

Jonathan S. Burgess

# HOMER



UNDERSTANDING CLASSICS

I.B. TAURIS



What reader could fail to be enthralled by the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, those greatest heroic epics of antiquity? Yet the author of these immortal texts remains, in the end, an enigma. The central paradox of ‘Homer’ is that – while recognized as producing poetry of incomparable genius – even in the ancient world nobody knew who he was. As a result, the myth-maker became the subject of myth. For the satirist Lucian (c.125–c.180 CE) he was a captive Babylonian. Other traditions have Homer born in Smyrna or on the island of Chios, or portray him as a blind and wandering minstrel.

In his new and authoritative introduction, Jonathan S. Burgess addresses fundamental questions of provenance and authorship. Besides conveying why these epics have been cherished down the ages, he discusses their historical sources and the possible impact on the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* of Indo-European, Near Eastern and folktale influences. Tracing their transmission through the ancient, medieval and modern periods, the author further examines questions of theory and reception.



JONATHAN S. BURGESS is Professor of Classics at the University of Toronto. He is the author of *The Tradition of the Trojan War in Homer and the Epic Cycle* (2001, paperback 2004) and *The Death and Afterlife of Achilles* (2009).

Jonathan Burgess is a leading figure in the ongoing study of Homeric poetry. He views this dynamic art form within the historical context of its reception in the overall song culture of the ancient Greeks – as also in the literary world of the Classical and the post-Classical eras. Such a perspective, which takes all epic traditions into account, gives the reader an illuminating view of Homer as a grand unifying idea of Hellenic civilization.

—Gregory Nagy, Francis Jones Professor of Classical Greek Literature  
and Professor of Comparative Literature, Director of the Center for  
Hellenic Studies, Harvard University

Two and a half millennia of criticism and reception of the indescribably rich Homeric texts make the task of introducing them quite Herculean, but Burgess has managed it superbly. This eminently readable survey covers an enormous amount of ground with tact and insight. Deeply informed both theoretically and philologically, this is an outstanding introduction to possibly the greatest poems in the Western canon.

—Robert Fowler, Henry Overton Wills Professor of Greek, University  
of Bristol

Jonathan S. Burgess is one of the most important scholars working on Homer today. In this elegant new book he starts with the big picture, introducing readers to the world of ancient epic. He then narrows his purview to focus on the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, discussing plot, characters and transmission. Finally, he homes in on one central mystery: the identity of Homer. The learning is vast; the approach nuanced; the writing crystal-clear. Readers will delight in this book, and learn a great deal from it.

—Barbara Graziosi, Professor of Classics, Durham University

Jonathan Burgess has written an admirable introduction, covering with lucid concision all the main issues from the Indo-European origins of Homeric epic to its reception in our own time.

—Richard Seaford, Professor of Ancient Greek, University of Exeter

# UNDERSTANDING CLASSICS

EDITOR: RICHARD STONEMAN (UNIVERSITY OF EXETER)

When the great Roman poets of the Augustan Age – Ovid, Virgil and Horace – composed their odes, love poetry and lyrical verse, could they have imagined that their works would one day form a cornerstone of Western civilization, or serve as the basis of study for generations of schoolchildren learning Latin? Could Aeschylus or Euripides have envisaged the remarkable popularity of contemporary stagings of their tragedies? The legacy and continuing resonance of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* – Greek poetical epics written many millennia ago – again testify to the capacity of the classics to cross the divide of thousands of years and speak powerfully and relevantly to audiences quite different from those to which they were originally addressed.

