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HOMER
THE ODYSSEY



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THE ODYSSEY

TRANSLATED BY

E. V. RIEU



PENGUIN BOOKS

THE PENGUIN CLASSICS

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The Greeks believed that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were compiled by Homer, and seven Greek cities claim to be the place of his birth. Nothing is known of his life or date, nor can it be proved that the same person compiled both works at the same time, but the quality and unity of the structure in each book indicates one author, who may for convenience be called Homer. Modern scholarship now places him somewhere in Ionia in about 700 B.C.

E. V. RIEU, editor of the Penguin Classics from 1944 to 1964, was born in 1887 and was a scholar of St Paul's School and of Balliol College, Oxford. He was appointed Manager of the Oxford University Press in Bombay in 1912, and served in the Mahratta Light Infantry during the First World War. He worked as Educational Manager and Managing Director for Methuen & Co. until 1936, when he became their Academic and Literary Adviser. He was President of the Virgil Society in 1951, and Vice-President of the Royal Society of Literature in 1958. Among his publications are *The Flattered Flying Fish and other poems*, and translations of the *Odyssey*, the *Iliad*, Virgil's *Pastoral Poems*, the *Voyage of Argo* and *The Four Gospels*, in the Penguin Classics. E. V. Rieu died in 1972.

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INTRODUCTION

THIS version of the *Odyssey* is, in its intention at any rate, a genuine translation, not a paraphrase nor a retold tale. At the same time, and within the rules I have set myself, I have done my best to make Homer easy reading for those who are unfamiliar with the Greek world. Nevertheless, they are bound to find here much that is strange and I beg them to bear with me patiently through a few preliminary pages, so that I may provide them beforehand with the answers to some at least of the questions that will occur to them as they read.

Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* have from time to time afforded a first-class battleground for scholars. In the nineteenth century in particular, German critics were at endless pains to show, not only that the two works are not the product of a single brain, but that each is a piece of intricate and rather ill-sewn patchwork. In this process Homer disappeared.

By now he has been firmly re-established on his throne and his readers may feel as sure that they are in one man's hands as they do when they turn to *As You Like It* after reading *King John*.^{*} But this restoration depends on a judicious re-examination of the internal evidence and has brought little new to light about the man and his life. It is beyond question that he is the earliest surviving Greek writer; probable that he lived in the tenth century before Christ in one or other of those cities which the Greeks had established on the Aegaeon coast of Asia Minor; and quite likely that he actually committed his poems to writing, though that art was still perhaps hardly known save to the

^{*} This is not to say that in so ancient a text one or two lines here and there may not be later interpolations. Yet the only longer passage in the *Odyssey* which I find valid reasons for suspecting is that beginning at l. 67 of Book xx, where Penelope, in a prayer addressed to the goddess Artemis, tells her a story in which she, Artemis, is referred to in the third person.

minstrel fraternity to which he belonged. The rest, including his blindness, is legend or guesswork; and the reader who tries to glean from his poems something of the man, as apart from his art, will find himself baffled by the most impersonal and objective of authors.

The *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are twin aspects of a single theme – the story of the Trojan War and its aftermath. Together they constitute the first expression of the Western mind in literary form – the earliest, at all events, which we possess, for it will be obvious even to those who read them in translation that two such masterpieces could not have sprung into being without artistic antecedents. In form they are epic poems; but it will perhaps make their content clearer to the modern reader if I describe the *Iliad* as a tragedy and the *Odyssey* as a novel. It is in the *Iliad* that we hear for the first time the authentic voice of the Tragic Muse, while the *Odyssey*, with its well-knit plot, its psychological interest, and its interplay of character, is the true ancestor of the long line of novels that have followed it. And though it is the first, I am not sure that it is not still the best. Let the new reader decide for himself.

Each of the two poems is complete and independent as a work of art, with an atmosphere of its own, yet, as we have seen, they share a common background in the Trojan War; and of this war something must now be said.

