de Jong 1988; de Jong 1987a; Martin 1989; Mackie 1996 (on differentiation of Trojan speech); Finkelberg 2012.

[98] J. M. Foley 1991: 7; brief account of his views in Foley 1997; for detailed readings see J. M. Foley 1991: 135–89 (on *Iliad* 24), 1999: 241–62 (on *Odyssey* 23). Kelly 2007b systematically applies this method to *Iliad* 8; for good examples of his method see pp. 183–4 (imagined third-person speakers), 205–8 (on *nēpioi*), 250–3 (prayers).

[99] E.g. J. M. Foley 1997: 168. See also Graziosi and Haubold 2005, esp. 49–60, on 'resonance'.

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norms; audiences are experienced enough to detect such abnormal usage. This is a very suggestive approach, though problems remain (such as how far different bards might differ in their styles and subjects, and how to allow for the evolution and invention within the tradition).

The other aspect of Parry's work which particularly caught the imagination of his followers was the comparative approach, pursued through fieldwork on existing oral poetic traditions, above all in Yugoslavia in the 1930s.[100] There it proved possible to hear, record, and question bards composing without literacy, and to test the reliability of their memories of previous songs. Through this fieldwork, so Parry believed, a poetic tradition comparable with that of Homer could be observed and preserved. Fascinating though the comparison has proved, subsequent scholarship has been cautious in making deductions about the consequences for Homer. In quality and metrical subtlety the Yugoslav poems seem to fall short of Homer's; nor do these bards generally compose on such a large scale, except on special request.[101] The differences between ancient Ionia and modern Europe mean that special caution is needed in tracing the development or degeneration of an oral poetic tradition.[102] These analogies can only be suggestive, not probative. In the end, Parry's work on modern traditions may be found less valuable for Homeric studies than his analysis of Homer's own style and formulae.

8. But could Homer write?

Milman Parry tended to say or imply that his researches had 'proved' that Homer was an oral poet, in the sense of one who not only performed orally but made no use of writing in the composition of his works or at any stage. Modern readers of Homer – 'readers' is the key word – find it almost impossible to imagine the effort of memory involved in preserving long poetic texts such as these without any aide-mémoire. True, actors and operatic singers achieve feats scarcely less miraculous even in our own time, but they have a written text to memorize.

[100] M. Parry 1971: chs. 13–17 (17 by A. B. Lord), with A. Parry 1971: xxxiv–xli, xlvii–xlviii; Lord 1960. See further Finnegan 1977; Hainsworth 1993: 32–53 (a valuable essay on 'The *Iliad* as heroic poetry'); and, for broadening of the comparative picture, e.g. Hatto 1980; J. M. Foley 1991, 2005.

[101] But important new work on the South Slavic traditions may require modification of current assumptions: see Danek 1998: 7–23; Danek 2010; and esp. Čolaković 2006.

[102] As is too eagerly attempted by Kirk 1962: 95–8. Contrast Thomas 1993: ch. 3.

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It can be argued, however, that this is the wrong model. According to Parry, and to many who have studied oral poetic traditions more widely than he, the singer is not memorizing and reproducing, but composing afresh, re-creating; each new performance is in a sense a new song, and tape recorders will show differences of some significance even when a singer does claim to be repeating 'the same' song. According to this view, the poet is in large part 'improvising', a word with disturbing implications. Did the *Iliad*, or parts thereof, go through this process in Homer's lifetime, being re-created many times? In that case, we may well suspect that the poet refined his work and added fresh beauties, rather than simply starting afresh each time; but how can we be sure that we have the 'best' version? The problem becomes greater when a different poet takes over the song, and remakes it anew. If a period of several generations intervenes before the poem is committed to writing, it may undergo extensive changes. In a way, it is not 'Homer's' poem. We may think of the paradox of the axe hanging on the wall for generations: if the blade has been replaced twice, the handle once, is it still 'grandfather's axe'? Hence the attractions of assuming a literate Homer; a written text may be subject to the normal mishaps of miscopying but at least imposes some fixity. Lord and others have supposed that Homer himself was illiterate but dictated his works to willing disciples or scribes, so making it possible for the master's works to live on.[103] Others have wished to go a step further and cut out the middleman: could not Homer himself have learned to write and used this opportunity to preserve, perhaps to enhance and enlarge, his greatest poem? It is an intriguing proposal that the discovery of writing itself could have been the stimulus which prompted a poet of exceptional gifts to create or develop a poem of extraordinary scope and length, in the knowledge that the instrument now existed to ensure his work's survival.[104] More far-fetched is the hypothesis that the alphabet was itself devised specifically as a means of preserving epic poetry.[105]