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RICHARD STONEMAN

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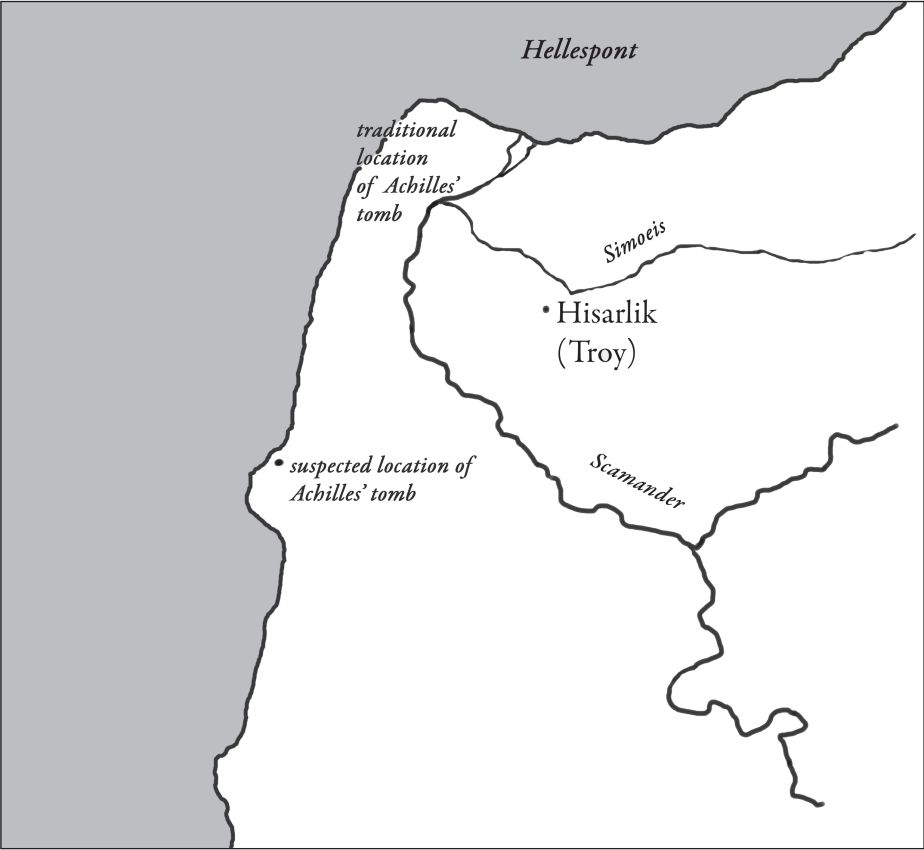
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