

HOMER THE ILIAD



A NEW TRANSLATION
BY E. V. RIEU

THE PENGUIN
CLASSICS

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Edited by E. V. Rieu

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PENGUIN BOOKS

MELBOURNE • LONDON • BALTIMORE

Penguin Books Ltd, Harmondsworth, Middlesex

U.S.A.: Penguin Books Inc., 3300 Clipper Mill Road, Baltimore 11, Md

[*Educational Representative:*

D. C. Heath & Co., 285 Columbus Avenue, Boston 16, Mass]

AUSTRALIA: Penguin Books Pty Ltd, 762 Whitehorse Road,
Mitcham, Victoria

CANADA: Penguin Books (Canada) Ltd, 47 Green Street,
Saint Lambert, Montreal, P.Q.

SOUTH AFRICA: Penguin Books (S.A.) Pty Ltd, 218 Grand Parade Centre,
Adderley Street, Capetown

First published 1950

Reprinted 1951, 1953, 1954

Made and printed in Great Britain by
Richard Clay and Company, Ltd, Bungay, Suffolk

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INTRODUCTION

THE Greeks looked on the *Iliad* as Homer's major work. It was the Story of Achilles, and not the Wanderings of Odysseus as might have been expected, that Alexander the Great took with him as a bedside book on his adventurous campaigns. I myself used not to accept this verdict, and I felt that many modern readers would agree with me. It was therefore with some trepidation that I bade farewell to the *Odyssey* and braced myself for the task of translating the *Iliad*, which I had not read through as a whole for twelve years. I soon began to have very different feelings, and now that I have finished the work I am completely reassured. The Greeks were right.

It is a question, not of any difference in skill, but of artistic levels. The *Odyssey*, with its happy ending, presents the romantic view of life: the *Iliad* is a tragedy.* To paint the Odyssean picture, convincing, just, and beautiful as it is, Homer took his easel to the lower slopes of Mount Olympus, which are pleasant, green, and wooded. It was a good spot, for the Muses certainly come down and play there. But to compose the *Iliad*, he moved higher up the mountain-side, nearer to the eternal snows and to the very homes of the Muses and the other gods. From there he had a different and a clearer view of the same landscape. Some of the mists had dissolved, the sun beat pitilessly on the snow, and a number of new things, many of them very terrible and lovely, came into sight. Homer himself became, if possible, even more human. He had climbed high; he had faced and solved some of the ultimate enigmas; and he could afford to smile both at the ant-like activities of men and the more awe-inspiring pageant of the gods. I am therefore very confident when I assure those who already know the *Odyssey* that they will be brought closer to tears by

* I am not implying in what follows that we really know which of them Homer wrote first.

the death of a single horse in the *Iliad* than by the killing of the whole gang of Suitors; closer too to laughter; and closer, if they follow Homer to the Olympian eminence from which he looks out on the world, to the heights where tears and laughter cease to count.

The plot of the *Iliad* is simple. King Agamemnon the imperial overlord of Greece (or Achaea, as Homer calls it) has, with his brother Menelaus of Sparta, induced the princes who owe him allegiance to join forces with him against King Priam of Troy, because Paris, one of Priam's sons, has run away with Menelaus' wife, the beautiful Helen of Argos. The Achaeans have for nine years been encamped beside their ships on the shore near Troy, but without bringing the matter to a conclusion, though they have captured and looted a number of towns in Trojan territory, under the dashing leadership of Achilles son of Peleus, Prince of the Myrmidons, the most redoubtable and the most unruly of Agamemnon's royal supporters. The success of these raiding parties leads to a feud between Achilles and his Commander-in-Chief. Agamemnon has been allotted the girl Chryseis as his prize, and he refuses to give her up to her father, a local priest of Apollo, when he comes to the camp with ransom for her release. The priest prays to his god; a plague ensues; and Agamemnon is forced by the strength of public feeling to give up the girl and so propitiate the angry god. But he recoups himself by confiscating one of Achilles' own prizes, a girl named Briseis. Achilles in high dudgeon refuses to fight any more and withdraws the Myrmidon force from the battlefield. After an abortive truce, intended to allow Menelaus and Paris to settle their quarrel by single combat, the two armies meet, and as a result of Achilles' absence from the field the Achaeans, who have hitherto kept the Trojan forces penned up in Troy or close to their own city walls, are slowly but surely put on the defensive. They are even forced to make a trench and a wall round their ships and huts. But these defences are eventually stormed by Hector the Trojan Commander-in-Chief, who succeeds in setting fire to one of the Achaean ships. At this