Current orthodoxy places the introduction of the alphabet from the Phoenician into the Greek world in the late ninth or early eighth century: the earliest known Greek inscriptions come from

[103] Lord 1953, and elsewhere; accepted e.g. by Janko 1992: 37–8, and re-argued in Janko 1998.

[104] A view championed by Bowra 1930, and by Adam Parry in an important paper (A. Parry 1966); contrast e.g. Taplin 1992: 8–9, 35–7. My own preference has always been for this theory; for others of the same opinion, see Garvie 1994: 16 n. 51, and now West 2011c, esp. 10–14.

[105] Powell 1991; for criticism see Woodard 1997.

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*c.*770–750 BC.[106] Whether we suppose that an alphabet, if available, would have been utilized to put Homer's poetry in a permanent form, or whether suitable writing materials could be obtained at this date, will partly depend on the importance which we suppose was attached to poetry in this period. Papyrus was an expensive import even in fifth-century Athens; leather has also been suggested.[107] The difficulties are formidable, but the notion that the *Iliad* was consigned to writing from the start, at a date in the late eighth or early seventh century, is not a physical impossibility. The special attraction of this theory is that it explains the composition of so massive an epic, which would hardly have been composed for performance alone. Alternatively, some look hopefully to the so-called Homeridae, who, if they recognized the stature of their poet, may perhaps have sought to memorize rather than re-create.

My own view, then, would be that the seventh-century date, while possible, is not proven, and I am content to see the *Iliad* as reaching something very like its final form towards the end of the eighth century, and quite possibly being committed to writing within the poet's own lifetime. The *Odyssey*, whoever its author may be, follows in its wake, after an interval of at least a decade. Only gradually would the two poems become known beyond the region (wherever that was) in which they were created and recorded, and it would be a long time before they became 'classic' texts to which other poets and artists might consciously allude.[108] The sheer length of these poems may have meant that they were at first actually *less* popular and would certainly have meant that most audiences would only have heard parts; geographical distance must also be taken into account (wherever they were composed, the process of diffusion would be different from modern 'publication' and far slower). Advocates of a seventh-century date point to the startling fact that Alcman, Stesichorus, and the Lesbian poets (*c.*600) are the earliest certain instances of allusion,[109] but the

[106] Jeffery 1961: 1–42 with addenda on pp. 425–7 in 1990 edition by Johnston, against the early dating proposed by Near Eastern experts such as J. Naveh; Burkert 1992: 25–33. See also Heubeck 1979.

[107] Cost: *IG* i^3 476.289–90; cf. Jeffery 1961: 56–7; Jensen 1980: 92–5. Burkert 1992 supports leather.

[108] This was a slow process, as shown by the paucity of representations in art and certain echoes in literature. See Burkert 1987; Snodgrass 1998; Burgess 2001: ch. 2.

[109] Alcman *PMG* 77 and 80; Alcaeus F 44 Lobel-Page; Stesich. *SLG*, esp. S11, revised in Davies, *PMGF* I; cf. Page 1973b. On the dating of Stesichorus, see D. A. Campbell 1991: 2–4; see further Burkert 1987.