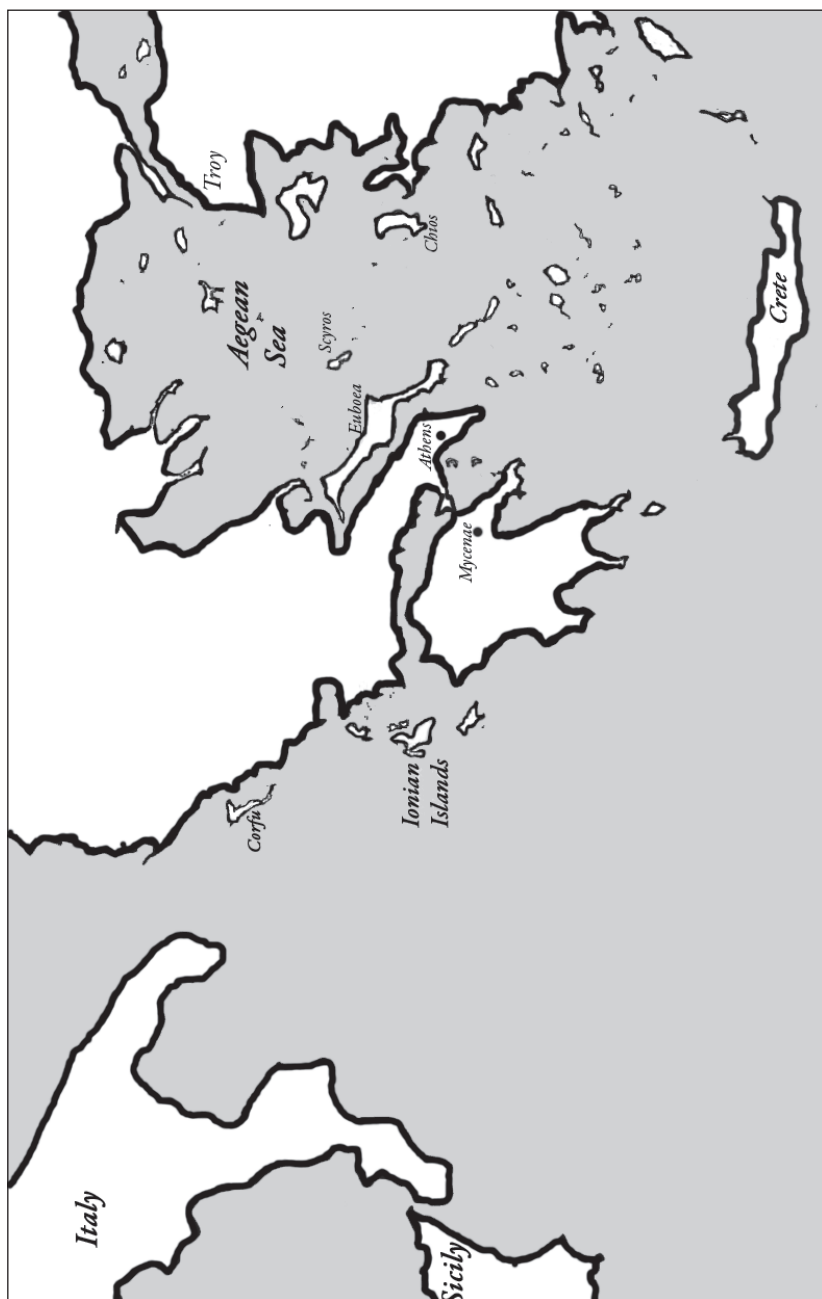
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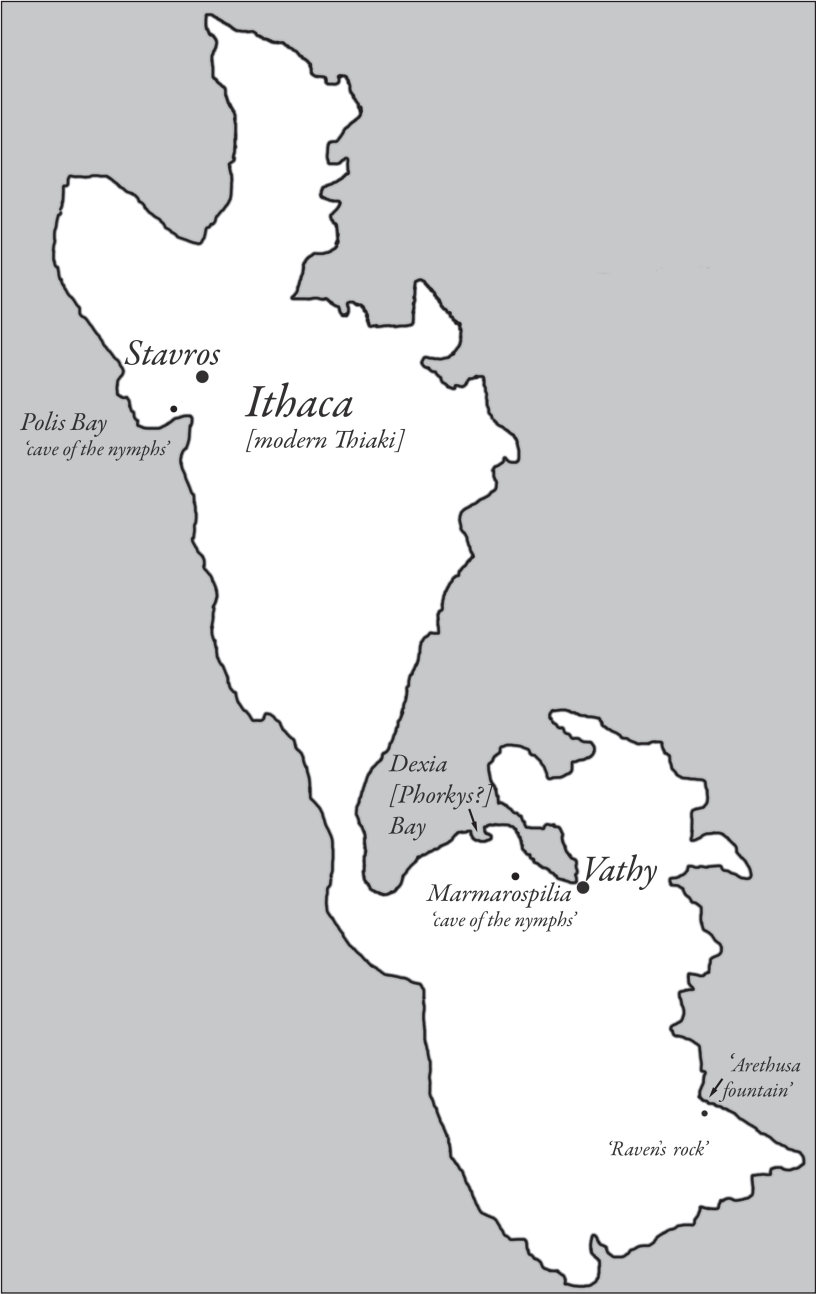
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Map 1: Troy and its environs



