Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.1)

• Introduction to Homeric Epic
  • The Epic Cycle: The Story of the Trojan War
  • Milman Parry and Oral Poetry

• The Iliad, Book 1: Overview and Analysis

• Grammar 2: Adjectives and Adverbs
The Epic Cycle

- collectively, the poems and stories of the Trojan War are called the **epic cycle**
- put together, the poems of the epic cycle originally told the complete story of the Trojan War
- from its cause through the return of the Greek warriors to their homelands
The Epic Cycle

- the epic poem, *The Cypria* (now lost), narrated the first episode of the Trojan War, the background to Homer’s epics
- named for Aphrodite (also called Cypria)
- the island of Cypros was a center of Aphrodite worship
The Epic Cycle

• we know about other epic poems (also lost now), e.g.
  • *The Little Iliad*
  • *The Aethiopis*
  • *The Iliupersis* (“The Sack of Troy”)
The Epic Cycle

• *The Iliad* (Homer)
  • the story of Achilles
  • set near the end of the Trojan War

• *The Odyssey* (Homer)
  • story of the *nóstos* (“return home”) of Odysseus
The Cypria

Thetis (an Oceanid)

- an oracle says that Thetis’ son will be greater than his father
- a warning to Zeus not to have sex with her
- so Zeus arranges to marry Thetis off to a mortal named Peleus (a Greek king)
- Achilles is the child they will have
The Cypria

Eris (the goddess of Discord)

• she was not invited to the wedding of Peleus and Thetis

• out of anger, she crashes the wedding and throws the “apple of discord” into the midst of the festivities
The Cypria

Eris (the goddess of Discord)

- inscribed on the apple is the Greek word ΚΑΛΛΙΣΤΗΙ (“for the most beautiful”)
- three goddesses claim to be “the fairest”: Hera, Athena and Aphrodite
The Cypria

The Judgment of Paris

- Zeus defers the decision of choosing “the fairest” to the mortal Paris of Troy (also called Alexander)
- the goddesses appear before him
- each goddess attempts to bribe him
The Cypria

The Judgment of Paris

• Aphrodite promises Paris the most beautiful woman in the world, Helen
• Helen is currently the wife of Menelaus, the king of Sparta
• Paris chooses Aphrodite
**The Cypria**

**Leda** (the mother of Helen)

- a mortal woman ravished by Zeus, when Zeus is disguised as a swan
- subsequently, Leda lays two eggs (?)
- from each egg come two children: Helen and Pollux, Clytemnestra and Castor
- Castor and Pollux are the Gemini
The Cypria

- Helen grows up to be very beautiful and is pursued by many men
- to avoid bloody conflicts, her suitors agree to pick a husband for her at random
- thus, the Oath of the Suitors: they all swear to defend with arms the winner’s right to have Helen
The Cypria

• Menelaus, the King of Sparta, is allotted Helen’s hand in marriage

• his brother Agamemnon, the King of Mycenae, takes Helen’s sister Clytemnestra as the “booby prize”

• Clytemnestra will kill Agamemnon when he returns home in victory to Mycenae
The Cypria

- because Aprodite promised Helen to Paris in the Judgment of Paris, she helps Paris abduct Helen
- Helen and Paris run away to Troy
- Menelaus calls for the suitors’ assistance
- Agamemnon organizes a naval expedition against the Trojans
The Cypria

- Agamemnon marshalls the Greek forces at **Aulis** (a seaport in NE Greece)
- but Artemis sends contrary winds and the Greeks cannot leave the harbor
- priests of Artemis tell Agamemnon that, to pay for some sin he committed, he must sacrifice his oldest daughter **Iphigenia**
The Cypria

- Agamemnon tricks his wife Clytemnestra into bringing Iphigenia to Aulis
- he claims he has arranged for the girl to wed the hero Achilles
- instead, he sacrifices her over the altar where he said she would be married
The Cypria

