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978-0-521-70372-7 - Homer: Iliad, Book VI

Edited by Barbara Graziosi and Johannes Haubold

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

1. THE POET AND THE MUSES

In his *Collection of useful knowledge* Proclus observes that Homer said nothing about his own origins and lineage, and that ‘because his poetry gives no express indication on these questions, each writer has indulged his inclinations with great freedom’.¹ This is a perceptive comment: from antiquity to the present there has been much debate about the origin, date and authorship of Homeric epic – a debate fuelled, in part, by a lack of reliable information. And yet the *Iliad* does say something important about its poet, and in order to offer an introduction to Homeric poetry, it seems reasonable to start with the image of the poet presented in the *Iliad* itself, before broaching the many, and difficult, issues on which the poem offers no explicit guidance.

The poem starts with an order: ‘Sing, goddess, the wrath of Achilles.’ Like all second-person addresses, this opening invocation establishes a specific relationship between speaker and addressee. The poet asks the goddess to sing and she evidently complies with his request: what follows, after the proem, is indeed a song about the wrath of Achilles. Song, *αοιδή*, is a word the poet uses for his own performance: the Muse sings, and the poet sings too, about the same topic. After the proem their voices blend, until the poet faces particularly difficult challenges. Before launching into the massive Catalogue of Ships in book 2, for example, the poet suddenly puts some distance between himself and the Muse, re-establishes his own individual voice with the pronoun *μοι*, and asks, again, for divine support (2.484–93):

ἔσπετε νῦν μοι, Μοῦσαι Ὀλύμπια δώματ' ἔχουσαι –
 ὑμεῖς γὰρ θεαὶ ἐστε πάρεστε τε ἴστε τε πάντα,
 ἡμεῖς δὲ κλέος οἶον ἀκούομεν οὐδέ τι ἴδμεν –
 οἳ τινες ἡγεμόνες Δαναῶν καὶ κοίρανοι ἦσαν.
 πληθὺν δ' οὐκ ἂν ἐγὼ μυθήσομαι οὐδ' ὄνομήνω,
 οὐδ' εἴ μοι δέκα μὲν γλῶσσαι, δέκα δὲ στόματ' εἴην,
 φωνὴ δ' ἄρρηκτος, χάλκεον δέ μοι ἦτορ ἐνείη,
 εἴ μὴ Ὀλυμπιάδες Μοῦσαι, Διὸς αἰγιόχοιο
 θυγατέρες, μνησαίαθ' ὅσοι ὑπὸ Ἴλιον ἦλθον.
 ἀρχοὺς αὖ νηῶν ἐρέω νῆάς τε προπάσας.

Tell me now, you Muses who have your homes on Olympus –
 for you are goddesses, are present and know all things,
 but we hear only the *kleos* and know nothing –
 who were the leaders and commanders of the Danaans.
 I could not tell the masses nor name them,

¹ Proclus, *Chrestomathy* I, trans. M. L. West 2003: 419.

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not even if I had ten tongues and ten mouths,
 a voice that cannot break, and a heart of bronze inside me,
 unless the Muses of Olympus, daughters of aegis-bearing
 Zeus, remembered all of those who came to Ilios;
 but now I will tell the leaders of the ships, and all the ships there were.

The Muses alone ‘are present and know all things’. Without their help, the poet is in exactly the same position as his audience: ‘we have only heard the κλέος, and know nothing’. κλέος is, literally, ‘what is heard’: the word sometimes describes the subject matter of epic poetry (e.g. *Od.* 3.204, 8.73; *Hes. Theog.* 99–101; *Hom. Hymn* 32.18–20; cf. *Il.* 9.189). The Muse ‘sings’, and the audience ‘hear’: in between, mediating in that complex transaction, stands the poet. At 2.487 the poet asks the Muses to tell him who the leaders of the Danaans were; he then declares he needs their help in order to relate to the audience this information; and finally, at 493, he launches into the grandest and most impressive catalogue in the whole poem. The Muses and the poet sing in unison again for a while; but the invocation establishes the terms of their relationship.² The goddesses guarantee the accuracy of the poet’s performance (they ‘know everything’); while the poet’s performance, in turn, guarantees their presence (he states he could not accomplish his poetic feat without their help). Through this interaction, the ability to perform and the accuracy of the performance are tightly woven together.