The city of Troy or Ilium, which in Homer's account was besieged for ten years and finally sacked by the Greek king Agamemnon and his feudal supporters, has been identified by archaeologists with Hissarlik, an ancient settlement near the coast of the Aegaeon in the north-west corner of Asia Minor, whose remains show traces of repeated demolition and rebuilding. It is quite likely that a marauding force from European Greece played a destructive part in its chequered life. But this is not to say that Homer's account is to be taken as history. Homer was neither a historian nor an archaeologist – the very ideas of history and archaeology were non-existent in his day – and we shall be far nearer to the truth if we regard him as having

worked up a mass of legendary and mythical material, of very ancient date and well known to his hearers, into a seemingly historical tale. His heroes and heroines were the supposed ancestors of the nobles before whom he recited his poems. It flattered his audience to hear of their doughty deeds and, in the absence of genuine pedigrees and records, to imagine these divinely-descended and godlike beings as separated from themselves by only a few generations. But in my view,* at any rate, they are mythical, and Homer's historical value to us lies, not in his attempt to describe an actual past, but in the picture which, in the course of this attempt, he cannot help giving us of the life and manners of his own day.

Before introducing the reader to the scene he will meet with in the *Odyssey*, we must briefly describe the action of the *Iliad*, which is no more than an episode in the ten years' siege of Troy. The ships of the Greek expeditionary force are lined up on the beach; the troops are encamped in huts beside them; the fighting takes place on the rolling plain between these huts and the city walls. Agamemnon, son of Atreus, the Greek overlord, with his brother Menelaus of Sparta, has induced the princes who owe him allegiance to join forces with him against Troy and Priam, its king, because Paris, one of Priam's many sons, has abducted Menelaus' wife, the beautiful Helen. The narrative covers only the short period of Achilles' withdrawal from the fighting after a quarrel with Agamemnon, his resumption of arms, and the death at his hands of the Trojan prince, Hector, whose body is recovered from Achilles for burial by the personal efforts of his father, King Priam. With Hector's funeral the *Iliad* ends. Homer left it to the lesser epic poets who followed him to fill the story out at either end.

His own work he resumed† in the *Odyssey*, which, though with many a backward look at the actual fighting, starts at a point in the tenth year after its end and deals with the

* A view that I express with some diffidence, for I feel that I have many scholars against me.

† There are some slight suggestions that he wrote the *Iliad* first.

adventures of the Greek chieftains on their homeward way. All the principal heroes are carefully accounted for, but the fate of one of them, Odysseus, King of Ithaca, an island off the western coast of Greece, is for artistic purposes selected as the central theme. Menelaus, Agamemnon, and Nestor receive special treatment. The adventures of Menelaus, indeed, are given at such length in Book IV and bear so suggestive a resemblance to those of Odysseus that we are tempted to think that in the material at his disposal Homer found the legend of the Wandering Prince attached to the names of both Menelaus and Odysseus, and gave us two versions of the tale. At any rate there is a puzzle here for those who would have us believe that the pair are historical figures. Incidentally, it is noteworthy that apart from the death of Priam's daughter, Cassandra, Homer, who shows such meticulous care in winding up the Greek side of the business, concerns himself not at all with the destinies of the Trojans and their allies after the Sack.

But to return to the *Odyssey* – I am not going to spoil my readers' pleasure by an analysis of the plot. Homer is the world's best story-teller, and I can safely leave them in his hands. A few words, however, on the opening scenes may not come amiss. The tale begins with a council of the Olympian gods – of whom more anon – in the tenth year after the Fall of Troy. Zeus takes the chair, and comments first on the fate of Agamemnon, murdered on his return from Troy by Clytaemnestra, his wife, and her lover, Aegisthus; a tragic tale which Homer introduces here, and many times again, by way of pointing the contrast between Clytaemnestra's infamy and the sterling virtue of Penelope, Odysseus' queen. Next, Odysseus himself is discussed, and it is felt that this unhappy wanderer, who, mainly through the enmity of the sea-god Poseidon, has for ten years failed to reach his home in Ithaca, should be brought back to his kingdom. At the moment he is detained against his will in the remote island of Ogygia by the nymph Calypso, a lesser goddess who has for seven years exercised her charms in vain upon him; and it is there (in Book v) that we first meet him,

and not till Book IX that we hear what he did in the first three years of his ten years' wanderings after the Sack of Troy.

