

1 | Introduction

Two sons of goddesses face each other in battle. One of them, Aeneas, is defending his doomed city; the other, Achilles, is part of an alliance fighting for divine justice and the marital rights of its commander's brother, but all such things are now overshadowed by the need to avenge the killing of his friend. He mocks Aeneas for attempting single combat with an enemy beyond his strength; Aeneas in turn mocks Achilles for resorting to mere insult, but then moves on to speak of the past, recalling 'the very famous tales (*epea*) of mortal men' (*Il.* 20.204) about both men's origins.¹ Each is sprung from an elemental power, for Aeneas is the son of Aphrodite, the goddess who presides over sexuality, while Achilles' mother is the sea-goddess Thetis; but on this day, Aeneas foretells, one of them will mourn the death of her son (20.207–12).

So far, these words fit into a familiar cross-cultural pattern of 'flyting', dramatised exchange of self-praise and insult before combat.² But Aeneas' tone changes when he traces his father's place in the royal lineage of Troy, picking up Achilles' taunt that he is only a junior cousin of the family:

Dardanus fathered a son, Erichthonius the king,
 who was born³ the most wealthy of all mortal men:
 he had three thousand horses that were pastured in the meadow,
 mares who took delight in their gentle foals.
 The North Wind⁴ fell in love with them as they were grazing
 and he lay with them in the likeness of a black-haired stallion:
 they conceived and gave birth to twelve foals.
 Whenever those went bounding over the life-giving⁵ ploughland,

¹ For the following discussion cf. Pucci 1998: 31–48.

² On this theme see Parks 1990, esp. 161–78 for a comparative study of the encounter between Aeneas and Achilles.

³ Or 'became' (*geneto*).

⁴ The North Wind Boreas and his brother Zephyrus the West Wind were often held to make horses pregnant: Achilles' horses, for example, were fathered by Zephyrus on a Harpy (*Il.* 16.150).

⁵ Or 'grain-giving', this probably being the original meaning; but the meaning 'life-giving' was the standard one assumed by the ancients.

they ran over the topmost heads of the sprouting corn, nor ever broke them;
 and whenever they went bounding over the broad backs of the sea,
 they ran along the topmost wave-crest of the grey salt water.

(*Il.* 20.219–29)

These are glimpses of the old lore of Troy and its kings, their fabled wealth and equally fabled untrustworthiness,⁶ and their unions with the gods – Tithonus, brother of the present king, was married to the goddess Dawn, and Ganymede his great-uncle was taken by Zeus to be his servant or his boy lover.⁷ Aeneas' implication is that his own direct ancestors have no part in the crimes committed by the royal family proper⁸ – but such stories could be shaped in endlessly varying ways, he says,

the tongue of mortals can be twisted: in it there are many words
 of every kind, and the meadow of tales is broad this way and that.

(*Il.* 20.248–9)

The word translated here as *tales* is again *epea*, as in the 'famous tales' that he spoke of earlier, and the 'words' are *muthoi*. Both are ambiguous: *epea* can refer to the most casual utterances as well as to high narratives, and *muthoi* can be simply 'words spoken', not necessarily approaching the level implied by the modern word 'myths'.⁹ Yet the heightened image of the 'meadow of tales'¹⁰ seems to draw each of these terms to the more solemn and lofty end of its potential range of reference: Homer is alluding to the endless variation and manipulation that a poet like himself could apply to traditional materials.¹¹

⁶ This is particularly associated with Laomedon, who cheated Apollo and Poseidon of their reward for building walls around Troy, and also cheated Heracles of his reward for killing the sea-monster sent by Apollo and Poseidon as a punishment, as a result of which Heracles sacked the city. See for example *Il.* 5.638–42, 7.452–3, 14.250–1, 20.144–8, 21.441–57; summary, presumably from multiple sources, at Apollodorus, *Library* 2.6.4.

⁷ See for example *Il.* 5.265–7, 20.232–5, and on the use of the myth in later homoerotic discourse see Davidson 2008.

⁸ Cf. Grethlein 2006: 65–70.