point Achilles, who has remained obdurate to all entreaties, yields to the extent of permitting his squire and closest friend Patroclus to lead the Myrmidon force to the rescue of the hard-pressed Achaeans. Patroclus brilliantly succeeds in this mission, but he goes too far and is killed under the walls of Troy by Hector. This disaster brings Achilles to life. In an access of rage with Hector and grief for his comrade he reconciles himself with Agamemnon, takes the field once more, hurls the panic-stricken Trojans back into their town, and finally kills Hector. Not content with this revenge, he savagely maltreats the body of his fallen enemy. Hector's father, King Priam, in his grief and horror, is inspired by the gods to visit Achilles in his camp by night, in order to recover his son's body.* Achilles relents; and the *Iliad* ends with an uneasy truce for the funeral of Hector.

Such is the framework of the story. Unlike those who describe the plot of a thriller on its dust-cover, I have disclosed the end. And I have done this, with no fear of spoiling the tale, in order to bring out the fact that the *Iliad* is a fine example of the Greek method of constructing a story or a play. In most cases, since the matter was traditional, the end was already known to the audience when they sat down to the beginning, and the author had to secure his effects by other methods than that of surprise. He could of course show a greater or lesser degree of originality in the details of his composition. In the *Odyssey*, for instance, it was a stroke of dramatic genius to break the narrative by causing Odysseus to recite his own adventures to the Phaeacian nobles in the shadowy hall of King Alcinous. And in the case of the *Iliad*, Homer's first audiences must have been delighted by the daring humour with which he presented the comedy of Olympus; for I believe this to have been one of his major contributions to the old story of the Trojan War. But apart from such innovations, Homer employs two devices, both of

* The Achaeans attached even more importance than we do to the proper disposal of their dead. See the ghost of Patroclus on the subject (XXIII, p. 414).

which are typical of Greek art. First, like the Attic dramatists, far from feeling that his hearers' foreknowledge is a handicap, he makes capital out of it by giving them confidential asides. The ominous remark that follows Hector's promise to Dolon of the horses of Achilles is a case in point. Again, the effect of the magnificent speech in which Achilles repudiates Agamemnon's overtures is heightened by the fact that Achilles really thinks that Destiny leaves him free to go home unscathed, whereas we know that he will be dragged back into the war by the killing of his dearest friend and in the end (or rather beyond it) will himself be killed. Which brings me to a further point. The action of the *Iliad* covers only fifty days in a ten years' war. But by a skilful extension of the device I am discussing, Homer causes two shadows to add their sombre significance to every page, that of the past and that of what is yet to come.

Secondly, Homer employs the device of delayed action. His hearers know what is coming, but not how or when. The sinister figure of Achilles is introduced at the beginning of the poem, but only to be withdrawn into the background till we reach Book IX. We are almost lulled into security – but not quite. There are too many references to the absentee for us to forget him. However, when Achilles does come into the foreground again, he removes himself once more with such a show of indomitable pride that we are left wondering how Homer is going to break this adamant spirit. And we are not surprised to discover that it takes him nine tremendous Books to do so. The same artifice of suspense is used in the *Odyssey*. There too the chief figure is introduced in the beginning only to vanish and be talked about by other characters till he appears in person in Book V. Moreover, the parallel in technique extends to the conclusion of both works. In both, Book XXII brings the action to a climax (Hector is killed: the Suitors are disposed of); in Book XXIII we have a peaceful interlude (the Funeral Games: Odysseus is recognized by Penelope), and Book XXIV provides the resolution of the drama (Achilles obeys the gods and relents: Odysseus

is reinstated by divine intervention). This similarity in their composition is one of the many things which incline me to the opinion that one man is the author of both works.

It will astonish people who know nothing of the 'Homeric question' to learn that these splendidly constructed poems, and especially the *Iliad*, have in the past been picked to pieces by the men who studied them most carefully and should presumably have admired them most. They alleged certain incongruities in the narrative and argued that the *Iliad* is the composite product of a number of poets of varying merit, who had not even the doubtful advantage of sitting in committee, but lived at different times and each patched up his predecessor's work, dropping many stitches in the course of this sartorial process. Now I think it is generally admitted that Homer did not invent the Story of Troy; also that it was the practice of ancient poets to build up their own edifice with the help of bricks taken from existing structures. In fact we should *expect* the *Iliad* to contain quite clear indications that it is the last of a long line of poems. Like Hermes as described by Priam, it bears every sign of good breeding and noble parentage. I have already referred to the evidence of advanced technique which is provided by certain elements in its construction. And I could add other points which in these latter days of literature we are too sophisticated to note with surprise or even to note at all, for instance that in Homer it is already an established convention that the author has been put by his Muse in a position to tell us everything his characters have said or thought, even their last soliloquies. If Homer invented all this technique it would be more than niggardly to deny him originality; but even if we take the likelier view that he inherited a great deal of it from previous poets, we have by no means shown that the *Iliad* was not his own.