We may wonder about the meaning of πάρεστε, at 2.485: are the Muses ‘present’, in the sense that they are in the company of the poet and his audience; or are they ‘present’ in Troy, at the time of the Trojan expedition? This question admits of no straightforward answer. Clearly, the Muses and the poet enjoy an intimate relationship, and the result of that relationship is the performance itself, in front of an audience. But the ‘presence’ of the Muses, in our passage, does not just concern their impact on the poet and his audience: it is closely linked to the Muses’ own knowledge of the Trojan expedition, and to their divine powers more generally: ὑμεῖς γὰρ θεαί ἐστε πάρεστέ τε ἴστε τε πάντα, ‘you are goddesses, are present, and know all things’. Hesiod tells us that the Muses please the mind of Zeus by ‘telling what is, what will be, and what was before’ (εἰρεῦσαι τὰ τ’ ἔοντα τὰ τ’ ἔσομένα πρό τ’ ἔοντα; *Theog.* 38). Their knowledge has a temporal dimension in the *Iliad* too: they bridge the gap between the great events at Troy, and the world of Homeric audiences. The poet never describes his audience in any detail, but he does imply that his performance takes place long after the age of the heroes: he repeatedly compares the feats of his heroic characters with the meagre achievements of ‘people as they are nowadays’ (5.302–4, 12.378–83, 445–9 and 20.285–7).

² Later the poet asks the Muse to identify the best of the Achaeans (2.761–2). At 11.218–20 and 14.508–10, two important moments in the narrative, he asks the Muses to establish the correct order of events. At 16.112–13 he demands to know how the ships of the Achaeans caught fire. In every case, the poet goes on to provide the information he requested of the goddesses.

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The question about the ‘presence’ of the Muses also applies to the position of the epic singer, as a passage in the *Odyssey* makes clear. When Odysseus arrives at the land of the Phaeacians, he has lost everything: his ship, his comrades, his possessions, even his clothes. The Phaeacians cannot, therefore, establish his identity on the basis of any external evidence; they can only rely on what he says himself – and that, of course, is a risk because travellers often lie. Fortunately, there is one character, in the land of the Phaeacians, who already knows about Odysseus and is thus in a position to corroborate his story. In the course of celebrations in honour of the shipwrecked stranger, the singer Demodocus entertains his audience with three songs: the first is about a quarrel between Odysseus and Achilles (8.73–82); the second is set on Olympus and describes an adulterous love affair between Ares and Aphrodite (8.266–366); the third celebrates the fall of Troy, and Odysseus’ stratagem of the Trojan horse (8.499–520). Demodocus is blind: he does not know that Odysseus, a major character in his own songs, is right there, among his audience. It is Odysseus who recognises himself in Demodocus’ first song: he pulls up his cloak, covers his head, and cries (8.83–92). Later, before Demodocus’ third song, he praises the singer (8.487–91):

“Δημόδοκ’, ἔξοχα δὴ σε βροτῶν αἰνίζομ’ ἀπάντων·
ἦ σέ γε Μοῦσ’ ἐδίδαξε, Διὸς παῖς, ἦ σέ γ’ Ἀπόλλων.
λίην γὰρ κατὰ κόσμον Ἀχαιῶν οἶτον αἰεῖδεις,
ὅσσ’ ἔρξαν τ’ ἔπαθόν τε καὶ ὅσσ’ ἐμόγησαν Ἀχαιοί,
ὡς τέ που ἦ αὐτὸς παρεῶν ἢ ἄλλου ἀκούσας.”

‘Demodocus, greatly I praise you, above all mortals;
either the Muse, daughter of Zeus, taught you, or Apollo.
You sing the fate of the Achaeans precisely, according to order;
what they did and endured and all they suffered,
as if you had been there yourself, or heard from someone who had.’