Map 2: The eastern Mediterranean



Map 3: Ithaca

*For Hugh F. Burgess, Jr*  
*poet, teacher, father*



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# I

## MYTHS



THE WARRIOR IS about to pass out of the gates of Troy to the battlefield when his wife approaches on the run, trailed by a nurse holding their infant child. He pauses, with relief; earlier he had looked for her at home. As he smiles quietly as his son, she urges him not to fight, certain this would make her a widow and their son an orphan. Warming to her appeal, she recalls how the best Greek warrior, Achilles, had sacked her native city, killing her father and brothers. Her mother was ransomed but later died. ‘Hector, you are to me father and queenly mother, you are brother, and you are my vigorous husband,’ she concludes, before veering off into an implausible bit of military advice. Moved but not persuaded, the Trojan leader states his intention to fight. He’s too proud to hang back, and he desires heroic *kleos* (‘glory’).

Yet as Hector explains himself, he affirms his tender devotion to family. The Trojan speaks of futures, inconsistently envisioned. Troy will fall, he first asserts, and Andromache will be unhappily enslaved. When he then reaches for his son, the child is terrified – not recognizing dad under a glittering, plumed helmet. Tension momentarily fades as the parents laugh; unhelmeted, the father picks up Astyanax and prays that he become a great warrior who returns victorious to a proud mother. Andromache, ‘smiling through her

tears, receives their child, and Hector gently muses that no one knows their fate. She should return to women's work in the home, he concludes, and he to war, the 'concern of men'. She departs, turning around again and again, weeping. Once home she and her female servants lament the living Hector as if dead. Hector returns to the battlefield with his brother Paris. Later Hector will be killed by Achilles; the epic ends with his burial.

A warrior on the way home from Troy finds himself in a tight spot: he is trapped in a cave by a gigantic shepherd who makes meals out of his companions. The Greek offers the Cyclops potent wine. This pleases so much that more is requested, as well as the guest's name; a gift is promised in return. Odysseus obliges and says, 'Nobody is my name.' Polyphemus promises that 'Nobody will I eat last among his comrades [...] this shall be your gift.' But Odysseus has a plan. The cannibal cannot simply be killed – he alone has the strength to move the cave-enclosing boulder. So the Greeks plunge a giant stake into the shepherd's giant eye.

When other Cyclopes come running at his cries, Polyphemus shouts, 'It is Nobody that is slaying me.' Unimpressed, they go on their way. Odysseus and his men escape the cave by hiding under sheep. Odysseus boastfully reveals his name from his ship; Polyphemus hurls rocks and prays to his father Poseidon that Odysseus not reach home – or at least wander long. Odysseus recounts this and many other adventures to his hosts the Phaeacians. When they bring him home to Ithaca, Odysseus plots to slaughter the suitors who desired his wife in his absence.

These two memorable Homeric moments, the encounter between Hector and Andromache in Book 6 of the *Iliad*, and the blinding of Polyphemus by Odysseus in Book 9 of the *Odyssey*, demonstrate the power of Homer's poetry. Thousands of years later the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are still read, studied and retold. The Homeric epics enchant, but also intrigue. There's much in them that makes one wonder, and certainly much that has spurred scholarly argument. The *Iliad* passage, for example, memorably portrays a family scene. Yet though the characters movingly express emotions emblematic of human experience, it is also apparent that Hector is self-involved and Andromache ineffective. Their tender feelings for each other do not break down the boundary of gender roles

that divides them. The issues that they discuss are deeply rooted in the ancient world, and not necessarily familiar to our modern life. And the scene, however extraordinary, does not advance the plot of the *Iliad* in any way.

The curse of Polyphemos is central to the plot of the *Odyssey*. Yet though the episode is recounted in a sophisticated manner by Odysseus, it is essentially a folk tale, the tricking of an ogre. Here, as elsewhere, one wonders about what material preceded the composition of the Homeric epics, and what distinguishes them from their traditions. Homer's version contains fantastic elements – Polyphemos is a mythological being and the son of a god – but it also seems to reflect conflict with other cultures during a time of Greek expansion into the western Mediterranean. Then there is the episode's obsession with gift-exchange, a societal convention of ancient aristocratic culture. Enjoyable as the Homeric poems are, they raise questions great and small. Why are parts of the epics called 'Books'? is one small yet potentially puzzling question. A very large one is: who is 'Homer'?