Meanwhile, to return to Book I, after suggesting that Hermes, the Envoy of the gods, should be dispatched to release Odysseus, the goddess Athene, Odysseus' champion and protector, visits his palace in Ithaca to stir his young son Telemachus to take active steps towards the discovery of his long-lost father, or, failing this, to bring to an end the intolerable situation that has arisen during his long absence. For we find that his faithful wife Penelope is besieged in her own house by a host of amorous and ambitious princelings from Ithaca itself and the neighbouring isles, each eager to wed the still attractive queen and even more eager to step into King Odysseus' shoes. It is the doom of these Suitors that is slowly but surely worked up to in the magnificent climax of Book XXII.

But I undertook to introduce the reader only to the opening scene. Nor, having done this, do I propose to add one more to the many appreciations of the *Odyssey* that have been penned. I will content myself by drawing his attention to one or two aspects of Homer's genius which have struck me with even greater force during the long period of intimate study which translation involves than they did when I tackled him as a task at school.

I put first the extraordinary insight, delicacy, and truth with which he handles his hero's relations with members of the other sex – I cannot simply say women, for at least three goddesses are involved, though they are by no means the less feminine for being divine. The princess Nausicaa is a peculiarly attractive figure to modern readers. Some of us, steeped in the traditions of later fiction, may regret Homer's failure to pursue Nausicaa's romance to a more exciting conclusion, or may console ourselves by reading a broken heart into her last words with Odysseus. But Homer was neither a sex-ridden romantic nor a disillusioned realist, with the happy result that his picture of Nausicaa is as fresh and lovely now as when it was painted three thousand years ago.

Next, in an age which in spite of two savage wars is still too ready to look askance at the barbarity of its predecessors and to censure the occasional brutalities that Homer seems to condone, I cannot help dwelling on the tenderness which he expresses (or rather, in some subtle manner, causes *us* to feel) for all those whom fate or their own follies have afflicted or cast down. I am thinking of the luckless young Elpenor, 'not much of a fighting man, nor very strong in the head'; of the woman-slave grinding corn in the handmill, who was 'not so vigorous as the rest'; of the stricken Calypso's lament; of Odysseus' mother, pining in heartache 'for his wise and gentle ways'; of the great Otus and Ephialtes, destroyed 'before the down came curling on their cheeks'; of Cassandra's dying cry, which lingered so long in Agamemnon's ears; of the lonely Circe, 'decking herself out' in vain to meet Odysseus; of the faithful Eumaeus, braving the inclement night to sleep with his pigs; of his Phoenician nurse cut off in the midst of her successful crime by Artemis with her gentle darts; of the suitor Amphinomus, 'a thoroughly decent fellow', who had his warning but did not heed it; of the dog Argus, too old and weak to greet his master with more than a wag of the tail; of the netted birds, 'who meet death where they had only looked for sleep'; of the souls of the vanquished Suitors 'following the Deliverer down the dark paths of decay'; of Odysseus' old father, Laertes, expressing his misery in rustic clothes; and of the blinded Cyclops with his words of endearment to his darling ram – perhaps the most interesting case of all, for here Homer actually succeeds in enlisting our sympathy for a cruel and disgusting monster, and does so to the detriment of his own hero, much as in Shakespeare's *Tempest* the more our hearts are wrung for the unfortunate Caliban the more thoroughly do we dislike the ruthless master who 'works upon him'.