We are left, in the end, with one kind of evidence, and that is psychological. To me, the proof of unity afforded by Homer's consistency in character-drawing is the most convincing of many. Note first that he does not describe his characters at length; he makes them disclose themselves by what

they say and do in the scenes where they appear. Thetis, for instance, the mother of Achilles, is a sorrowful lady, who always has a grievance: her one obsession is her love for her illustrious but ill-starred son, on whose behalf she is ready to pester anyone from Zeus to Hephaestus. From the moment of her first introduction in Book I, through all the episodes in which she reappears, up to the last Book, Homer presents her with complete consistency – and that in scenes which have all been denied a right to their place in the *Iliad*. I argue that such a high degree of consistency would have proved impossible for more than a single author, particularly without the assistance, in one place or another, of a full-length portrait from the original creator's pen. The same is true if one follows the major figures – Athene, Odysseus, Nestor, or Helen herself – from the *Iliad* into the *Odyssey*. They are always themselves. I feel sure, on general literary grounds, that a fresh author taking them over could not have helped revealing his hand. In fact, any newcomer in the field of Epic poetry who was original enough to have 'contributed' to the *Iliad* or *Odyssey*, could not have failed, indeed would almost certainly have wished, to leave the imprint of his own mind on his characters. The Attic dramatists, who drew so largely on Homer, certainly showed this very human proclivity. It is difficult to recognize the characters of Homer in *their* portraits of Helen, Odysseus, Aias, and the rest.

However, it is inconsistencies in the narrative that were the chief weapons of those who tried to pick the *Iliad* to pieces. I cordially invite new readers to try to find some for themselves, though, unlike Achilles at the sports, I offer no 'splendid prizes' for this event. No marks will be given for the discovery of passages where Homer, after killing a man in battle, brings him back to life – this might happen to any author. One mark (out of ten) is allotted for the detection of minor incongruities in timing. For instance, Odysseus in the course of twenty-four hours, besides eating three dinners, does more things than the most energetic hero of a modern adventure story could have done in three days. But the taking

of these little liberties with time is part of a dramatist's privilege, and Homer, particularly in the *Iliad*, is above all things dramatic. Half the poem consists of speeches and all the rest is put before us as though upon a stage – in fact, Homer invented drama before the theatre was invented to receive it. I might allot as much as two marks to the enquiring spirit who asks how it comes about in Book III that Priam, who has had the Achæan chieftains knocking at his gates for nine years, has to ask Helen who is who. But full marks will be given only for the detection of a real flaw which cannot be explained away – as can be done, in my opinion, with all the alleged literary crimes for which Homer was dismembered and served up piecemeal to Victorian schoolboys, myself included.

If we have now re-integrated Homer as one person, or at most two (for I believe I am in the minority in attributing the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* to a single author), the next thing that the reader will ask is where the story of the *Iliad* came from. I wish I could tell him. A great deal of scholarly research has been done on the question. It has become fairly certain that there was an earlier *Achilleis* or Story of Achilles, indeed several stories in which the angry young hero who refused to fight till the eleventh hour bore other names than that of Achilles. In fact, Homer himself gives us one of these, in which Meleager figures in the leading rôle, much as in the *Odyssey* he gives us the 'Wandering Prince' once with Odysseus as hero and once with Menelaus. Stories of the siege and sack of towns are by no means missing from the mythology of other races. And it is my surmise that the stories we read in Homer issued, with an esoteric or at least ritual content, from the mouths of wise men who lived long before him; that in the course of centuries they spread across the world, undergoing many changes of nomenclature and language, and sinking to the folklore level, where, even if they were not fully understood, they were at least enabled to survive by their intrinsic interest and excellence; and that in the age of Homer they were raised to what we recognize as the literary level. That is my impression. It would need a good deal to

confirm it; and at this point I will only add my own belief that Homer himself did not realize the esoteric content of his tales, if any. He had his own approach to truth, but that was through art.