Questions will be encouraged in this work, which aims to introduce the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, as well as Homeric studies more generally. The epics will be celebrated, but so will the long, continuing history of their interpretation and reception. The multiplicity of perspectives on Homeric poetry, from Aristotle to *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, is fascinating. Many readers will be Homerists and classicists, but no knowledge of Greek is assumed and jargon is avoided. My hope is that a wide range of people will be encouraged to enjoy and study Homer.

The book starts with the poems themselves, moving from the big picture of the Trojan War myth to a tighter focus on plot, characterization and poetics in subsequent chapters. The middle chapters will discuss the history of the texts, review ancient and modern scholarship, and address the so-called 'Homeric Question'. The penultimate chapter surveys theoretical approaches to Homer, and the final one discusses creative responses to the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* down through the ages. Endnotes point the way forward to further reading.

A number of themes recur in my analysis. One is the interrelation between the Homeric poems and their epic and mythological traditions. Homeric

scholars through history have sought to ascertain how the Homer poems fit into the larger stories of the Trojan War and its aftermath. In antiquity 'Homer' often seemed to mean 'heroic epics in general', even as the exceptional nature of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* was insisted upon. Modern responses to Homeric poetry also tend to focus on the Troy story as much as the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Another theme of the book is the potential compatibility of different approaches to Homer. Points of contact between critical perspectives will often be noted, although Homeric studies are certainly often contentious and polemical. A final theme is the richness and variety of reactions to the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, both interpretative and creative (the boundary between the two can be hard to draw). It is not this work's purpose to pronounce on 'what we know' about what the Homeric epics were; rather my study intends to survey inclusively the wide range of assessments of the Homeric epics, which continue to evolve as interpretation expands. Ongoing interest in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* amply demonstrates that they endure, thanks especially to provocative interpretation and visionary creativity. While I cannot begin to claim expertise in all areas of Homeric studies and Homeric reception, I have endeavoured to sketch their outlines. The possession of a mental map of the broad reaches of the Homeric world should be useful for any foray into a particular part of its terrain.

At the end of the book I point out that everyone who experiences the epics tends to develop an image of 'Homer' in their mind. When another Homeric enthusiast's 'Homer' is not yours, it's unsettling. But even in major stand-offs about Homer in the past – for example, during the dispute over ancient and modern aesthetics in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, or when variant Romantic notions of Homer as Tradition or Original Genius arose in the late eighteenth century, or when polemics between Analysts and Unitarians flared up in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – the extent of common ground is striking. Even when alternative hypotheses remain irreconcilable, the argumentation employed often blends together. Or at least there is a choice between viable perspectives on Homer. You will not want to agree with every argument in Homeric studies that you encounter, including my own, but the experience of hearing out the variety of Homeric responses will be profitable.

## *The Myth of the Trojan War*

Hector and Andromache are in the midst of the Trojan War; Odysseus is returning from it. The *Iliad* and *Odyssey* directly narrate only very small portions of the ten-year war and Odysseus' ten-year return, but they display deep awareness of the larger cycle of myths in which they are embedded. The narrator ('Homer' by convention) and his characters talk all the time about the Trojan War and other stories of the Heroic Age. For example, in Book 6 of the *Iliad* (290–2) Homer provides a backstory for a robe that his mother Hecuba selects for dedication to Athena. Paris obtained it, the poet reports, in a meandering return to Troy from Sparta with Helen. In Book 8 of the *Odyssey* tales of the Trojan War are sung by Demodocus, bard of Odysseus' hosts the Phaeacians. His first story (73 ff.) is about a quarrel between Odysseus and Achilles; a later song (499 ff.) features the famous wooden horse that was employed to sack Troy. Demodocus can apparently perform material from the whole range of Trojan myth. It is too much to perform it all at once, but the bard seems confident that his listeners know the larger story.

Not that the story always remained the same. My examples of Trojan War material embedded in the Homeric epics are not without difficulties. Herodotus reports (*Histories* 2.117) that in a lost Trojan War epic, the *Cypria*, the return of Paris and Helen took an easy three days, with no stops. But an ancient summary of the poem reports a meandering journey, as the *Iliad* suggests. So we do not even know if the *Iliad* and *Cypria* disagree about the return of Paris and Helen. But let us suppose that the *Iliad* and the *Cypria* had different conceptions of the journey. Were poets free to tell the journey any way they preferred? Or is variance on the return of Paris allowed only because it does not change the basic outlines of the story? The Trojan War will commence no matter how Paris journeys back to Troy with Helen.