By now I have at least mentioned the chief human actors in the tale. It remains for me to repair an omission and say something of that galaxy of Olympian gods whom the reader is faced with at the very beginning of the poem and will meet as individuals on almost every page. This is no place for a disquisition

on Greek religion, but it is worth while, before describing these gods and their functions, to pause for a moment and inquire what Homer's attitude towards them was.

The wrong conclusion to jump to, though I have often been tempted to make the mistake, is that Homer's attitude is detached and sophisticated. He does believe in his gods, and that very vividly, but whereas the Christian conception of godhead is based on our creation by God in his image and likeness, with imperfections introduced by Satan, Homer regards his gods, though immortal, as made in the image and likeness of man. Mixed with his deep respect for their almost unlimited powers and his aesthetic appreciation of their beauty, he betrays a very tolerant understanding of their motives and frailties. This leads quite often, as in the famous Lay of Demodocus in Book VIII, to a treatment that we can only regard as humorous. But it was neither flippant nor irreverent. These powerful beings, who were so intimately connected with men's passions and desires, were there to administer, not necessarily to obey, man's moral code. Christian apologists of a later age made a mistake when they suggested that the pagans had invented the gods and their iniquities as an excuse for themselves. Homer never censures a god nor lets a mortal use a god's misdeeds as a pretext for his own.

So much, however inadequate, about Homeric religion. It remains to touch briefly on the artistic use which Homer made of the superhuman realm. The most casual reader must at every page be struck by the contrast between the carefree happiness of the Olympian company and the toiling, anxious world of men. This contrast is woven into the very texture of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and is nowhere turned to better account than when Odysseus refuses immortality as a gift from Calypso. To us the device may seem artificial. Yet how effective an artifice! Modern novelists might well envy Homer its use.

And now a few words on the individual gods who play a part in Odysseus' story. *Zeus*, son of *Cronos*, is supreme – the Father of gods and men. It is left a little doubtful to what extent he is

independent of Fate,* but at all events it is he who administers the fate of men. Justice and the punishment of the transgressor are in his hands. So is mercy, and, perhaps because supreme power engenders confidence, he is more compassionate in his dealings than most of his fellow-Olympians. He was conceived by Greek artists as a handsome bearded man in early middle age. His consort, *Here*, is little more than mentioned in the *Odyssey*.

His brother *Poseidon*, the god of the earthquake, who rules the sea, as Zeus rules the heavens, is a far less attractive and imposing figure, at any rate in the *Odyssey*, where he is represented as persecuting the hero with implacable though not unjustified resentment.

Hades is another brother of Zeus. Remote from Olympus, he and his consort *Persephone* are the austere and dreaded powers that rule in the realm of the dead.

The youthful and attractive *Hermes* we have already met in his capacity as Ambassador of Zeus. He also serves as Guide to the dead. And Homer makes many references to his great exploit in slaying Argus, the monster with the hundred eyes.

Ares, the War-god; laughter-loving *Aphrodite*, the goddess of Love; and lame *Hephaestus*, the Master-craftsman, though frequently heard of in the *Iliad*, play only incidental parts in the *Odyssey* and may be summarily dealt with here. So may *Phoebus Apollo*, the Archer-king, and *Artemis*, the Virgin Huntress, though both are often mentioned in the poem as responsible for sudden deaths.

There are other and lesser deities whom we need not here describe, since Homer himself introduces them with sufficient clarity, but there remains one major figure, *Pallas Athene*, who commands our attention, since she plays a leading, if not the heroine's, part in the plot. Athene is a daughter of Zeus, and inherits many of his powers and qualities. She is not all-powerful nor all-wise. Her impetuosity is sometimes curbed by Zeus, and she dreads her uncle Poseidon; but subject to these Olympian limitations she stands in Homer for the intellectual and moral

* See the curious passage about Sarpedon, *Iliad*, xvi. 440 ff.