⁹ On the semantics of the English *myth*, and its uneasy partial overlap in meaning with the Greek *muthos*, see for example Most 1999; Fowler 2011.

¹⁰ Translation is difficult here. 'Meadow' is an established sense for the word *nomós* (see e.g. *Il.* 18.587), but the word might also be taken in a more abstract way – 'territory', 'realm'. The same query arises at Hesiod *WD* 403 and *Homeric Hymn to Apollo* 20.

¹¹ In the same way, the woman over whom the war is fought, Helen of Sparta, has said earlier in the *Iliad* that the evil fortunes of herself and her husband have been ordained so that they will become the subject of song (*aoidimoi*) for the people of the future (*Il.* 6.356–8) – almost a prophecy of the poem in which the story of those sufferings is taking shape. Cf. De Jong 2006.

I have begun with these words of Aeneas because they sum up the strange beauty of this poetry and the unsettling experience of trying to understand its balance between savagery and elegance, between the brutalities of hand-to-hand combat and the reverberations of myth and pseudohistory: the joys and sorrows of mortals, the loves and quarrels and cosmic powers of gods, all passed through Homer's reflexive awareness of the poetic form itself, the endlessly shifting and self-renewing tradition in which the *Iliad* belongs.

The prehistory of Greek epic

In a sense, the question of the origins of Greek epic is the same as that of the origins of the Greek language. According to the accepted reconstruction, at some time in the Bronze Age its ancestral speakers had come to Crete and mainland Greece from an ultimate place of origin somewhere in west-central Asia, and their speech was one of the family of related languages known as Indo-European.¹² Within that broader relationship the words and phrasal collocations of Homeric verse exhibit many astonishingly close parallels to the poetic language of Vedic, the earliest form of Sanskrit, not only on the micro-scale but often also in more complex details of ideas and imagery. These shared features seem to represent the continuation of elements that belonged in the poetic tradition of the common parent language, Proto-Indo-European, or an early offshoot; and this tradition must have been flourishing already by the time the forebears of Greek and Vedic separated from each other, an unguessably long time before the Homeric poems were composed.

That should be enough in itself to make us treat the precise wording of the poems as a thing of special gravity and depth: but the argument can be pushed further. Some of the phrases shared between Greek and Vedic seem random, no more significant than the stray chunks of Anglo-Saxon phrasing embedded here and there in modern English – *wassail, willy-nilly, so what*¹³ – but among them there is a cluster of phrases that suggest a glimpse of the themes of the poetry (or at least the artistic speech) of the lost parent language.¹⁴ One is a collocation meaning something like 'holy strength',

¹² For an overview see Fortson 2010: 18–50, with the more bold reconstruction by Anthony 2007.

¹³ Notoriously, the collocation of the adjective and verb in Hesiod's advice 'do not urinate upright while facing the sun' (*WD* 727) finds close parallels in early Sanskrit, both lexically and conceptually (see West 2007: 217).

¹⁴ Overview by Katz 2010; see further Schmitt 1967, and among more recent treatments see for example West 2007, with the careful discussion of the methodological problems by Clackson 2007: 187–215.

‘god-like vigour’: Greek *hieron menos*, Vedic *iṣiréṇa mánasa*. To judge by the attested meanings, the Proto-Indo-European phrase from which both descend would have referred to the energy and vitality of the living body: the force of spontaneous growth and movement that flows in young men and women at the peak of their health and strength, the force that is embodied in the special power and sacredness of kings and resides in the sanctuaries of the gods – in essence, the quality of self-propelled movement and growth that later Greek thinkers would identify as the presence of divinity.¹⁵ Still more telling is the collocation found in Greek as *kléos áphthiton* and in Vedic as *śrávas . . . ákṣitam*, both of which reach back through a series of well-documented and systematic sound-changes to the formula reconstructed as **klewos ṛdʰgʷhítom* ‘imperishable fame’ – fame that will live for ever, fame that will never be worn away like the waning moon.¹⁶ In the Vedic attestations the phrase appears in the context of the reciprocal benefits that flow from devout acts: the worshipper, it is said, will gain ‘imperishable fame’ in return for offering the sacred drink called *soma*.¹⁷ In Greek we have a verse inscription from the earlier sixth century BCE in which the context is very similar: the making of a dedication to Athene will guarantee *kleos aphthiton* for all time to the man responsible for it.¹⁸ Given the semantic parallel, it is a fair guess that the common ground between these two takes us close to the original associations of the phrase in the parent language, even if this particular Greek example reflects the survival of archaic language and ideas in cultic practice rather than the authoritative literary traditions of the poets.