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yawning absence of early Greek poetry outside the hexameter tradition deprives that argument of a great deal of its force.

9. Sixth-century Athens

According to later sources it was in the sixth century, during the reign of the Athenian tyrant Pisistratus (d. 527) and his sons, that an authoritative written text of Homer was prepared, for use by rhapsodes who recited the epics at the great festival of the Panathenaea.[110] These sources are not only much later but mutually contradictory, and there have been attempts to dismiss the whole 'Pisistratean recension' as a fiction; but, although we should not envisage anything like a scholarly publication, it seems likely that some such centralized text was established, and that this stage in the tradition accounts for some of the 'Atticisms' or traces of Attic dialect in our texts of Homer. The idea that before this date no coherent epic songs existed, and that it was Pisistratus who brought various songs together and created 'Homer', was brilliantly asserted by Wolf and has been re-argued since,[111] but seems fundamentally implausible: the Greeks thought of Homer as an older figure, and did not associate him with Athens; the Athenians themselves make a poor showing in the *Iliad*, which makes it unlikely that the poem was radically modified in that city; the assertions that the Athenians did in fact interpolate certain passages presupposes a pre-existing text; and the theory contradicts the chronological arguments of Janko. It is much more likely that Pisistratus or his sons 'procured the first complete set of rolls to cross the Aegean',[112] and that their contribution was later exaggerated.

The earliest testimony to this activity by the Pisistratid family ascribes it to Hipparchus, his son: 'he first conveyed the poems of Homer to this country, and made the rhapsodes go through them in order at the Panathenaia, taking turns at the task, as they still do today' (Pl. *Hipparch.* 228b). These rhapsodes ('weavers of song'), professional reciters of poetry which is not their own, are often seen as a new

[110] Pl. *Hipparch.* 228b; Isoc. *Paneg.* 159; Lycurg. 1.102; Cic. *De or.* 3.137; Merkelbach 1952; Davison 1955; Janko 1992: 29–32; Lewis 1988: 292. For a different approach see Nagy 1995; he sees the story of the Pisistratean recension as in effect a myth describing a gradual process by which the text became fixed.

[111] Jensen 1980, esp. ch. 7.

[112] Janko 1992: 37.

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phenomenon, distinct from the genuine oral poet; the dividing line may not be quite so sharp.[113] Our view of them is biased by Plato, who satirizes the pretensions of one such figure, the complacent Ion, who can perform Homer to perfection but cannot explain him. The poets and their kinsmen no longer have a special authority over their poetry; by becoming a classic, Homer has entered the public domain.[114]

A more specific allegation in antiquity, preserved in the Homeric scholia, was that Book 10 of the *Iliad*, often called the *Doloneia*, was not part of the original poem, but was separately composed and incorporated in the epic by Pisistratus (schol T. 10.1). The association of the change with Pisistratus may be merely the result of the earlier stories about his involvement with the Homeric text, but the suggestion that Book 10 is a later addition gains some support from the linguistic, structural, and ethical peculiarities of that book, as well as from the lack of cross-references to it in the rest of the *Iliad*. Although the tenth book presupposes the *Iliad*, the *Iliad* does not need the *Doloneia*.[115]

This leads on to the general question of addition to and subtraction from the Homeric text during the course of its transmission.[116] If a whole book has been interpolated, what other changes may have been made at different times? Other cases were indeed cited, or at least problems were identified, by ancient critics: most alarmingly, the conclusion of the *Odyssey* (see below, p. 98).[117]

[113] Hes. fr. 357 M-W seems to anticipate the image, but applying it to the bard; contrast Pind. *Nem.* 2.2. See Patzer 1952; Sealey 1957; Herington 1985: 167–76; Burkert 1987; M. L. West 2010.