There is a striking correspondence between the suffering of the Achaeans and Odysseus’ own pain, as he listens and remembers his past. It is through tears, and poetry, that Odysseus first begins to reveal himself to his hosts. After paying his compliment to Demodocus, Odysseus asks the bard to sing about the fall of Troy, and the stratagem of the Trojan horse. It is after that performance that he finally reveals his identity: in books 9–12 Odysseus takes over from Demodocus’ story and tells what happened after the fall of Troy. The Phaeacians believe Odysseus because he sounds like a singer (11.363–9):

“ὦ Ὀδυσσεῦ, τὸ μὲν οὐ τί σ’ εἴσκομεν εἰσορόωντες
ἠπεροπῆά τ’ ἔμεν καὶ ἐπὶ κλοπῶν, οἷά τε πολλοὺς
βόσκει γαῖα μέλαινα πολυσπερέας ἀνθρώπους
ψεύδεά τ’ ἀρτύνοντας, ὅθεν κέ τις οὐδὲ ἴδοιτο·
σοὶ δ’ ἔπι μὲν μορφή ἐπέων, ἐνὶ δὲ φρένες ἐσθλαί,
μῦθον δ’ ὡς ὅτ’ αἰδοῦς ἐπισταμένως κατέλεξας,
πάντων Ἀργείων σέο δ’ αὐτοῦ κήδεα λυγρά.”

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‘Odysseus, looking at you, we do not liken you
to a fraud or a cheat, the sort that the black earth
breeds in great numbers, widespread people,
who craft their lies – from what sources one does not see.
Your words have beauty, and there is sense in you,
and expertly, as a singer would do, you have set out the story,
of all the Argives’ terrible sorrows, and your own.’

Again, a complex exchange links truth to epic performance. Odysseus compliments Demodocus because he describes the fall of Troy as accurately as if he had been there; while the Phaeacians believe Odysseus’ own account because he performs like a singer: his words have ‘beauty’, or ‘shape’ (μορφή).

There are of course differences between Odysseus and Demodocus: the most obvious is that the singer will never be an eyewitness: he is blind. It is because of his relationship with the Muse, rather than any first-hand experience, that he knows what happened at Troy. By himself, he is not even able to recognise Odysseus, who is sitting right beside him. Blindness separates Demodocus from his audience; but also marks a different, divine, kind of vision (8.63–4):

τὸν περὶ Μοῦσ’ ἐφίλησε, δίδου δ’ ἀγαθὸν τε κακὸν τε·
ὀφθαλμῶν μὲν ἄμερσε, δίδου δ’ ἠδεῖαν ἀοιδήν.

The Muse loved him greatly, and gave him both good and evil:
she took his eyesight but gave him sweet song.

Ancient readers thought that this description of Demodocus was autobiographical: an image of Homer himself. Modern scholars have often doubted the ancient report that Homer was blind and have sometimes noted that his poetry is especially vivid and visual. But this is to miss the point of the ancient legend: Homer’s blindness, just like Demodocus’, was thought to compensate for his poetry.³ And, as a poet, he could see what went on in Troy: like Demodocus, and the Muses, he could overcome the barriers of time and space and ‘be present’. At the same time, Homer’s blindness symbolised his distance and impartiality vis-à-vis his human audiences.

The poet of the *Iliad* does not address his audience directly, in order to ask for attention, flatter or make demands. Never does he name specific addressees or describe the context of his performance. By contrast, he addresses not only the Muses, but also some characters in his own story.⁴ These direct apostrophes are so startling that some ancient and modern readers have argued that they betray a special concern

³ The idea would have seemed less strange to ancient readers than it might seem to us. Compare what Socrates has to say about true insight at Plato, *Symp.* 219a: ‘The inner eye of thought (ἡ τῆς διανοίας ὄψις) begins to see clearly when our real eyes start losing their sharpness of vision.’

⁴ The passages are collected and discussed in A. Parry 1972, Block 1982 and Yamagata 1989.

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for the characters addressed.⁵ But in one case, at least, there seems to be no reason to suppose an enduring affection or interest on the part of the poet: the direct address seems motivated by the immediate situation at hand, rather than by a long-lasting commitment to certain characters. At 15.582–4 Antilochos has just killed Melanippos and is about to take his spoils, when the poet suddenly addresses the dead Melanippos in the vocative and points out that Hector defended his corpse. The narrative gains in immediacy: what the poet describes is not a routine battlefield occurrence, but something that would have mattered greatly to Melanippos and now matters to the poet, and hence to all those who listen to him. The poet thus engages his audience not by addressing them directly, but by addressing his characters, and thus taking part in the story he tells.