Is Homer's narrative in any sense historical? The answer is both yes and no. I do not think that, in telling the story of the Trojan War, he is giving us history, even in its most diluted form. There *was* a place called Troy (or Ilium) and we know that it was more than once destroyed. But even so, this ten years' war, as described by him and thrown back a few generations into the past, did not take place (even without the participation of the gods) either at Troy or, in my opinion, anywhere else. It was a fiction of a very special kind, which had existed long before Homer's time – a fiction that he adorned with the names of people whom his audience believed to be the ancestors of their own ruling princes, and some of whom we ourselves may well accept as having lived. If this view is correct, it enormously enhances the merit of Homer's achievement in building up the tale and the characters who make it. I would rather have the *Iliad* than a whole shelf of Bronze-Age war-reports, however accurate.

Besides, Homer does give us history – the history of his own world. That statement needs but little qualification. We know from the archaeological evidence that Homer attempts to archaeologize, even to take us into the Mycenaean Age. Nestor's cup is a case in point – a comparable vessel, with a couple of doves on top of it, was discovered at Mycenae. Yet in Homer's day there was no science of archaeology, no written history, to assist the historical novelist. Where then did he get these details from the past? I think there is only one answer. He took them from the work of previous poets, in much the same way as he took over from them much of their vocabulary, and even a number of their lines and ways of dealing with recurring situations. Yet in spite of this indebtedness, Homer leaves on our minds the impress of complete originality. It is his own observation of life that he depends on. I am not denying that he invokes the glamour of the mythical past when he

confronts Odysseus with the Sirens, or Meleager with the Calydonian Boar. But I feel strongly that in all that matters most, in describing the general structure of society, the relations of men and women to one another, and even the physical circumstances of their existence, he is drawing from contemporary models. I will go even further and say that he could not have done otherwise and at the same time succeeded in holding his audience, who, it must be remembered, did not read him in a printed book with the assistance of learned footnotes, but heard him recite his hexameters to the accompaniment of a lyre, as an after-dinner entertainment, while the wine went round. I maintain that in such circumstances any attempt to describe an alien world must have failed.

Homer, then, appealed to his hearers' minds through what they knew. For instance, every member of his audience would at once recognize the force of the homely simile in which the Myrmidons are likened to a horde of wasps. By the same token they must have known the lion; and for this reason I mistrust the archaeologists who argue that in the period and place in which they wish to locate Homer lions were extinct. Would any narrator to-day, in his efforts to bring his story to life, present his listeners every few minutes with a dodo in action? If archaeology cannot fit Homer into a period which contains lions and the rest of the things that he refers to in familiar terms, I feel that archaeology must think again. And to be quite frank it does so – every ten or twenty years. At the moment it is fashionable to place Homer as late as 750 B.C. I myself would put him in the tenth century before Christ. But the question of his date is extremely difficult, and my only contention here is that Homer gives us a unified picture of the world that he saw with his own eyes, whatever its exact date may have been. In that sense Homer gives us history – and history of a period about which, but for a few broken relics, we should otherwise have known next to nothing.

There is no need for me to describe Homer's world as revealed in the *Iliad*. He does it a great deal better than I

could; he looks at it through the eyes of a poet. Hitherto I have discussed him mainly as a constructor of stories; and the problems involved were simple in comparison with the difficulty of assessing him as an imaginative poet. I can make only slanting approaches to this task, and must fall back on some of the new impressions that have crowded in upon me during the many years I have spent in the study of his mind.

I have been struck first by the realism, subtlety and modernity of Homer's character-drawing. When I say 'modernity' I do not mean that we shall meet such characters as Dolon, Paris, Diomedes or Briseis in Piccadilly, but that to Homer they were contemporary and true. He did not summon them from the legendary past: he created them out of his own experience of life. The deep impression of reality which they made upon me entirely banished from my mind (and I hope from my translation) the idea I had received in my schooldays that Homer was harking back to the so-called 'heroic age', when 'heroes' were apparently as common as blackberries. My illusions were shattered by a single reading of the sordid quarrel between Agamemnon and Achilles in Book I. I soon became convinced that human nature has not materially altered in the three thousand years since Homer wrote; that his people were a great deal more interesting than 'heroes'; that his poetic achievement in raising them to the tragic level was all the more sublime; and, incidentally, that his whole effect is obscured if one heroizes his men and gods by describing them and making them talk in a pompous and old-fashioned style. In other words, I found that Homer is depicting *us* in somewhat different circumstances. And I am not at all shaken in this conclusion when he makes his warriors hurl at each other lumps of rock 'even to lift which was a feat beyond the strength of any two men bred to-day.' That is merely a conventional tribute to the ancient belief that regression rather than progress is the rule in human affairs.

Another misapprehension that I rapidly corrected was concerned with the humour of Homer. 'Homeric laughter' is an unfortunate phrase. When the banqueters on Olympus are