[114] For the emergence of interpretation of Homer by non-poets, see Theagenes of Rhegium (fragments in Diels–Kranz 8), esp. B2, discussing the battle of the gods in *Iliad* 20; later, e.g. Ar. *Banqueters* fr. 233 K-A; Prt. 80A29, 30; Plut. *Vit. Alc.* 7.1. See N. J. Richardson 1975. On the origins of criticism, see Ford 2002.

[115] See esp. Hainsworth's 1993 commentary and the earlier bibliography on his p. 155, esp. Klingner 1940; Danek 1988 (with Danek 2012, in English).

[116] Gregory Nagy in a long series of publications (e.g. Nagy 1996, 2003, 2010) has argued that a creative performance tradition for Homer continued long after Pisistratus, and that many differing versions of the epics existed, so that modern attempts to establish or reconstruct an early fixed text are misguided. This argument has found little support: see the criticisms by Finkelberg 2000, with Nagy's reply in Nagy 2001. The tradition of Homer is far less 'multiform' than some other oral traditions (examples in M. L. West 2001b: 11).

[117] Other cases are for the most part much shorter. In antiquity there were controversies about so-called Athenian interpolations (Arist. *Rh.* 1375b30, Dieuchidas *FGrH* 485F6 = D. L. i.57; cf. Allen 1924: 241 ff.), but the Athenians makes so small a showing in the *Iliad* that it is hard to suppose that much was added. Suspect passages on this score include 1.265, 2.553–5, 11.602–4. On manuscript evidence for interpolation see Bolling 1925 and Apthorp 1980a: the problems are too complex to discuss here. M. L. West 2001b: 12–14, with wonderful confidence, sets out a catalogue of Iliadic interpolations grouped in categories.

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10. Text and scholars

It hardly needs saying that commitment of the epics to writing, and even the possible establishment of an 'authorized' text for the Panathenaic recitations, did not ensure a calm and straightforward transmission of the text from that point to the present day. In virtually all textual traditions, the work comes down to us by various routes, and is recopied many times; even setting aside deliberate interference, it is an established fact that new errors will occur at every stage.[118] Although there is much that we cannot reconstruct, it seems clear that Homer circulated in many versions which differed significantly from one another during the centuries after Pisistratus: the evidence comes partly from quotations in other literary sources, partly from the early papyri, which often deviate from the text that later became 'standard', in particular including additional lines. The divergences are sometimes so marked that scholars refer to early extracts as the 'wild' papyri.[119] Alexandrian scholars did much work identifying possibly spurious lines and deciding between variant readings; after the third century BC the text seems to have settled into more or less the form which we have inherited, and it is usual to associate this development with the name of Aristarchus, one of the most distinguished scholars of Alexandria.[120]

In modern times, the analysts claimed that they had identified many later additions, and sought to reduce the poem to its earliest and purest state by purging it of such intrusions. This practice is misguided and in any case fruitless: even supposing that all such cases were objectively identified, we cannot assume that they have been simply added to a core which remains uncontaminated. If that assumption is not made,

[118] On textual criticism in general see M. L. West 1973b; Reynolds and Wilson 1991: ch. 6. For more detail on the Homeric tradition, see Davison 1962a; M. L. West 2001b; Haslam 1997, 2011. On the *Odyssey*, see S. West 1988: 33–48.

[119] The 'wild papyri' are edited by S. West 1967; for a brief account, see E. J. Turner 1968: 106–12. D. Sutton n.d. is an online database 'Homer and the Papyri', now overseen by G. Nagy.

[120] Besides the variations in manuscript evidence, there is the supplementary testimony of ancient quotations: for a conspicuous case of a passage preserved only in one source, not represented in manuscripts or papyri, see 9.458–61, quoted by Plutarch as excised by Aristarchus; these lines may well be authentic (cf. Janko 1992: 27–8; Hainsworth 1993: ad loc.). On the Alexandrian scholars, see Fraser 1972: 447–79; Davison 1962a: 222–6; Pfeiffer 1968: part 2, esp. chs. 2 and 6; Janko 1992: 22–9 (with invaluable bibliography and lists of examples of their judgements); M. L. West 2001b: 33–85; F. Schironi, entries in Finkelberg 2011, under 'Alexandrian scholarship' and the names of scholars.