The poet's presence at Troy may help to explain another puzzling feature of Homeric poetry. In an influential study of 1899–1901, Theodor Zielinski argued that Homeric narrative always moves forward: as a result, the poet represents simultaneous actions as sequential. Early responses to 'Zielinski's law' took it as evidence for the primitive state of the Homeric mind, which was supposedly unable to grasp the complexities of time and simultaneity.⁶ Such perceptions of Homeric poetry have by now been dispelled: the poems do, in fact, represent simultaneous action by several different means.⁷ For example, while Hector leaves the battlefield, Glaukos and Diomedes meet and exchange gifts: in terms of narrative structure, the encounter between the two warriors counterbalances Hector's mission in Troy (see below, Introduction 4.1). What remains true, however, is that the poet often fails to draw attention to simultaneity. As Scodel points out in her judicious appraisal of Zielinski's law, 'there is no single solution for all passages where the Homeric narrator's treatment of time is difficult, because time stands in a complex relationship with his other narrative concerns'.⁸ One such concern does, however, help to explain Zielinski's observation. The poet describes events as if he were there. Overt references to simultaneity would dispel that sense of presence: in order to say that an event was taking place while something else was happening elsewhere, the poet would need to stand back from both events, however briefly. That, by and large, he does not do: he often abandons one strand of the story and picks up another without offering explicit guidance to the audience about the transition. He simply, suddenly, looks elsewhere, or changes locale – just like Zeus, who, at the beginning of book 13, momentarily stops looking down at the war raging on the Trojan plain and turns his eyes to the land of the Thracians.

The perspective of the poet is indeed that of the gods. He can offer a god's-eye view of the whole battlefield at 1–4n. and then zoom in to show how the tip of a spear penetrates through a forehead and 'breaks into the bone': 10n. He can observe at close quarters how Adrestos' horses trip over a tamarisk branch, break the chariot's pole and run away – and then zoom out in order to show how the horses

⁵ S. D. Richardson 1990: 170–4 discusses ancient and modern views.

⁶ See, for example, Fränkel 1955. ⁷ De Jong 2007: 30–1. ⁸ Scodel 2008b: 109.

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are just two of many that are stampeding across the plain towards the city (38–41n.). Contemporary readers describe Homeric poetry as cinematic,⁹ but in antiquity there were no helicopters from which to take aerial shots, and no cameras zooming in or out. The poet's powers were truly divine: only the gods could view things from above, or descend and observe the fighting at close quarters, without fear of death. The poet makes that point explicitly at 4.539–42, when he describes an especially fierce battle:

ἔνθά κεν οὐκέτι ἔργον ἀνὴρ ὀνόσαιτο μετελθών,
 ὅς τις ἔτ' ἄβλητος καὶ ἀνούτατος ὄξει χαλκῶι
 δινεύοι κατὰ μέσσον, ἄγχοι δέ ἐ Πάλλας Ἀθήνη
 χειρὸς ἔλοῦσ', αὐτὰρ βελέων ἀπερύκοι ἐρωήν·

Then no longer could a man have faulted their war work, on arrival –
 someone who, as yet unhurt and unstabbed by the piercing bronze,
 moved about in their midst, as Pallas Athena led him
 taking his hand, and holding off the oncoming spears.¹⁰

Divine inspiration, then, is not just a matter of conventional invocations to the Muses. It shapes the poet's relationship to space, and his treatment of time. More importantly still, it informs his moral outlook. The poet can always tell whether the gods are present or absent (1n.) and knows what they plan. At the very beginning of the *Iliad* he asks the Muse to sing the wrath of Achilles and tell how 'the will of Zeus was accomplished' (1.5). The characters inside the poem have only a limited understanding of their own circumstances and have no sure knowledge of the future. The poet, by contrast, knows everything: his song follows the plan of Zeus and describes in painful detail what it entails for mortals. There is, then, a wide gap between the poet (and his audience), who know the future and the will of the gods; and the characters inside the narrative, who struggle, in their ignorance, with their hopes and fears (see, for example, 237–41n.). There is just one character, in *Iliad* 6, who does share the perceptions of the poet, at least to an extent. At 357–8n. Helen presents herself, Paris and, indirectly, Hector as future subjects of song – and sees a link between her human suffering, the fate decreed by Zeus and the delight of future epic audiences.