But sometimes the basic plotlines of myth *are* changed. Herodotus suspects that Homer is aware of a story in which Helen sits out the war in Egypt, while the Greeks and Trojans battle over a phantom of her! Herodotus' evidence is thin: the wandering of Paris and Helen (but not to Egypt) mentioned in *Iliad* 6, Menelaus and Helen talking of visiting Egypt

*after* the war in *Odyssey* 4. But this alternative version of the Trojan War was supported by the sixth-century-BCE lyric poet Stesichorus,<sup>1</sup> and it is the basis of the fifth-century-BCE drama *Helen* by Euripides. Similar issues arise with Demodocus' song about the quarrel of Odysseus and Achilles. It doesn't match up very precisely with anything else we hear of the Trojan War, and the indirect, compressed and elliptical reporting of the bard's song does not assist explication. Is the 'quarrel of Odysseus and Achilles' untraditional, invented on the spot by Demodocus/Homer? If so, why does Homer report that the story's 'fame had then reached broad heaven'? In these examples we are confronted not only with our ignorance about myth outside of Homer, but also with the possibility of variance, both small and large.

These issues give scholars much to ponder. But when approaching the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* one should assume that the myth of the Trojan War, like most ancient myths, was largely stable. Myth was not just a few epic poets jousting with each other with 'can you top this?' entertainment. Stories honed over time served the Greeks as a kind of prehistory, with serious implications about genealogical, cultural and religious matters in the contemporary world. The anti-myth of Helen staying in Egypt is designed to invert the story that everyone knows; the widespread currency of the traditional version is assumed. The literary game in later antiquity of perversely challenging Homer (see Chapter 7) similarly rested on an assumption of familiarity with the Homeric epics. Most narratives with mythological content, including the Homeric epics, worked within traditions. Myth was a kind of super-language in Greek culture, and it could not function as such if it were a chaotic mass of disjointed details. Of course, different versions might favour aspects important to local areas. The same mythological figure might be portrayed more or less sympathetically, depending on the issues involved. Certainly speakers within the Homeric poems know how to spin the details of a heroic tale in order to impress and influence their audience.

If Demodocus' song of the 'quarrel of Odysseus and Achilles' is an innovation, it is merely a detail in the larger scheme of the whole war, just as is the return of Paris and Helen to Troy. Why would Homer have Demodocus tell a non-traditional tale? It might allude to the quarrel of Achilles and

Agamemnon that occurs at the beginning of the *Iliad*, or it might reflect a thematic antithesis between Achilles (physical prowess) and Odysseus (mental agility),<sup>2</sup> or it might simply serve to elicit the tears of Odysseus. As for the wandering journey of Paris in Book 6, that could emphasize the importance of the robe being dedicated or remind one of the notorious elopement of Paris and Helen shortly before they appear together in Book 6. In other poems (perhaps including the *Cypria*, or a version of it), a long return home for Paris might make it possible to reference aspects in the Aegean important to various local audiences. These are all possible functions for these passages. But such effects do not necessarily depend on innovation, and one should not *expect* radical invention of myth in Homer.

## *Muses and Myth*

Homer publicizes the traditional nature of his song when he, like other early bards, requests information from the Muses. For early Greek epic, invoking the Muses was not a poetic convention, as it was in later periods;<sup>3</sup> it was the means to recreate standard narratives about the distant heroic past. A single Muse is invoked at the beginning of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and in the former poem Homer repeatedly calls on the Muse when hard-pressed for details (for example, the names of minor heroes). Hesiod, the other great epic poet of Homer's time, invokes Muses in the plural, as do composers of the so-called Homeric Hymns. According to Hesiod, the Muses are daughters of Mnemosyne, 'memory' (*Theogony* 53–5).

Poets looked to the Muses not just for memorized data, but also for narrative sequence. In *Odyssey* 8 the Muse directs Demodocus to sing of a quarrel of Odysseus and Achilles from the larger *oime* ('path') of Trojan War episodes. After Demodocus has finished, Odysseus states that he sang as if he had been present at Troy, or had heard about the war from someone who had been there. Since Odysseus was present at Troy, this is high praise indeed. But what Odysseus implies is that Demodocus is well trained in the singing of heroic narrative. That relatively recent events would already have been turned into traditional stories is of course ironic. Here,