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then the supposed original is irrecoverable. But in an oral tradition the very concept of an 'original' version may in any case be a chimaera. Nevertheless, many critics have continued to build up counter-arguments to the more drastic version of analytic criticism, showing how well integrated and intricately structured both epics in fact are. Scenes are demonstrably connected, later events are foreshadowed, explicit anticipation is common, and the poet has a firm control over an extended but carefully organized plot. Against those who maintained that oral composition must be loose and 'paratactic', this new wave of unitarians insists on the subtlety and complexity of Homer's art. This is a version of the argument from design: random combination or cumulative addition could not have resulted in this satisfyingly ordered microcosm. Schadewaldt and Reinhardt, Bannert and Reichel in German, Macleod and Taplin in English, have charted an impressive range of connections and cross-references which surely imply the master hand of a 'monumental poet' who planned the *Iliad* as a whole. Similar arguments have been applied to the *Odyssey* by Garvie and myself, among others. It remains true that some of these intricate structures are more visible and significant than others; some, it may be said, are perceptible only to the eye of faith. More disquieting is the argument that many of the thematic echoes and links which the unitarians detect can equally be explained by the conscious development of the poem by a succession of bards; to seek a single poet of surpassing genius is merely romantic misunderstanding of the nature of an oral tradition.[121] Such a hypothesis offers one possible explanation for the problems at the conclusion of the *Odyssey*.

11. Reception and interpretation

From the beginning following Homer, because all have learned [from him?]...
(Xenophanes B10)

It is they [Homer and Hesiod] who by their poetry gave the Greeks a theogony and gave the gods their titles; they who assigned to them their statuses and skills and gave an indication of their appearance. (Hdt. 2.53).[122]

[121] Nagy 1992, esp. 30–1; Seaford 1994,:144–54, part of a complex argument, many stages of which I cannot accept. Griffin 1995: 8 attempts a brief response to Seaford. See also Sourvinou-Inwood 1995: 94–103.

[122] Burkert 1985, 119–25; Gould 1994.

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> Consequently, Glaucon, when you encounter admirers of Homer who assert that this poet has been the educator of Greece, and that…one should organise and lead one's whole life in accordance with this poet's work… (Pl. *Resp*. 10.606e)

These and many other passages attest the special prestige of Homer in the classical period. Simonides could refer to him as 'the Chian' (fr. 19), but in time he became simply 'the poet' – no ambiguity was possible. Aristophanes' Aeschylus calls him 'divine' (*Ran.* 1034); the real Aeschylus was said to have declared his tragedies 'fish-slices from the banquet of Homer' (Ath. 8.347c). The highest praise for a later poet was to call him 'Homeric' (D. L. 4.20, on Sophocles). Prose writers were praised in the same terms ('Longinus' 13.3 on Herodotus; *SEG* 48.1330). Homer was not the pathfinder of tragedy alone; he can also be seen as the inspiration for historiography, which shares his concern to preserve the 'glorious deeds of men', for rhetoric, even for New Comedy. The ancient novel, with its parted lovers wandering in strange foreign lands but eventually reunited, is another obvious descendant.[123] Quintilian and others compared Homer with the Ocean, which encircled the world and flowed into every lesser river.[124]