In Homer, however, the formula belongs in a different thematic configuration. In response to a public insult, Achilles has withdrawn from the war and embarked on the rage that will lead to the deaths of thousands of his own comrades (*Il.* 1.4–5), and three of his peers have been begging him to re-enter the combat and save them from defeat. His reply is that he is about to abandon the war and sail away home. To him a special choice has been revealed:

My mother, silver-footed goddess Thetis, says
 that there are two different demons¹⁹ bringing me to death’s fulfilment:

¹⁵ Schmitt 1967: 109–12; cf. Clarke 1995b.

¹⁶ See Katz 2010: 361 for a summary; the definitive treatment remains Schmitt 1967: 61–102, esp. 61–9. Cf. West 2007: 406–10.

¹⁷ *Rig Veda* 1.9.7 (where, however, the words are not adjacent to each other). The other instances are in similar contexts (*Rig Veda* 1.40.4, 8.103.5, 9.66.7). On the comparison between Greek and Vedic contexts here see Clackson 2007: 180–2, Volk 2002: 61–3.

¹⁸ Hansen, *CEG*, p. 182, no. 344. ¹⁹ See below, pp. 223–225, for my choice of wording here.

if I stand fast here and fight around the Trojans' city,
 my homecoming is lost, but imperishable fame will be mine.
 But if I make the journey home to the dear country of my fathers,
 noble fame is lost for me, yet for a long time life
 will be in me, and death's fulfilment will not be quick to meet me.

(*Il.* 9.410–16)

Imperishable fame will be mine:²⁰ this is *kleos apthiton*, words reaching back to the prehistory of the language.²¹ This is the pivotal moment of the *Iliad*, when Achilles rejects everything that the warrior ideal represents; but those who first heard the poem must have known that Achilles would never go home. Looming all along is the certainty that he will stay and die, winning the 'imperishable fame' that is represented by the poem itself. And in Homer's version another level of irony and bitterness will be added, because Achilles will die in the grip of misery and self-hatred that will make fame seem trivial and worthless.

Neither poet nor audience can have sensed in *kleos apthiton* anything of the prehistory that is revealed by the Vedic correlation. Nonetheless, it is a powerful reminder that the language and thoughts embodied in the epic stretch above and behind any one creative voice, including that of the tradition or intelligence that lies behind the name 'Homer'. This makes it all the more strange that the *Iliad* explores and undercuts the ideals that the men of the Trojan War acknowledge and embody. This tension, as I will try to show, follows from the heightened energy and vitality that characterises men or half-gods like Achilles. Their energy is admirable, it is beautiful, it

²⁰ Volk 2002 shows decisively that the adjective is better to be understood as attributive ('imperishable fame will be mine') rather than predicative ('my fame will be imperishable'). Finkelberg had argued (1986, reprised 2007) that the adjective is predicative, that the collocation therefore fails to qualify as a Homeric formula in the strict sense and that the force of the Vedic parallel is thereby weakened or even invalidated. Even if the syntactic claim were admitted, this argument seems to me extremely narrow: the fact remains that the presence of the same noun–adjective pair in both languages and in such similar contexts points unmistakably towards a single lexical and semantic configuration in the parent language. In terms of the arguments developed later in this book, however, it remains remarkable that in the Old Babylonian *Gilgamesh* there is a very similar formulation, both lexically and thematically, in which the equivalent adjective is placed in a verbless subordinate clause: *šuma ša darû*, 'a name that is eternal' (*OB III.148*: see below, p. 261). (I owe this observation to Bruno Currie.)

