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with an Introduction by
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THE ILIAD

THE ILIAD was probably composed around 750 BC, when oral verse composition was the only way of telling a story in any permanent form. Homer would almost certainly have sung his long narrative poem, to an audience who could neither read nor write. Behind him stood an ancient tradition of oral poetry, from which many of the dramatic and formulaic elements of the *Iliad* derive. But the work also clearly bears the marks of Homer's astonishing originality and genius, which has made it perhaps the greatest epic poem in world literature.

Little is known about Homer's life or personality. He probably came from one of the Aegean islands or from the mainland of Asia Minor. The *Iliad* appears to be the work of his mature years, the *Odyssey* (if indeed he was its author) of his old age. By tradition Homer was blind, which is how most of the portraits of him that survive from antiquity represent him.

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INTRODUCTION

G. S. KIRK

THE *Iliad* is the tale of a few days' fighting in the tenth year of the Trojan War, when the Greeks – Homer knew them as Achaeans or Argives or Danaans – had sailed across the Aegean to win back Helen and humble the great fortress-city of King Priam. Helen was wife of Menelaus of Sparta; most of the young Achaean aristocrats had wooed her, promising each other to help, if ever the need arose, the one among them who was successful. So when Paris, one of Priam's sons, abducted her (for he was as handsome as she was beautiful), this promise was brought into effect. It was left to Menelaus' brother Agamemnon, king of Mycenae 'of much gold', whose palace was in the hills overlooking the rich Argive plain in the north-west Peloponnese, to gather a great force from all the cities of Greece, which after certain difficulties sailed from Aulis in Boeotia (the 'Catalogue of Ships' in Book II is an adapted list of naval contingents there). After nearly ten years of stalemate the gods themselves became more closely involved in the war down below, as King Agamemnon offended first of all Apollo and then his own greatest warrior Achilles, whose mother was the sea-goddess Thetis and who was thus able to enlist the support of Zeus himself to restore his honour. That proved to be a costly affair, which led to the death not only of Hector the Trojan leader (which ultimately sealed the fate of Troy), but also, first, of Achilles' companion Patroclus. It is with these events, varied, tragic, and profound, that the *Iliad* is concerned.

It is an extraordinary poem, and one that makes unusual demands of the reader. Partly it is a question of style; long narrative poems in verse are bound in any case to be stylistically unfamiliar, to make heavy calls on our ability to tolerate what might appear as an unnatural way of expression. To say that when the *Iliad* was composed there was no literary prose, that verse was the only way of telling a story in any permanent form, provides some answer but raises new questions. Why was that so? What were the conditions of society and the techniques of communication that made epic hexameters the inevitable form of any ambitious tale of war and heroism? Obviously, in order to give even preliminary answers to such questions, we have to be able to assign this kind of composition to an

approximate date or period, and, if not to one particular region, at least to a particular kind of social and material setting.

That runs directly counter to a recent approach to literary criticism which rejects any serious interest in the biography of the author, and in particular any reconstruction of his literary intentions, as irrelevant and misleading, together with any provision of historical glosses on the work itself. That we should be primarily concerned with literature and not history and biography – with the text before us, without too much distraction from problems over the exact conditions of its creation – is in one way obvious enough. Yet even with a relatively modern work, created under conditions we can understand (for example with full use of writing), that approach can be criticized. With a work in an unfamiliar medium like narrative verse, and in a 'dead' language, in a style that can be immediately seen as incompatible with familiar literate composition, it has to be rejected (in its severest form at least) as both restrictive and unimaginative. The kinds of archaeological and historical information that we find in a classical commentary on the *Iliad* (not that there has been a complete one in any detail for over eighty years) are admittedly often irrelevant to the poem as literature, and can sometimes interpose a barrier of pedantry and learning that the sensitive reader, Greekless or not, finds distracting and obstructive. Yet to present such a reader with the bare text, to expect him or her to understand from the internal evidence of the poem itself everything about its special idiosyncrasies of construction and style, is impractical if not worse.