Homer has indeed been called 'the Bible of the Greeks', but this description requires some important qualifications. At no stage were the epics sacred texts: they were not kept in temples or interpreted by priests; although Homer was gaining pre-eminence by the end of the sixth century, other early texts were quoted and cited to illustrate mythical 'facts' or to back up an argument; as we have seen, Herodotus paired Homer with Hesiod as a formative influence on the Greeks' conception of the gods. Above all, Homer was not venerated without question. 'Poets tell many a lie', said the Athenian Solon, echoing Hesiod.[125] The Pre-Socratic thinker Xenophanes was more specific: 'Homer and Hesiod attributed to the gods all the things which bring reproach and disgrace among men – theft, adultery, deceit' (B11). Heraclitus was more forthright: 'Homer deserves to be thrown out of the public contests and given a beating' (B42). Pindar expressed reservations as to the reliability of Homer's testimony about Odysseus: 'I

[123] E.g. Hägg 1983; for tales of the ends of the earth see also Romm 1992.

[124] See Hornblower 1994: 7–13 for historiography, with Marincola 2007; Radermacher 1951: 1–10 for rhetoric. Satyrus, *Life of Euripides* fr. 39, col. vii, 23 ff. Arrighetti, comments on the line of descent from Homer to New Comedy. Homer as Ocean: Quint. 10.1.46; F. Williams 1978: 98–9.

[125] Solon F 29 West; Hes. *Theog.* 27–8; Thalmann 1984: 147–9; Pratt 1993.

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hold that the renown of Odysseus is more than his sufferings, because of Homer's sweet singing... Art beguiles and cheats with its tales' (*Nem.* 7.20–3). Plato refers in the *Republic* to 'an ancient quarrel between poetry and philosophy' (10.607bc),[126] and excises offending passages, particularly those which show gods or heroes in an ignoble light. The controversy over the immorality of Homer's gods continued throughout antiquity.[127] But the morality of the heroes, the impetuous Achilles and the devious Odysseus, also aroused strong feelings. The tragic dramas of fifth-century Athens constantly rework Homeric themes and scrutinize epic values from the standpoint of a later age: enthusiastic admiration is mingled with questioning and even protest.[128]

Interpretation arises out of competition and polemic, for later poets sought to compete with or surpass the epic master. Hesiod, elaborating on the function of Strife in the community, speaks of competition between potters, carpenters, beggars, and bards (*Op.* 25–6).[129] Hesiod's own reference to the Muses' lies has sometimes been taken as a jibe at epic narrative, probably wrongly; but Stesichorus revised Homer's mythology and his own, rejecting the tale that Helen went to Troy with Paris (*PMG* 192). In the sixth century Theagenes allegorized Homer; in the fifth Protagoras criticized his grammar. We recognize the beginnings of scholarly commentary.[130] Many passages of Homer are quoted and discussed, not always in negative vein, by speakers in Plato's dialogues or the works of Xenophon. Although interpretation was often whimsical – selecting passages to prove a point without considering context, applying anachronistic criteria, or finding fault in order to show off – the eventual effect was to generate a rich and varied body of critical discussion.

The special importance of Homer meant that his poems, and especially the *Iliad*, were more closely studied than any other works of pagan antiquity. Historians debated the date of the fall of Troy, parodists spoofed epic phraseology, rhetoricians analysed the forms of argument employed in the speeches, students of mythology sought to

[126] Cf. Curtius 1953: ch. 11.
[127] Pease 1955–8 on Cic. *Nat. D.* 1.42.
[128] Cf. Easterling 1984; Goldhill 1986, esp. ch. 6.
[129] For mutual rivalry and criticism among poets see e.g. Simonides on Pittacus, *PMG* 542, and on Cleobulus, ibid. 581; also the stories of a contest between Homer and Hesiod. See further Griffith 1990; Buxton 1994: 31.
[130] Pfeiffer 1968 is the fundamental reference work, supplemented by N. J. Richardson 1975 and esp. 1993: 25–49. See also Lamberton and Keaney 1992.