²¹ *Kleos apthiton* also appears in the poetry of Ibycus (fr. 282a.47: Campbell, *GL* 3.223–4), referring to the fame that the poem will give its patron Polycrates (see below, p. 125). Since the context is an evocation of the fame of Homeric heroes, probably Ibycus is alluding to Achilles' words in *Iliad* 9. The same applies to its use in a heroizing verse epitaph from Athens, commemorating dead heroes from the Persian War (Hansen, *CEG*, p. 2, no. 2 (i)), and in the Hesiodic *Catalogue of Women*, where it refers to the fame that will come (to whom?) from Ino's immortalisation (fr. 41.5 Most = fr. 70.5 M–W). These and other doubtful or late examples are also surveyed by Volk 2002.

can bring strength and bravery and wisdom: but potentially it goes too far and becomes wild and ungovernable, and in these final extremes it is to be feared and shunned even when its agents are at the height of their greatness.

The remoteness of Homer

It is no part of this book's aim to try to listen to Homeric poetry via parallel evidence gleaned from living traditions of oral 'composition-in-performance' known from ethnographic fieldwork.²² It is possible to argue that the poems were composed in an environment where alphabetic writing was the normal tool of the wordsmith, and that the image of the divinely inspired blind singer is itself a myth of self-invention (cf. below, pp. 117–120). But this does not alter the most challenging fact about Homeric poetry: the world-picture and poetics of the epics seem in many ways utterly different from those current in the so-called 'Classical Period' centred on the fifth century BCE, to which the bulk of surviving ancient Greek literature belongs. Just as its language and its poetic resources seem to speak to us from a time more remote and more archaic than (for example) Athenian tragedy, so too its theology and its ethics, its system of social ideals and its conceptualisation of mental and emotional life, seem often to resemble only superficially those of the time of Pindar and Aeschylus, let alone that of Plato. These are writers whom we can hope to know and appreciate as individual creative minds, against a cultural background of which we have straightforward independent knowledge – more remote, certainly, than (say) Tennyson or Shakespeare or even Chaucer, but with a difference of degree rather than of kind. By contrast, every ancient response to Homer that we know of is from outside the speech-community in which the poems originated. This is true in different ways for Theagenes of Rhegium around the 530s BCE, interpreting the Homeric gods as allegories of natural phenomena,²³ for Aristotle explaining the bizarre savagery of Homer's Achilles through a comparison with the equally savage customs of contemporary Thessalians,²⁴ and for the Alexandrian scholar Aristarchus a century and more later, formulating the principle that Homeric poetry should be interpreted only on the basis of evidence and parallels from within the corpus: as Porphyry would later put

²² A useful introduction to the 'state of the art' on this question is Foley 2002.

²³ On Theagenes see Novokhatko 2013: 31, Lamberton 1986: 32. ²⁴ Aristotle, fr. 166 Rose.

it, summing up Aristarchus' method, one must 'interpret Homer out of Homer'.²⁵

This, more than any other factor, has encouraged the feeling that the Homeric poems are somehow prior to and higher than everything else in the flow of Western literature. As the late antique critic Macrobius put it,

This is the crowning touch to Homer's glory: though so many authors have watched in wait against him and all have gathered their forces to assail him, 'he stands against them unmoved, like a crag in the sea.' (Macrobius, *Saturnalia* 6.3.1, tr. Kaster)²⁶