Helen's clear-sightedness is unusual and derives, in part, from her unique position in the poem. As the war rages over her, she – standing in the eye of the storm – sees herself from the perspective of future audiences. Helen thus momentarily comes close to sharing the poet's own vantage point and, like him, draws a connection between Zeus's plans, human suffering, and poetry. And yet her vision does not stem from an objective knowledge of what was, is and shall be – for all that she is the daughter of Zeus (just like the Muses themselves). In the *Iliad* Helen's divinity is played down, and she shapes her vision of the future not like a goddess or a singer,

⁹ Winkler 2007.

¹⁰ On the complex relationship between the imagined observer, the poet and the audience in this passage, see Mirto 1997: 925.

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but like a woman with immediate and pressing concerns. She wants Hector to stay with her: she needs him to focus on her plight and wants him to feel special because of his connection with her. In Helen's handling, future poetry becomes a weapon of seduction (343–58n., 357–8n.). Her words are not an impartial statement of fact, but an attempt to manipulate the situation so as to flatter Hector and persuade him to stay. Helen cannot ultimately escape the pain and uncertainty of her own human condition. At 3.234–42, for example, she looks for her brothers among the Achaean troops and wonders why they are not there: at that point, the poet informs us that they are already dead (3.243–4).

There is a great difference between what we know with utter certainty (because the poet, the Muses and Zeus himself guarantee it), and what the characters themselves think, feel and fear. This gap in knowledge is crucial to the *Iliad* as a whole but is especially important in book 6. We know that Troy must fall; and so, when Hector enters the city, we are confronted with a place and a people that are, from our perspective, already doomed. This is not just a general impression: it is reinforced by many details in the narrative. The women of Troy, for example, pray that Diomedes die in front of the Scaean Gates – but we know that he will survive the war; we thus realise that their prayer is futile (306–7n.), even before the poet describes Athena's response to it (311n.). The poet's narrative is in tune with the plans and actions of the gods, but also with what we already know, as competent epic audiences. It is of course difficult to establish, in every case, what kind of knowledge the poet assumed of his listeners. In some cases, allusions seem clear. When Hector picks up his baby son and tosses him about in his arms, we recognise a familiar gesture, which usually makes babies squeal with fear and elation – but we also remember Astyanax's individual fate: the next time a soldier picks him up, he will throw him off the walls (466–81n.). Other allusions are harder to assess: according to Euripides' *Alexander*, Paris was meant to be killed in infancy, but he survived and returned to Troy as a grown man. Hecuba tried to kill him on his return but then recognized him as her child and welcomed him back into the city. At 280–5n. Hector says to Hecuba, of all people, that he wishes her own son Paris was dead: that is a hard thing for any mother to hear, but to those audiences who knew the legend staged in the *Alexander*, Hector's comment will have seemed particularly harsh – a pointed allusion to Hecuba's own role in saving Paris' life. Early audiences did not have complete mastery of every aspect of the epic tradition: they did not instantly recognise all verbal echoes with the facility of a computer search engine. The point, rather, is that what the poet told his audiences resonated with what they already knew about his characters; and that, conversely, further stories, legends and poems developed around the *Iliad*: as a result of that process, the *Iliad* itself became richer, and more allusive, in the course of time (e.g. 434n.).

The main effect of our knowledge, and of the characters' lack of it, is a sense of tragic irony – a realisation that mortals have no sure understanding of the gods, or even of themselves. The *Iliad* enables us to see the limitations of humankind from the perspective of divine knowledge; but the spectacle is not simply entertaining, because the pain, suffering and uncertainty of Homer's characters are ultimately our own.