What is he to make, for example (to take a minor concrete instance), of the common Iliadic practice of taking chariot and horses right into the thick of battle? Is that what people really did? If so, why do we not hear of more casualties among the horses and more isolation of warriors through the disabling of their chariots? Was that nevertheless something that really happened in this period (but then we are forbidden to think about period)? Or can it be put down to carelessness on the part of the composer (but then we are not allowed to consider evidence that might show whether he would be careless over such details or not)? Or take another difficulty that would strike any careful reader, insulated from distracting outside knowledge, of the unencumbered text whether in Greek or English: how is it that the unusual duel between Paris and Menelaus in Book III is apparently closely copied, and at equal length, so soon afterwards as the beginning of Book VII, this

time between Hector and Ajax?* Certain details may differ, but the overall similarity is striking – except that this second duel seems pointless, and ends in anticlimax when the heralds intervene because night is coming on. It is not archaeological information that will help solve either problem, but rather historical knowledge in the broadest sense, particularly about the development of the technique of writing, the characteristics of the preceding 'oral' period, and the special difficulties facing an ambitious composer of a large-scale narrative without the full resources of writing.

For the Greeks had a peculiar relation to writing; they were late to acquire it from their more progressive neighbours in the second millennium BC, and then they applied their clumsy syllabary (in the so-called 'Linear B' script found on the famous clay tablets from Knossos in Crete and Pylos in the south-west Peloponnese) only to documentary purposes – whereas cuneiform, for example, had been used for literary texts in Mesopotamia for over a thousand years before. Then by the end of the Bronze Age, when the Mycenaean empire, whose last great venture is described in the *Iliad* itself, went down in ruins, that archaic syllabary became forgotten and disappeared. Infinitely more practical and accurate systems were now available around the eastern end of the Mediterranean, and it was from the Levant that the Phoenician alphabetic system was adapted and introduced, probably by way of Cyprus and near the beginning of the eighth century BC. The earliest surviving examples of Greek writing, mere scraps recording an owner's name for the most part, are from the middle of that century; quite soon, around 725 BC, the earliest 'literary' inscriptions begin to appear, but even they are mere single hexameter verses, or pairs of verses, scratched on a pot to record its role as a prize, for instance. For this new writing system to become flexible enough to be used as a serious means of literary creation seems to have taken two or three generations more. Archilochus, the soldier-poet from the island of Paros, is the earliest surviving composer of whom we can be relatively sure that he *wrote* his poems (though with many survivals of remembered 'oral' verse), one of them referring to an eclipse of the sun that can be dated to 648 BC. And his poems were short ones, quite unlike the massive *Iliad*.

How did all this affect Homer? That depends on his date; the evidence for this is complicated and not absolutely watertight,

* The Translation uses the exactly transliterated Greek form Aias.

but by combining several different kinds of indication (Homeric figure-scenes on vases, quotations in other poets, above all the mention in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* themselves of roughly datable objects and practices) we can assign the *Iliad* to around 750 or 725 BC, with the *Odyssey* perhaps as late as around 700 or even 680 BC. The consequence is, therefore, that Homer – as composer, that is, certainly of the *Iliad* and perhaps also of the *Odyssey* – must have been active in the very early days of the new alphabetic writing system, and its technical limitations (including those of writing-material and book-form) would have made it unlikely that he was able to use it as a primary and essential aid to his monumental task.

Whatever the use he made of writing (and it is likely to have been very limited at best), we can be certain that his audiences made no use of it whatever – during his lifetime, that is. He composed for people who were essentially non-literate, who *listened* to poetry as their ancestors had, and to poetry that was sung rather than recited; at any rate, Homer's own word for a poet is *aoidos*, or singer. He was, in short, an 'oral poet' in the clumsy modern phrase, composing and delivering his poems in something of the manner of the illiterate Yugoslav *guslari*, singers of heroic Serbian and Montenegrin folk-epics, who have been intensely studied by Western romantics and scholars from the mid-nineteenth century until today, when they are almost extinct. Homerists had already begun to draw conclusions about Homer's use of repeated phrases when a talented American, Milman Parry, finally demonstrated in 1926 that his style depended on an elaborate *system* of standardized phrases that could only have been gradually perfected, not by one man but as a result of a whole tradition of oral poetry going back over several generations.