Achilles

• the central figure of the Trojan War
• the son of Peleus and Thetis, the couple at whose wedding Eris threw the apple of discord and the Trojan War was born
• thus, he is born from the oracle which predicted Thetis’ child would be greater than his father
The Cypria

Achilles

- another oracle predicts he will die in the Trojan War
- in an effort to circumvent this fate, Thetis dips him in the Styx River
- contact with the “waters of death” makes him invulnerable to weapons of any sort
The Cypria

Achilles

• but Thetis holds him by the heel
• from this comes the modern phrase “an Achilles’ heel” (a weak point)
• also, the Achilles tendon (near the heel)
• eventually, Achilles will be killed by a poisoned arrow shot into his heel
Analysis of *The Cypria*

- *The Cypria* was clearly designed to clarify unexplained features of Homer’s story
- e.g. the Oath of the Suitors explains why all sorts of different Greek warriors are fighting at Troy over one man’s wife
- Achilles in the Styx explains why he’s never wounded even once in *The Iliad*
Analysis of *The Cypria*

- the *Sacrifice of Iphigenia* explains why Clytemnestra hates Agamemnon so much that she kills him when he returns home from Troy
- the *Judgment of Paris* explains why Hera and Athena hate the Trojans, and Aphrodite supports them
Analysis of *The Cypria*

- **Conclusion:** if *The Cypria* is “explaining” the story found in Homer, it must have been written *after* Homer composed his epics.
- thus, even if *The Cypria* narrates an earlier episode in the Trojan War, it must have been written later than Homer’s epics.
- it’s the world’s first known “prequel”
Milman Parry and Oral Poetry

• there are several curious features of Homer’s poetry
  – he uses repetitive phrases, e.g. “thus he spoke in winged words”
  – also, there are many epithets, e.g. “Achilles of the swift knees”
  – these are called “(oral) formulas”
Milman Parry and Oral Poetry

- other curious features of Homer’s poetry
  - Homer’s story does not always make sense, especially across long stretches
  - e.g. more than once, the same warrior dies twice in different parts of the epic
  - these inconsistencies are called “weak joins”
Milman Parry and Oral Poetry

- **Milman Parry** was an American graduate student in the 1930’s
- he was studying “oral bards” in the former Yugoslavia
- these oral bards could compose hundreds, even thousands, of lines of verse spontaneously during performance
Milman Parry and Oral Poetry

• Parry discovered that oral poets could compose poetry on the spot because they had memorized many oral formulas.
• He called his discovery “oral theory”.
• He then realized that the same applied to Homer and from this concluded that Homer must have been an oral bard!
Milman Parry and Oral Poetry

• oral theory explains several of the idiosyncrasies of Homeric epic
• for instance, the presence of so many formulaic phrases
• Homer was using these formulas to create poetry spontaneously in performance
Milman Parry and Oral Poetry

- oral theory also explains why there are “weak joins” in Homeric epic
- could anyone in an oral poet’s audience have remembered a passage word for word which had been sung hours before?
- would passages far apart in the epic even have been sung at the same performance?
Milman Parry and Oral Poetry

• if Homer’s epics were oral poetry, it also explains why the ancients said that Homer was blind

• blind people often have very good oral memory

• in antiquity, oral poetry would be one of the few jobs the blind could perform
Milman Parry and Oral Poetry

• but oral poetry is a product of a society which does not have writing

• in other words, why have oral poets if there are scribes?

• so was Homer’s Greece an illiterate society?
Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.1)

Milman Parry and Oral Poetry

• archaeological research has, in fact, confirmed that the Greeks in Homer’s day (ca. 800-750 BCE) were largely illiterate

• there is very little evidence of writing in Greece from 1100-750 BCE

• so all evidence points to Homer as an oral poet
Milman Parry and Oral Poetry

• but if Homer was an oral poet, then how were Homer’s poems recorded?