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Sometimes, characters do have moments of insight: at 447–9n., for example, Hector declares that he knows Troy will fall. And yet he cannot hold on to that realisation: only moments later, with his baby son in his arms, he hopes for a better future (475–81n.). Later still, Hector declares that he does not know what awaits him: he tells himself and his wife that all they can do is behave dutifully, as their destiny unfolds (485–93n.); but even that sense of clarity, and resignation, gives way to wild hope at the very end of the book. As Hector leaves the city and prepares to face the enemy, he depicts an unlikely image of future happiness: one day, after the Achaeans have been defeated, he will raise a toast to freedom together with his brother Paris, and the other Trojan men (520–9n., 526–9n.). This last wish clashes violently with what we know will happen to the Trojans and their city. The prophetic knowledge of the poet, together with the human frailty and uncertainty of his characters, provokes in the audience a mixture of pleasure and pain. As Macleod points out, in Homer we find ‘an awareness of the paradox that pain, as recorded in art, can give pleasure – and not only of this aesthetic paradox, but also of the fact it rests on, namely the difference between art and life, tragedy and suffering’.¹¹ In Homer’s *Iliad* we do indeed recognise the seeds of Greek tragedy; but more importantly still, we recognise ourselves.¹² Homeric audiences, and readers, need no special knowledge in order to understand, for example, Hector’s sudden surge of hope, as he holds his baby son in his arms; or imagine Hecuba’s pain, as she hears one of her sons wish death on another. The Muses guarantee the truthfulness of the poet’s song: they are goddesses, are present and can describe with utter precision what happened at Troy. But the poem is true also because it connects with what audiences know, from their own experience, about human life.

2. THE COMPOSITION OF HOMERIC EPIC

The poet never specifies his intended audience, or the context of his performance. This has led to great speculation about the circumstances under which the *Iliad* was composed; but there are, in fact, good reasons for the poet’s silence. The poem aspires to be a tale of universal interest, and the poet, as Griffith points out, avoids establishing a privileged relationship with a particular addressee, or audience.¹³ Scodel argues that he tells his story in a manner which does not divide audiences over controversial issues: he does not draw attention to mythological innovations, for example.¹⁴ That he shows little interest in local legends and cults has long been recognised.¹⁵ Because of the poet’s reticence, and the scarcity of external evidence, it is difficult to establish how and when the *Iliad* was composed, so it seems best to start with two points on which there is general consensus. The poem clearly belongs to a rich and ancient tradition of epic poetry. Its language and compositional techniques were honed over a long

¹¹ Macleod 1982: 7. ¹² See Zajko 2006. ¹³ Griffith 1983: 46. ¹⁴ Scodel 2002a.

¹⁵ See, for example, Rohde 1925: 25–6 (German edn 1898).

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period of time: they developed for the purpose of singing the deeds of gods and men to a particular rhythm, what we call the hexameter 'line'.

The second point on which there is broad agreement is that, by the second half of the sixth century BCE, the *Iliad* was well known. The material record preserves many late archaic images inspired by the *Iliad*; and the earliest explicit quotation from the poem also dates to this period. Simonides singles out a line from book 6, and calls it 'the finest thing the Chian man said': 146n. Some doubt the authenticity of Simonides' fragment 19 West, but his treatment of Homer fits a late sixth-century or early fifth-century context: we know that at that time artists were selecting and reworking their favourite Iliadic episodes.¹⁶ We also know that Theagenes was writing about Homer in the late sixth century: as Cassio argues, the fact that there were written disquisitions about Homeric epic suggests that there were also written copies of his poems by 530–520 BCE.¹⁷ It thus seems that the *Iliad* was widely known in the late sixth century BCE, and that written copies were available. When precisely the poem came into being is much more difficult to establish: current suggestions range from c. 800 BCE to as late as the sixth century itself.¹⁸ Those who champion an early date of composition tend to argue that Homer himself wrote down or dictated a master copy of the *Iliad*.¹⁹ Those who support a sixth-century date often emphasise the importance of an Athenian 'recension'.²⁰ According to some sources, the tyrant Pisistratus or one of his sons decreed that only Homer had to be recited, in the correct order, at the most important city festival: the Great Panathenaea.²¹ Those reports do not speak of a state-owned text; they refer to a situation in which the state monitored the performance of Homeric poetry. The debate over the date of composition of the *Iliad* reflects, in part, a difference in emphasis: some scholars focus on the original contribution by an early poet, others on the earliest known historical context for Homeric recitation. Beyond these differences, all Homerists agree that a sixth-century 'recension' must have captured something older; it is also clear that even if texts of the *Iliad* existed in the seventh century, they did not much affect the reception of the poem: they were scores or scripts, rather than works of literature. Most people appreciated the *Iliad* through listening, not reading.

¹⁶ The visual evidence for Iliadic scenes is collected and discussed in Burgess 2001: 53–94.

¹⁷ Cassio 2002: 118–19.