These standard phrases are an important and a prominent element of Homeric style; they are known as 'formulas', and the 'formular style' was a keyword of Anglo-Saxon Homeric scholarship until the quite recent reaction against an emphasis on the traditional and supposedly mechanical aspects of Homer's language and in favour of his obviously striking creative powers. The truth seems to be that both the formular language of the long-standing tradition of oral epic and the individual imagination and brilliance of the composer of the *Iliad* itself are essential and complementary elements of that epic. And if this is so, then the reader cannot properly understand and appreciate the poem unless he takes the formular, repetitive elements into account. Admittedly many modern translators

tend to diminish the repetitions in order to reduce this particular problem; Robert Fitzgerald has certainly done so, because he does not seek complete literalness, which can be rather deadly and usually misses the special Greekness of the text it seeks to preserve and transmit. His translation seems to me wonderfully strong and Homeric in character, even though it plays down to a certain extent this formular element in the Homeric style. Readers of this translation, therefore, are not likely to be as unnerved by apparently monotonous repetitions as those of some others – of Richmond Lattimore's, for example. Even so, they need to know that the repetitions are there in the Greek, and why they are there.

Moreover, there are other results of the oral and non-literate nature of early Greek heroic poetry that are analogous and cannot be disguised. The chief of these is the use, not of standard epithets and phrases this time, but of standard motifs, which find expression often enough in whole verses or sequences of verses, themselves therefore repeated exactly from time to time; but which can also be varied in detail and so in language. Beginning or ending a speech, arriving or departing, bringing a message, travelling to a destination whether by land or sea (or air, in the case of gods visiting earth), preparing a meal and making a sacrifice, boast and counter-boast followed by blow and counter-blow in battle – these are some of the typical actions of the poem, which can be developed into typical incidents or scenes which use much of the same content and expression each time they occur. Every description in every language has, of course, some of this standard quality, some of these almost formular elements; but the oral epic developed that kind of repetitiveness to a fine art, mainly because that is the only way that an oral singer, working without a fixed text either on paper or even in memory, can develop his theme. When we read Homer we are often aware of the reuse of a standard word, phrase, sentence, or motif in circumstances a literate composer would carefully avoid. That should not cause us to compare him unfavourably with the literate poet, who sedulously avoids repetition and, moreover, tends to cultivate variety as desirable in itself, an opportunity to describe something in a fresh way.

This repetition is something that does not explain itself in the text of the *Iliad*, and so deserves discussion as an external critical factor. At the same time, the 'oral style' – a concept which should not be elevated to absurd heights, as are implied by the occasional demand for the creation of a distinct 'oral

poetics' – has its own positive merits, and that is important to understand. When Homer uses a formular epithet, for example, it is not merely a necessary concession to the unlettered singer who has no time to choose a word that is fresh or unfamiliar or particularly appropriate to the individual context. It is also a response to the antiquity, the austerity, and the solemnity of the poetical tradition itself. Thus a ship may be 'black' or 'equal' or 'balanced' or 'hollow' or 'swift' – a good variety of epithets, it seems; but then one notices that the choice between them is dictated simply and solely by the particular part of the hexameter verse that needs to be filled by a word – most easily by some kind of descriptive epithet. A ship is hollow or black according to its grammatical case and exactly where in the verse it is convenient to mention it, and this sometimes overrides literal meaning; that is why a beached ship can be described as 'swift' on occasion. But even that is not carelessness, or allowing the mechanics of oral composition to get out of hand; rather it is that these hallowed descriptions were carefully shaped and isolated in the course of time, they were functional but also carried something of the essence of the object or person to which they were applied; a ship is potentially 'swift' even when it is ashore, and when an Achaean ship drawn up on the beach before Troy is called 'swift', then that tends to carry a sinister and pathetic reminder of what it should really be doing, indeed of the whole failure and frustration of the siege as it enters its tenth year.