• perhaps he stood at an important juncture when writing was being imported into Greece

• that is, scribes who belonged to a society that was just learning how to write recorded Homer’s oral poems
Milman Parry and Oral Poetry

• but then we are relying on the dictational skills of newly minted scribes, aren’t we?
• how can we be sure these epics represent Homer’s own words?
• we can’t!
Overview of *The Iliad*, Book 1

- several different names for the Greeks
  - Danaans
  - Achaeans
  - Argives
  - Pelasgians
- evidence that there is no unified Greece at this point in history
Overview of *The Iliad*, Book 1

There are other alternate names used by Homer:

- he often calls Menelaus and Agamemnon the *Atreides* (*Atreidai*), i.e. the “sons of Atreus”
- Troy is often referred to as *Ilium* (*Ilion*)
- and the Trojans are called *Dardanians*
Overview of *The Iliad*, Book 1

- *The Iliad* leaps *in medias res* (“into the middle of things,” Horace)
- the epic begins nine years into the war
- the Greeks are fighting among themselves as much they are fighting the Trojans
- the first word is “*Anger* . . .”
Overview of *The Iliad*, Book 1

- Agamemnon has taken as “spear-prize” Chryseis, the daughter of the Chryses who is a priest of Apollo
- this is a grave offense against the god
- Chryses tries to reclaim his daughter but Agamemnon rebuffs him
Overview of *The Iliad*, Book 1

- Chryses goes down to the beach and prays for help from Apollo
- the god sends a plague of “arrows” on the Greeks
- Greek men and animals begin to die off in large numbers
Overview of *The Iliad*, Book 1

- the Greek chieftains call a council meeting to deliberate over what to do
- with the priest Calchas’ backing, Achilles blames Agamemnon for the plague
- he insults the general, calling him all sorts of names, e.g. “Sack of wine, you with your cur’s eyes and your antelope heart!”
Overview of *The Iliad*, Book 1

- the aged **Nestor** counsels that they both should calm down
- the quarrel resumes
- in the end, Agamemnon agrees to return Chryseis to her father but demands in recompense Briseis, one of Achilles’ spear-prizes
Overview of *The Iliad*, Book 1

- stripped of his spear-prize and dignity, Achilles refuses to fight for Agamemnon or the Greek cause any longer
- he also withdraws his special forces, the **Myrmidons** (“Ant-men”), from the war
- the meeting breaks up and **Odysseus** leaves to return Chryseis to her father
Overview of *The Iliad*, Book 1

- Achilles goes down to the seashore and calls out to his mother, the sea-nymph Thetis, who appears from the mist.
- He tells her all that has happened, especially how Agamemnon dishonored him by taking Briseis.
Overview of *The Iliad*, Book 1

- in oral poetry, this sort of **recapitulation** is useful
- it reminds the listener of what’s happening
- Thetis promises to defend Achilles’ cause to Zeus and leaves for Mount Olympus
- Odysseus delivers Chryseis to her father
Overview of *The Iliad*, Book 1

- on Mount Olympus, Thetis finds the gods holding a feast
- she pulls Zeus aside and beseeches him to help the Trojans against the Greeks
- Zeus agrees but Hera sees her husband speaking in private with Thetis and nodding to her
Overview of *The Iliad*, Book 1

- Hera accuses Zeus of plotting against the Greeks whom she favors over the Trojans (the Judgment of Paris!)

- Zeus threatens to “lay his inexorable hands upon her,” if she doesn’t “sit down, be still” and obey him

- Hera sulks
Overview of *The Iliad*, Book 1

- Hephaestus attempts to reconcile his parents’ quarrel
- he limps around serving the gods . . .
  