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reconcile or relate different legends, and grammarians puzzled over linguistic forms, tried to explain difficult words, and assessed the merits of variant readings. One work which would have shed much light on the state of interpretation in classical times was Aristotle's *Homeric Problems*, now lost except for a few extremely suggestive fragments; the much more sketchy treatment of some Homeric topics in a chapter of the *Poetics* gives an idea of the acumen with which Aristotle must have cut through much arid or ill-conceived argument.[131] After the lengthy complaints in Plato and others about the unworthy behaviour of Homeric gods and men, there is something refreshing about the curt response of Aristotle:

> Correctness in poetry is not the same as correctness in morals, nor yet is it the same as correctness in any other art. . . . If an error arises through the poet's setting out to represent something incorrectly, and that is the reason why we find in the poem a mistake concerning, say, medicine or some other art,. . .this does not involve the essential nature of poetry. (Arist. *Poet.* 25.1460b13–21)[132]

Above all, the ancient commentaries on Homer, which digest and pass on many of the observations of the great Hellenistic editors, provide not only precious mythological data and testimony to the textual tradition of the poems, but literary comment which may sometimes appear naïve, but retains interest and value.[133] It is mere arrogance to suppose that only the most recent critical methods and concepts can offer any insight to the modern reader.[134] Similarly, reception studies have brought home to many readers how much can be learned from the responses of earlier generations, whether amateurs or professionals and whether they came to Homer in the original or through the countless translations.[135]

[131] *Hom. Probl.*: frr. 142–79 Rose; *Poet.* 25, with commentaries; Carroll 1895.

[132] Translation from Hubbard 1972 (slightly modified). See further Halliwell 1986: 10–17 and ch. 7.

[133] For the Hellenistic critics whose views are quoted by the scholia, see the works cited in n. 114 above; also Kirk 1985: 38–43; Meijering 1987; Nünlist 2010.

[134] The monumental edition of most of the scholia to the *Iliad* is Erbse 1969–88, supplemented for the D scholia by van Thiel 2000. A new edition of the *Odyssey* scholia has begun to appear (Pontani 2007; for books not yet covered one must still go back to Dindorf 1855). For guidance on this and other editions, see Dickey 2007: 18–28. On their critical criteria and preoccupations N. J. Richardson 1980 is invaluable. Cf. Snipes 1988 (similes); N. J. Richardson 1993: 35–40; see also Heath 1989: ch. 8. Griffin 1980 also makes use of the scholia, but tends to praise or damn them according to the extent that they confirm his views.

[135] No attempt can be made here to survey the history of Homeric reception, which would embrace much of the history of western literature. Helpful starting points include Thomson 1962; F. M. Turner 1981; France 2000; Graziosi and Greenwood 2007; Grafton, Most, and

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Many of the topics considered by scholars and students of Homer today were pioneered by the ancient critics: the study of plot construction, characterization, rhetorical techniques, decorum and generic convention, preparation, foreshadowing, retardation, ironic double meanings – the list could be extended. The ancients were also more alert to matters of metre and audible effects, an area much neglected in our post-oral culture.[136] Thucydides and Aristotle formulated the principle of poetic licence (Thuc. 1.10.3; Arist. *Poet*. 25); Longinus, in a brilliant paragraph, summed up unforgettably the differences between the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* (*On the Sublime*, 9.11–15). We need not be too modest: some advances in critical understanding have become possible because we know more about philology and linguistic development than ancient scholars did; scientific archaeology has given us a far clearer insight into the dark ages and the earlier era of Mycenae than was available to Thucydides. Other improvements are technical. We have more readable printed texts, supplemented by systematic grammars, Homeric lexica, and computerized concordances: the study of Homeric vocabulary and formulaic diction is far more straightforward for us today than it was for Aristarchus or even for Wolf and his followers.