In this lies the problem. If we are to understand the epics as created works of art, we need a sense of the background from which they emerged: we need a norm or baseline or starting-point against which to locate the messages that they articulate. Whatever those messages are, we can safely assume that they are more than platitudes and truisms. As Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood brilliantly expressed it – thinking of tragic poetry, but the principle applies to any genre characterised by exploration rather than mere celebration – the discourses of serious literature are located at 'the interstices of established belief'.²⁷ If the conventional world-picture of the community is imagined as a net cast over experience, the points of intellectual interest and creative tension lie in the hollow squares between the lines of fibre – areas of doubt, uncertainty, or contradiction. With the poets of Classical Athens it should be possible (with effort) to distinguish the network from the interstices, because of the wealth of other texts and artefacts and historical knowledge that survive to shed light on the conventional wisdom and 'collective representations' of their time. But with Homer we rely on the same source for reconstructing both. To take examples that will loom large in this book, it is clear that the *Iliad* is exploring themes like the relationship between honour and vengeance, or the intervention of the gods in human thought and action, or the tendency among men of violence for courage to move towards madness: but if we are to try to interpret these explorations, where do we begin? Even our sense of the semantic range of each of the key lexical items – *timē* 'honour', *kleos* 'fame', *moira* 'destiny' – must be built up on the basis of the attestations offered by the Homeric poems themselves. How then can we distinguish

²⁵ Porphyry, *Homeric Questions* 1.56.3–6. On this formulation of Aristarchus' methodology see Montana 2013: 134–6, with Schironi 2018: 75 n. 47.

²⁶ It may or may not be an irony here on Macrobius' part that the image of the rock in the sea is itself quoted from Vergil (*Aeneid* 7.586), whose intense and allusive engagement with Homer is Macrobius' main theme.

²⁷ Sourvinou-Inwood 1995: 11.

the unmarked and conventional meanings of those words from the creative, perhaps even anti-traditional discourses that Homer builds up around them?

The hypothesis that Homeric poetry should be heard and contextualised as part of a long pre-existing tradition of oral composition has often seemed to offer the prospect of distinguishing tradition from originality at the level of word-choice, phrasing and poetic diction.²⁸ However, it has proved harder to find an equivalent opportunity when it comes to matters of ethics, psychology and the thoughts and motivations of Homer's characters. Achilles deploys the resources of Homeric diction and formula on a more heightened, even more creative level than any other character in the *Iliad*,²⁹ but this in itself offers no direct guidance when we confront the apparent gulf between his words in *Iliad* 9 and what seem to be the default expectations of Homer and his characters about the desirability of a brave death in battle. Again, in *Iliad* 6 when Hector and his wife Andromache confront each other with diametrically opposed images of what a commander in his situation should do – Hector impelled to risk self-destruction for honour and glory, Andromache urging caution and defensive tactics that will save his life and delay the city's fall – it remains an open question whether her advice would have seemed feeble and womanly or deft and subtle when the poem first took shape.³⁰ As long as the Homeric poems remain our sole useful witness to the world-view of their own author(s) and first audiences, the distinction between tradition and originality remains elusive.

Chasing the heroic age

One traditional response relies on cross-cultural comparison. Running through many responses to Homer are versions of the belief that the epics depict an *heroic age*, something that has emerged again and again at different times and places across the world. The basic principle (or myth) behind this goes back at least as far as Augustine, the idea that the historical development of mankind replicates that of a man growing up.³¹ In this scheme the third age of life, roughly the late teens, is the age of youthful ebullience and barely controllable violence, and the corresponding Third Age of the world was the period in which the Trojan War took place. This model reappeared in a new

²⁸ On the cognitive implications of the theory of oral composition, see Minchin 2001.

²⁹ Classic exposition by Martin 1989: 146–205.

³⁰ See Graziosi and Haubold 2003, and below, pp. 313–316.

³¹ See Burrow 1986 for an overview.

guise among nineteenth-century anthropologists, often in the form of the assertion that the same mentality could be found in peoples at the same stage of development – development typically measured in terms of increasing social and technological complexity. Andrew Lang’s enormously popular *Homer and his Age* (1893) declared its credentials with a picture on the frontispiece of Algonquin Indians in battle formation: it is no coincidence that Lang was intellectually close to E. B. Tylor, one of the key exponents of the theory of a universal ‘primitive culture’ found under parallel forms in societies at the same point in the sequence of development.³²