  “And quenchless laughter broke out among the blissful gods to see Hephaistos wheezing down the hall.”
Overview of *The Iliad*, Book 1

• as the gods’ party breaks up and they go to bed, a peace of sorts settles over Olympus and earth

• thus, Book 1 ends on this note of uneasy resolution

• very different from the prayer and plague with which it started
Analysis of *The Iliad*, Book 1

- the book is arranged in **ring composition**:
  
  \[ A \ B \ C \ D \ C \ B \ A \]

- the first (A) and last (A) element echo each other

- the elements inside those (B) do also, and so on
Analysis of The Iliad, Book 1

• Prayer and Plague: Chryses invokes Apollo
  – Council of Men: Agamemnon and Achilles
  • Odysseus leaves to return Chryseis to Chryses

ACHILLES AND THETIS
• Odysseus delivers Chryseis to Chryses
  – Council of Gods: Zeus and Hera quarrel

• Feast and Joy: the Gods Party on Olympus
Analysis of *The Iliad*, Book 1

Ring composition serves several purposes:

- the symmetrical balance imitates nature and is artistically satisfying
- the return to A at the end of a section signals closure to the audience
- probably most important, using ring composition helps an oral poet remember where he is in the story
Overview of *The Iliad*, Books 2-9

**Book 2**

- Agamemnon musters the Greek troops and marches into battle
- as the army marches forth, Homer recites a “Catalogue of Heroes,” all the various men and tribes fighting at Troy
- catalogues are impressive in oral poetry
Overview of *The Iliad*, Books 2-9

Book 3

- Menelaus and Paris duel one-on-one, as everyone including Helen and Priam (the King of Troy) watch
- Paris is about to lose when Aphrodite rescues him
Overview of *The Iliad*, Books 2-9

**Book 3**

- Menelaus is declared the winner, and a truce is called
- back in Troy, Aphrodite forces Helen into bed with Paris
Overview of *The Iliad*, Books 2-9

Books 4 and 5

- Athena incites battle again by inducing a Trojan fighter to shoot Menelaus in the leg without warning
- there ensues much death and carnage
Overview of *The Iliad*, Books 2-9

**Book 6**

- the Trojans’ greatest warrior **Hector** appears for the first time in the epic
- he finds Paris in bed with Helen
- he upbraids his brother and sends him back to battle
- Helen comes onto Hector (!)
Overview of *The Iliad*, Books 2-9

*Book 6*

- Hector rejects Helen’s advances and goes off to meet his wife Andromache
- he finds her with their baby Astyanax at the Scaean Gate (an important gate leading into Troy)
Overview of *The Iliad*, Books 2-9

**Book 6**

- Andromache begs him not to fight and imagines her life as a “spear-prize” after he has been killed.

- Hector responds with the “Warrior’s Creed” (*Iliad* 6.440-465): a man has no choice but to fight!
Overview of *The Iliad*, Books 2-9

Book 6

- as he leaves, Hector leans over to kiss the baby Astyanax who recoils in terror at the plume on his father’s helmet
- Hector and Andromache laugh at the baby’s distress (!)
Overview of *The Iliad*, Books 2-9

Books 7 and 8

- Zeus abides by his promise to Thetis and favors the Trojans
- the Trojans begin to defeat the Greeks badly and push them back to the shore
- they nearly burn the Greeks’ ships
Overview of *The Iliad*, Books 2-9

**Book 9**

- the Greeks start to panic
- they desperately need Achilles back
- Agamemnon sends an embassy of warriors to Achilles’ tent to reason with him
- Agamemnon agrees to return Briseis and pay Achilles even more for the insult
Overview of *The Iliad*, Books 2-9

**Book 9**

- the embassy arrives in Achilles’ tent
- **Odysseus** pleads with him to take the money and return to the fighting
- **Phoinix** reminds Achilles of his duty to his family and their honor
- Achilles rejects them both
Overview of *The Iliad*, Books 2-9

**Book 9**

- finally, Ajax talks to Achilles as one warrior to another, arguing that the men need help
- Achilles rejects him, too
Overview of *The Iliad*, Books 2-9

Book 9

- pattern: pride
  \[ \downarrow \]
  hubris (an excessive act)
  \[ \downarrow \]
  tragedy and sorrow

(Patroclus’ death in Book 16)