Some modern approaches, although perhaps anticipated in earlier times in certain specific observations or insights, do seem to represent fresh steps towards a deeper understanding. One which has already been mentioned is the study of creative or imaginative development of 'stock' formulae and themes. Another is the application of a sociological or anthropological approach to Homeric society, scrutinizing the institutions, the structures of the community, and above all the values and morality which motivate the characters in the epics.[137] Closely related to this is the study of Homeric religion in relation to worship and cult in historical times: in one way this is the hardest of all tasks for modern readers, brought up in a completely different religious tradition (or in none), but there is another sense in which we have an advantage over the Greeks, since we are viewing the subject from outside, with a quite different perspective. After much ground-breaking

Settis 2010; Hardwick and Stray 2008; also, on the *Odyssey*, E. Hall 2008. Eight of the essays in R. L. Fowler 2004 deal with Homeric reception. For translations, see pp. 134–5.

[136] N. J. Richardson 1980: 283–7; M. W. Edwards 1987a: ch. 15.

[137] Finley 1954 (rev. 1978) and Redfield 1975 are particularly important works in this area; more recently, van Wees 1992b; Raaflaub 1991, 1993; D. Cairns 1993 (and more recent articles, e.g. 2003, 2011); Osborne 2004.

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and original research we may now hope that we have a better understanding of the relation between Homer's poetic presentation of the gods and the historical realities of ritual and cult.[138] Valuable work has been done on the use of imagery, metaphor, and even symbolism (in the sense of poetic representation of physical objects which also conveys a deeper meaning), matters which at one time seemed too fanciful or sophisticated for Homer.[139] The extended simile is not the only way in which Homer adorns and obliquely sheds light on his narrative.

Modern Homeric scholarship has also welcomed the advent of narratology – again, the systematic development of an insight already explicitly discussed in ancient texts. Narratology examines the sequence and emphases of a narrative: not just 'what happens?' but 'how is it described?'.[140] It also stresses the distinction between the poet's authorial viewpoint and that of his characters, and pays special attention to the passages in which the distinction is blurred or ambiguous. Instead of taking the story for granted, we are encouraged to look more closely at the way in which it is told. This has already had beneficial effect, not least in demonstrating the futility of the old debate as to whether Homer is 'objective' or not; the terminology of former discussion is seen to be hopelessly over-simplified.[141] A related enquiry is to examine the defining structures of Homer's plots, seminal for so many later works. A bold and intellectually demanding attempt to do just this has been made by Nick Lowe, drawing not only on narratology but on cognitive science and game theory: the contrasts he draws between the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* as models for later plots in tragedy, comedy, and the novel are illuminating for the original poems and for later literature as well.[142]

[138] Burkert 1985 (English translation of his 1977 book) is a rich store of insights. See also Parker 1983: 66–70, 130–43, etc.; Griffin 1980: chs. 5–6; new ch. in Redfield 1975 (1994 edition); Bremmer 1994, Versnel 2011 (very wide-ranging; for Homer see esp. ch. 2). See further Kearns 2004, 2011; and pp. 64–70 below.

[139] M. W. Edwards 1987a: chs. 11–14; Griffin 1980: ch. 1. Rather differently Lynn-George 1988, e.g. 252–72 on grave mounds and monuments. On metaphor, see M. Parry 1971: 365–75, 414–18; Moulton 1979; M. W. Edwards 1991: 48–53. For gesture, facial expression, and related matters, see Lateiner 1995; D. Cairns 2005.

[140] Genette 1980; Bal 1985; de Jong 1987a introduced this approach to Homeric studies (also in many other papers, some listed in the bibliography); the method is applied on a grand scale to the *Odyssey* in de Jong 2001.

[141] Pragmatic treatment in Griffin 1986; more theoretically grounded, de Jong 1987a; S. Richardson 1990; di Benedetto 1994, part 1. See also M. W. Edwards 1991: introduction, 1–10.

[142] Lowe 2000.

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These and other critical techniques cannot be adequately explored in the abstract; they need to be illustrated through examples drawn from the epics themselves. In the pages which follow only a few instances can be provided from the abundance of Homer's store. As Dryden wrote of Chaucer, 'here is God's plenty'.

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