The repetition of epithets, of phrases, of verses and passages, of standard themes and motifs gives the *Iliad* a distinctive flavour that would become enervating if carried too far; but that does not happen. Rather this element of oral style confers a certain almost hieratic character on the poem as a whole, and one that adds to the pleasure of reading it (but even more of hearing it), especially if one knows what is happening and accepts the particular style not blindly but as something of a connoisseur. But there are other ways, too, in which an appreciation of the possible by-products of oral composition and delivery can help one perceive the poem far better than if one simply faces the text in a state of innocence or ignorance. Important among these is the whole matter of consistency and inconsistency. Occasional anomalies in this respect are to be expected even in a written text, if it is an extremely long and complicated one; but where the composer does not even have the help of a written draft, and where everything has to be kept somehow in his head as he develops his plot progressively from per-

formance to performance, the anomalies are likely to be more far-reaching. Homer manages his extensive list of characters, many of them mere victims for the great warriors on either side, with admirable skill, but the insignificant Pylaemenes notoriously contrives to be slain twice over. That is unimportant, not even a necessarily oral mistake. A more interesting and indeed problematic case is concerned with the complex figure presented by Agamemnon.

Agamemnon 'lord of men' (this formular description is occasionally applied to others, but it is Agamemnon's special hallmark), commander-in-chief of the whole Achaean expedition to Troy, is only occasionally presented with the majesty and venerability that this role would lead one to expect. As the army prepares to march out, in Book II, he is compared to a great bull standing out from a herd of cattle, and early in Book XI he has his own moment of martial glory and success. But the preparations in Book II had been immediately preceded by a highly equivocal scene in which he tests the troops' morale by proposing immediate retreat, and which nearly turns to disaster; and that followed the whole quarrel with Achilles in Book I, which shows him as selfish and arrogant. Moreover, the call for retreat in the morale-testing episode is repeated, in different circumstances, at the beginning of the ninth book, and establishes Agamemnon as distinctly lacking in moral stamina compared with men like Diomedes, Ajax, or Odysseus. When he finally ends his quarrel with Achilles, in Book XIX, he refuses to accept responsibility for it and blames it all on Zeus. Now part of all this may reflect a stereotype of the king or tyrant (which can be glimpsed in surviving Greek tragedy, and which could have had its origins in the epic tradition even outside the Iliadic Agamemnon) as arrogant and ungenerous in the face of bad news, or of advice contrary to his own wishes. Another part of it may have been deliberate; most of the great leaders have their own special characteristics, amounting at times almost to idiosyncrasy – Nestor's garrulity, Achilles' impetuosity, Ajax's imperturbability, for instance. Why should not Agamemnon have been depicted by the poet as rather unstable? Well, perhaps he was, although it is surprising for such a key role in the poem to be made so equivocal and disconcerting. But close study of, for example, the morale-testing episode in the second book suggests that his actions may sometimes result from other causes, in fact from the reshuffling of scenes and motifs or the conflation of different variant accounts. That sort of thing only rarely obtrudes in the *Iliad* – it probably

accounts for the division of the not wholly successful 'Battle of the Gods' between Books XX and XXI – and may be the result of either of two different kinds of manipulation: attempts at expansion and elaboration of the poem after Homer's own time (especially by rhapsodes in the seventh century BC), or the relocation, adaptation, and development of traditional materials by the monumental composer, Homer, himself. For I repeat that, like other heroic singers, he can be shown to have used not merely phrases and sentences from the tradition – that is, which had been invented and refined by earlier singers – but also themes and episodes. This introduces a new dimension into the problem of Agamemnon's erratic behaviour and peculiar personality, for the reader has to consider whether part of it, at least, may not be the unintended result of the kind of manipulation and selection of earlier versions that the monumental *oral* composer was inevitably committed to, here and there. Scholars have not succeeded in determining the exact combination of factors in such a complex equation, and the ordinary reader may be no more successful; but at least he will understand the poem better, and perhaps enjoy it more, if he has an idea of the full range of possibilities in a case such as that of Agamemnon.

Taking all that into account, what will the reader find? A poem of truly heroic length that obviously aimed, among other things, at conveying the quality of the whole Trojan expedition. It does so by taking an episode in its tenth year that begins in a clash of personalities on the Achaean side and develops into a massive conflict between the two opposing armies which leaves Patroclus and Hector dead, Achilles in despair, and Troy on the verge of final collapse – this last was to be achieved by the stratagem of the Trojan Horse, to which Homer alludes but which lies outside his strictly envisaged scheme for the whole epic. For one of the more remarkable characteristics of the poem is the discipline it reveals on the part of a composer who had at his disposal an enormous store of legendary material about Troy, but steadfastly refused to dissipate the severe concentration of his chosen theme and its immediate consequences. That theme is stated in a deliberately limited form in the opening verses:

> Anger be now your song, immortal one,
> Achilles' anger, doomed and ruinous,
> that caused the Achaeans loss on bitter loss
> and crowded brave souls into the undergloom.