A less easily debunked version depends on a cross-cultural model of the epic poet as mouthpiece of an archaic tradition: a blind man with a stringed instrument who sings from inspired memory. The first parallel of this kind to infect Homeric scholarship was provided by the (genuine or bogus) poems of Ossian, which were published by Macpherson from the 1760s onwards with the accompaniment of Hugh Blair’s essay systematically comparing and contrasting Homer with the ‘Gaelic bard’.³³ As one resurgent national literature after another established its canon, a single work would be selected to fit into the Homeric slot: *Beowulf* for the English language, the *Song of Roland* for French, the *Nibelungenlied* for German and for Irish the prosimetric saga *Táin Bó Cuailnge* and the so-called Ulster Cycle to which it belongs. Outliers in this group were the heroic songs of the Serbian *guslar* tradition, which were recruited as the national heroic literature of the Serbian nation in the decades of resurgence up to the crisis of 1914.³⁴ Just as folklorists in northern and western Europe sought living poetic traditions that could be linked to the ancient literatures, so too the equivalent phenomena among the South Slavs were recruited for this role.³⁵ Moreover, by a strange twist of fortune a surviving offshoot of this tradition in Bosnia was used by Milman Parry as the basis for his newly scientific hypothesis on the oral-formulaic diction of Homeric poetry.³⁶ When Parry wrote that ‘when one hears the Southern Slavs sing their tales he has the overwhelming feeling that, in some way, he is hearing Homer’,³⁷ he was closing a loop that Hugh Blair had begun to construct a century-and-a-half beforehand.

³² Cox 2017. ³³ Clarke 2006.

³⁴ The classic anthology of Vuk Karadžić is edited and translated by Holton and Mihailovich 1997. For the (re)shaping of the song culture in response to the interference of Parry and others, see Čolaković 2006, discussed by Currie 2012a: 578–9.

³⁵ On the recruitment of song traditions in Serbian nationalism, see Judah 2010: 17–46.

³⁶ Parry 1971, with the subsequent scholarly tradition as traced by Jensen 2009.

³⁷ Parry 1971: 378 (from a paper first published in 1933).

Perhaps the most succinct and elegant expression of the idea of *heroic literature*, at least among English-speakers, was that set out by H. M. Chadwick, first in *The Heroic Age* (1912) and then (with Nora Chadwick) in a more nuanced form in the first volume of *The Growth of Literature* (1932). For the Chadwicks, the model is constructed on the following lines. An earlier, more settled and wealthier civilisation has collapsed; a period of confusion, disruption and impoverishment follows; in that period men of war form an inward-looking and privileged group, relying on strength in physical combat to protect their people or to seize control of other communities; and finally (a stage that was clarified only in the later book) in more peaceful but still impoverished times a poetic tradition enshrines the values of the earlier period as the stuff of legend and song. This model was applied most clearly in the equation of Homeric heroes, seen as a memory of the real-life ‘sackers of cities’ who thrive on the turmoil surrounding the collapse of Aegean civilisation at the end of the Bronze Age,³⁸ with the legendary warriors of the Celtic and Germanic literatures of medieval Europe, understood as re-evocations of the warlords who came to prominence in Europe after the collapse of Roman hegemony. For scholars working in this framework, it became routine to assume that the ethical values and conceptual norms, and even the details of narrative and imagery, of one such tradition could illuminate those of another.

Sometimes, indeed, the method seems powerful. In a famous passage Chadwick cited the scene in *Beowulf* where the doomed hero tells his followers how he wants to be buried:

Bid men of battle build me a tomb
 fair after fire, on the foreland by the sea
 that shall stand as a reminder of me to my people,
 towering high over Hronesness
 so that ocean travellers shall afterwards name it
 Beowulf's Barrow, bending in the distance
 their masted ships through the mists upon the sea.

(*Beowulf* 2802 ff., tr. Alexander 2001)

Taking the salient images of these lines – the hero looking to his own death, the memorial mound on a headland of the sea, the perpetuation of his fame in the name of that mound – Chadwick adduced a Homeric passage composed perhaps 1,500 years earlier.³⁹ Hector, foremost warrior of the Trojans, is about to fight a duel against a Greek champion, and declares to

³⁸ It is useful to compare the modern understanding of this relationship, for which see for example Finkelberg 2005.

³⁹ Chadwick 1912: 326.