¹⁸ Powell 1991 suggests that the Greek alphabet was adapted from West Semitic prototypes specifically so as to write down Homeric epic at around 800 BCE. Janko 1982: 231 dates the *Iliad* to c. 755/750–725 BCE. Burkert 1976 and M. L. West 1995 detect allusions in the *Iliad* to later events, and on that basis suggest a date of composition in the seventh century BCE. Jensen 1980 argues that the poems were written down in Athens, in the sixth century BCE.

¹⁹ E.g. Janko 1982: 191; Lord 2000: chs. 6–7; Powell 1991: 232–3.

²⁰ E.g. Wolf 1985 [1795]; Heitsch 1968; Jensen 1980; Seaford 1994: 152–4; for the view that the poems were transmitted orally, but with only minor variations, between the eighth and sixth centuries BCE, see Kirk 1962, esp. pp. 98–101. Kirk's idea of the 'life cycle' of an oral tradition (Kirk 1962: 95–8) is developed in G. Nagy 1996a.

²¹ See esp. [Plato], *Hippiarchus* 228b and Lycurgus, *In Leocratem* 102. Related sources are collected and discussed in Merkelbach 1952; Jensen 1980: chs. 9–10; Kotsidu 1991: 41–4; and G. Nagy 1996a, esp. ch. 3.

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Our own love of reading, and appreciation of writing, may lead in fact to wrong assumptions: in the *Iliad* writing (or something close to it) is depicted as an especially nasty and devious business. At 168–70n. Proitos asks Bellerophon to deliver a folded tablet to the king of Lycia, on which he has inscribed the order to kill the bearer of the message.²² Bellerophon thus goes into exile carrying with him his own death warrant. There is no hint, in the Homeric poems, that writing may be used to record great deeds, or help singers compose their songs. This may simply be because Homeric epic is set in a distant, heroic past, where writing did not yet exist or was just being invented by resourceful crooks like Proitos. The actual context of composition of the *Iliad* may have been quite different from the situation depicted inside the poem.²³ What remains true, however, is that the poet of the *Iliad* describes his own work in terms of singing (ᾄδῆ) and listening (κλέος): he therefore invites his audience, and indeed his readers, to consider his poem as a live performance. The hexameter rhythm is an integral part of that performance, and shapes the language, grammar, and narrative structures of the *Iliad*.

2.1 *The hexameter*

1	2	3	4	5	6
– ◡	– ◡	– ◡	– ◡	– ◡	– –

The rhythm of Homeric poetry is the dactylic hexameter.²⁴ It consists of five dactylic feet or metra (– ◡), and a sixth foot that scans – –. The last syllable in the line can be short or long, but is always measured long, because there is a pause in recitation at the end of the verse. Dactyls can be replaced with spondees (– –), though this is rare in the fifth foot (about 5 per cent of lines in the whole of early Greek epic; e.g. 232–3n.). Homeric lines may consist exclusively of dactyls (e.g. 6.13) or, exceptionally, spondees (e.g. 2.544); but most lines are a mixture of the two.

For the purposes of scansion, each verse is divided into syllables, without regard for word division; that is, word divisions can fall within syllables: it is only at the end of the line that there is always a break (for other breaks see below). A syllable is long if it is ‘closed’ (i.e. ends with a consonant), or if it has a long vowel or diphthong; otherwise it is short. The letters η and ω represent long vowels; ε and ο represent short ones. α, ι, υ may be either long or short.

Syllables begin with the consonant that precedes a vowel, if there is one; otherwise they begin with the vowel itself. When two consonants occur in succession (other than

²² On Proitos’ trick and what, if anything, it reveals about the role of writing in the composition of Homeric epic, see Heubeck 1979: 126–46; Powell 1991: 198–200; Ford 1992: 131–8; Brillante 1996; Bassi 1997: 325–9; and J. M. Foley 1999: 1–3.

²³ The extremely regular layout of the inscription on the eighth-century Ischia cup (‘Nestor’s cup’) may reflect the influence of epic texts written on papyrus or leather – though such texts may not have been Homer’s poems as we have them; see Cassio 1999: 79.

²⁴ For Homeric prosody and metre see W. S. Allen 1973, M. L. West 1982 and 1997b, Sicking 1993, Nünlist 2000.