But that anger, that wrath (*mēnis* is the Greek word), infected Agamemnon as well as Achilles, and involved the whole Greek

army in confusion and frustration. It brought out the tensions and contradictions that underlay the whole 'heroic' view of what matters most in life; that, by itself, makes the *Iliad* a fascinating exercise in moral self-analysis (if that is not too pedantic a way of describing one aspect of a work of art). For these heroes – the Greek word is *hērōes* and implies great men of the almost mythical past who were ultimately descended from the Olympian gods themselves – are kings and princes, royal leaders in peace and war, proud aristocrats whose life and pleasures were founded on wealth, display, prowess at hunting and fighting, and feasting among their equals. That may be too crude a picture – as kings, they also concerned themselves with dispensing justice – but it is one confirmed in the *Iliad* by Achilles, who in his rage against Agamemnon rejects both the warfare itself, as he fumes in his quarters among his followers, and even the urgent appeals of his close friends in the powerful embassy-scene of the ninth book. Why should a man risk his life in battle on behalf of other men's womenfolk, when his own Briseis has been taken from him in an act of despotic spite? The Trojans have done him no particular harm; they have not rustled his cattle or (one may infer) damaged his honour in the way Agamemnon has. That will all change when Patroclus, his great friend and protégé, is at last permitted by Achilles to wear his armour and fight in his place, and is subsequently killed by Hector. Now the heroic character, questioned and rejected by Achilles in his own case, reasserts itself in its most violent form as the hero goes half mad with rage and despair and slaughters Trojans by the dozen to make up for his own miscalculations and their consequences. Zeus himself has to bring him to his senses, and in its closing book the epic shows an unexpected and even sublime resolution of Achilles' inner conflicts. One kind of modern Homeric criticism has been concerned to show that the epic tradition did not have the resources, either conceptual or linguistic, for describing mental tensions or even the process of making up one's mind. That is wrong, as Achilles in the *Iliad* and Odysseus in the *Odyssey* clearly reveal; yet it is of course true that psychological insight is not an ordinary or a developed tool of the epic tradition. More usually a hero relieves his feelings by his actions, and action is the dominant mode of the poem as a whole; yet the action, especially in the long scenes of fighting, is given meaning and depth by the questioning of heroic aims that underlies it all.

Nevertheless many readers will find the descriptions of

fighting, especially in the central part of the epic from Book XI to Book XVII, quite hard to accept without effort. Until then the warfare has been punctuated by diversions, designed no doubt to create a certain kind of suspense (even though the audience knew the eventual outcome, if not of the quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon, at least of the war as a whole). Fighting does not even begin until the fourth book; before that has come the great quarrel in Book I, the preparations and catalogues in Book II, the formal duel and Helen's identifying of the Achaean princes in Book III, Pandarus' breaking of the truce and Agamemnon's final inspection in Book IV itself. The long fifth book is mainly devoted to Diomedes' prowess in battle (for he is the most formidable attacking fighter, Ajax being best in defence, after Achilles); but that is given variety by his remarkable wounding of two deities, Aphrodite and then Ares. No book hereafter, until close to the end of the poem, is entirely free from fighting, but the sixth is mainly concerned with Hector's return to Troy (ostensibly to organize prayers for Trojan success) and the unusual scenes, for the *Iliad*, of domestic life there; the ninth is centred round the embassy to Achilles, and the tenth devoted to a dramatic night patrol by Diomedes and Odysseus in which they capture the Trojan spy Dolon and then kill the newly arrived Rhesus. Then, in the eleventh book, after early successes by Agamemnon himself, he and Diomedes and Odysseus are all wounded and put temporarily out of action. The threat from the Trojan forces becomes even more urgent, and the severest part of the fighting begins.

