

A Student Guide

Homer

The Odyssey

Jasper Griffin
Second Edition

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Homer

The Odyssey

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HOMER

The Odyssey

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Preface

The two great epics which go under the name of Homer bring Western literature into existence with a bang. Its echoes, like those of the cosmic explosion which started the universe, are still reverberating. Whatever existed of verse or prose before Homer has been lost for thousands of years, while the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* have in all that time never ceased to be read, to be admired, and to be influential. The plot of the *Odyssey* is essentially simple: the wandering hero wins his way home and faces the intruders who plan to rob him of wife, son, and kingdom. It contains unforgettable adventure stories: the Sirens, the Lotus-Eaters, the Cyclops, the Land of the Dead. It also contains comedy of manners, irony, pathos. Heroism is subjected to a quizzical scrutiny, when the hero must face ogres and witches, or conciliate a princess who finds him naked on the sea-shore, or fight a boxing match with a professional beggar. The range of characters is extraordinarily wide, and so is the breadth of interest in different social types: goddesses, queens, bards, servants, swineherds. A poem which must have emerged from a tradition of oral verse and an illiterate society, it has a sophisticated structure and an over-riding unity which is unmistakable, despite its great length and its variety of tone and subject-matter.

In this book I have aimed to put the *Odyssey* into its historical setting, and to bring out its individual character. That involves being prepared to criticise and to compare the poem with others. Every critic is, or should be, sometimes sobered, as he reflects how presumptuous it is for him to criticise great literature. Without criticism there can be little understanding; but it is at least as important for the critic to confess his own smallness in the face of a work like the *Odyssey*.

Chapter 1

The making of the *Odyssey*

1 The background to the *Odyssey*

European literature springs into existence with two great poems, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, traditionally ascribed to the same poet. That, at least, is the way the Greeks thought of their own literary history, and the Romans adopted that view and transmitted it to the rest of the world. In reality, of course, such a story is impossible: works of massive scale and great sophistication do not come out of nothing, and there was a long history behind the Homeric epics. That history was dark to the Greeks, and we are obliged to use conjecture for much of it. The effort is worth making, because its results help to make many things about the poems intelligible.

The ancestors of the Greeks entered the country from the north about 1900 B.C. They belonged to the great Indo-European family of peoples, which also includes, among others, the Germanic, Celtic, Latin and Iranian peoples, and the Aryans who in the same millennium invaded and conquered Northern India. They brought with them their language and their religion. They came from a nomadic existence on the great plains; the world which they entered was one of an old and settled culture, with palaces, frescoes, writing, luxury artefacts. There was trade and correspondence between the princes of the Aegean, the Minoans as we call them, and the kingdoms of the East: Asia Minor, Mesopotamia, Egypt. The incomers came face to face with new and impressive things. They began to worship new gods and, especially, new goddesses: in addition to the old, of course, not instead of them. Their sky-god Zeus acquired a new wife, the great goddess Hera of Argos and Mycenae, and a wonderful daughter, the goddess Athena of Athens. New forms of art and music were borrowed and adapted.

Like all the Indo-European peoples, they must have brought with them heroic tales: fierce legends of warfare, cattle-raiding, adventure, and revenge. The Icelandic sagas, the German Song of the Nibelungen, the English Beowulf, are among the surviving representatives of such poetry. The story of the hero who is dishonoured and avenges himself on his own companions, and the story of the hero whose wife is beset by other men while he is away on his adventures, so that he must return in time to reclaim her and take his vengeance: the basic plots of both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are recognisable as being at home in that ancient tradition. But the new setting in Greece, in the midst of complex and alien societies, must have had the effect of changing and developing the old poetry, both in technique and to some extent in attitudes. We have only to think, for instance, of an *Odyssey* with no role for Athena, and showing little familiarity with ships and the sea.

Those ancestors of the Greeks set up fortresses and kingdoms, under the influence of the Minoans, at Pylos and Athens and other places; from the most spectacular of them, Mycenae in the Peloponnese, we call them Mycenaeans. They were able to amass treasures of gold and ivory, to trade with the East, and to have bureaucracies of surprising extent and complexity, whose clerkly records, the 'Linear B tablets', let us see something of the workings of centralised kingdoms where everything was listed and inventoried: the lists of chariot wheels, for instance, faithfully record the presence of broken ones. All this was swept away, and the art of writing was lost, in the disasters of the twelfth century B.C., in which the citadels, including that of Mycenae, were destroyed. A dark age followed, with reduced population, humble conditions of life (no more stone-built palaces), and sharp decline both in the arts and in overseas connections. The cause of this catastrophe is generally identified as the coming of the Dorians, another group of Greeks who were slower than the rest to enter Greece, having stayed behind somewhere up in the north west. Intercourse with the East resumed on an appreciable scale by about 850 B.C., and the next two centuries saw a great increase in oriental products, rituals, and techniques such as building and jewellery. It was at this time that the Greeks took from Phoenicia the alphabet, dramatically improving it by the device of writing out the vowels as separate letters, and so creating the ancestor of our