Hector breaks through the defences of the Achaean encampment at the end of Book XII after heavy fighting – in the *Iliad*, that means after a long series of individual encounters in which, after an almost ritual exchange of spear-thrusts or -throws, the weaker and less god-protected warrior is struck down and dies. The variety of fatal wounds is enormous (no formular simplification here), and these anatomical descriptions are often placed in deliberate and stark contrast with moving little biographies of the victim as he expires. Yet every Homeric duel ends as destiny has decreed and the particular hero's status makes appropriate. These vignettes are more than a necessary simplification of the complex action, a mere descriptive device; they symbolize something important about war itself and how in the end it destroys the individual human spirit, the only thing (in the unsentimental Greek view) a man can count as truly his own; but the mass fighting, with ranks of warriors

bearing down on each other across the plain, goes on in the background. Occasionally there are short evocations of the general scene, sometimes illuminated by the developed similes, here of rivers in flood or tumultuous seas or forest fires, that are one of the most brilliant and individual elements of the Homeric style. Other interludes in this austere martial core of the epic are rare, but they include the lyrical and even light-hearted episode of Hera's seduction of Zeus, to allow Poseidon a free hand in helping the Achaeans, that runs from Book XIV into XV. At the end of that book Hector sets fire to one of the ships, and Achilles at last dispatches Patroclus to relieve the hard-pressed Achaeans. He is victorious for a time and surges up to the walls of Troy, but is then dazed and stripped of his armour by the god Apollo, to fall an easy victim to Hector. Something similar will happen when Hector himself succumbs to Achilles six books later – these poets and their audiences were not really interested in a 'fair fight', or whether one great warrior was marginally tougher and more deadly than the other; they saw each encounter as a move in the complex operations of divine destiny, in which a man's success or failure depended on the gods as much as, or more than, on himself, and the important thing was to win or lose with honour, with pride, defiant or boastful as a true aristocrat should be.

That will be Hector's undoing, in a sense, in Book XXII, as he alone remains outside Troy with Achilles back in action and obsessively determined to avenge Patroclus' death. He wonders in a moment of weakness whether to retreat within the gates; his old parents Priam and Hecuba implore him from the walls, his mother baring her breast to remind him of the duty he owes her. All to no avail; he is determined, infatuated with the concept of honour, proud of himself as the Trojans' greatest defender, but destined by recurrent human weakness to turn and run as his formidable enemy, divinely inspired and with his brazen shield gleaming like fire, approaches. Just as Apollo deluded Patroclus, so Athena deludes Hector and lays him open to his inevitable death. Hector is one of the most appealing of these great princes, and the tenderness of his meeting with his wife and child back in Book VI is never forgotten. How far he was the special invention of Homer, or at least of some close predecessor in the oral poetical tradition, is uncertain – he may have been less of a solid historical figure, in origin, than Agamemnon or Odysseus, Diomedes or Cretan Idomeneus; but Troy (Ilios as Homer calls the city itself as distinct from its region) was destined to fall, and it had to

have a great fighter to match Achilles and justify the tradition of a long siege.

At all events, the monumental poet leads his great construction into a powerful and unexpected conclusion. Troy, with Hector's death, is doomed – let other singers tell of that in lesser songs. What matters in the *Iliad* is the solution of the dilemma posed by the quarrel and its consequences. That is achieved in the most remarkable way. For Achilles becomes, first, little more than an animal, as he drags Hector's body behind his chariot round the walls of Troy in an act that was wholly contrary to heroic behaviour, and then slaughters twelve Trojan prisoners on the pyre of Patroclus. Then, with the funeral games over which he presides serving as partial restoration of his heroic status, he becomes almost superhuman, an instrument of Zeus at his most impressive, as he hands back Hector's body to his father Priam as climax of that mysterious and other-worldly nocturnal scene in the final, twenty-fourth book. How the earlier stages of the epic have led up to that, and whether Achilles, rather than, for example, warfare or the heroic past itself, forms the true heart of the poem, are questions critics have often posed. They are valid questions, even important ones, but the overwhelming experience of reading the *Iliad* as a whole may make them appear as aesthetically irrelevant or incomplete.

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