

CLASSICAL LITERATURE

*An Epic Journey
from
Homer to Virgil
and Beyond*

RICHARD JENKYN'S

A detailed marble sculpture of a woman, likely a personification of a classical deity or muse, holding a laurel wreath. She is shown from the chest up, with her head tilted back and her right arm raised, holding the wreath. The sculpture is set against a dark background, and the lighting highlights the texture of the marble and the intricate details of the wreath.

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PREFACE

This book is about the literature of ancient Greece and Rome. So it is, among other things, a story – a account of what Greek and Latin authors invented and imagined, of what they learned from one another, of how their literature grew and flowered and changed. It is a story of lasting importance since western civilization was formed in classical antiquity by the Greeks, Romans and Jews, and a large part through what they thought and wrote. We need some appreciation of classical literature if we are fully to understand where our own culture came from and what it is.

But the subject is also compelling in itself. Classical literature includes some works that rank among the supreme achievements of the human mind. Here are brilliance, depth, originality, as well as a variety and daring which would surprise anyone who takes the word ‘classical’ to imply marmoreal correctitude. Like all literatures at all times, classical literature also includes authors of lesser calibre and they are part of the story too. However, I have supposed that readers are likely to want mainly two things: a reasonably full survey of the greatest authors, and a picture of the broad shape of literary history. I have tried to keep a balance between these two aims. ‘Literature’ for my purposes means writing that has an aesthetic intent or value. Accordingly, works on science, medicine, engineering, grammar, geography and so on do not appear; I have also left out most of the minor historians. Plato is a literary master of the first order, but otherwise I have considered philosophy only insofar as it has literary consequences.

‘Begin at the beginning,’ said the King of Hearts, ‘and go on till you come to the end: then stop.’ The first part of this command is easily obeyed, the second harder. To have included late antiquity, even were I qualified to do so, would have changed the balance of the book drastically. I have chosen to stop around AD 100, making an exception for the three great Latin writers active in the second century AD. Even so, a book covering two languages and a period of a thousand years must be selective. As it happens, a comprehensive and balanced account of classical literature is not possible even in principle, because the bulk of it is lost, and we are dependent on the accidents of survival (a matter that I discuss more fully in the second chapter). But in any case, I have naturally chosen to give most space to those works and authors whom I find most inspiring. However, that has not been the only criterion: some writers are hard to discuss without a good deal of historical background, because what remains of them is fragmentary or problematic, or simply because they stand apart from the mainstream of literary history. For one or more of these reasons I have described some areas compactly; in particular, comedy and oratory. The subjects that I have judged to be most essential are Homer, Greek tragedy, the greatest historians, and Virgil and the Latin golden age.

Much in this book is probably not controversial, but some things are, and readers should be warned that it gives a personal view. Indeed, it could hardly be otherwise: literature, if it is any good, demands the reader’s response, and literary history must make judgements, if it is to be more than a list of facts. This book is both a narrative and a survey of some individual authors. Much of what the ancients wrote was never meant to be more than useful, and among more ambitious works the quality varies greatly. My foremost aim, however, has been to present the best of what the Greeks and

Romans wrote, and to show, as well as I can, what makes it the best.

Chapter 1

HOMER

WRATH! – EUROPEAN literature begins not with the whimper of infancy, but with a bang. For ‘wrath’ is the first word of Homer’s *Iliad*. We do not in fact know that the *Iliad* is the earliest Greek poem that we have; the Greeks themselves debated whether Homer or Hesiod had the priority. But it was to be important to Greek life and culture for a thousand years and more that so commanding a masterpiece stood at the head of its literature. Naturally, such a work did not spring from nowhere; it is the summit of a submerged mountain, the culmination of a long poetic tradition about which we can know little.

The first civilization to arise on the mainland of Europe was the Mycenaean, named from Mycenae, its greatest city. It was at its peak in the middle of the second millennium BC, and the *Iliad* retains some memory of that time. The Mycenaeans spoke Greek and they knew the use of writing, although they may have employed it only for practical purposes, but with the decline of this culture writing disappeared, not to be introduced again until the eighth century. Until then, verse could only be composed in the poet’s head, for singing or recitation. Such must have been Homer’s ancestry – but was there a Homer at all, or were the *Iliad* and the other Homeric epic, the *Odyssey*, the products of many authors? That question has been debated since the end of the eighteenth century.

The issue was transformed by the discovery, some eighty years ago, that these poems belong to an oral tradition. Any reader of Homer soon becomes aware that there is much repetition. In particular phrases linking noun and adjective recur: ‘swift-footed Achilles’, ‘unharvested sea’, ‘cloud-gathering Zeus’, and so on. Such phrases, known in modern scholarship as formulae, are not only frequent, they are systematic. If the poet says that Achilles is doing something and wants him to occupy five syllables at the end of a line, he calls him ‘noble Achilles’. If he wants him to occupy seven syllables he calls him ‘swift-footed Achilles’. The system has no redundancy: each time the poet wants a person or thing to fill a given amount of metrical space, he has one such phrase and one only.

Moreover, these phrases have linguistic features which show that they must have been invented at different times; one or two of them are very ancient, centuries earlier than anyone whom we could call Homer. There are also some variations in dialect, which are metrically useful to the poet. Homeric language, therefore, could not have been spoken at any one time or place; it is a construction which must have been formed over generations and handed down orally.

If a piece of gossip circulates round a village, being continuously altered and embellished with each telling, we might not wish to attribute it to an author; the story is the product of the village collectively. An oral poem might be like that. On the other hand, a poem in an oral tradition need not be fully oral itself; the poet might learn to write, or dictate his work. Although scholars continue to disagree, we can now say with fair confidence that the *Iliad* as we know it is essentially the creation of a single mind, using traditional material, and that it was composed at the point of contact with writing.

There are two principal reasons for this. The first is that no one has been able to give a convincing account of how a work of such immense length could be transmitted by purely oral means. The second is more particular: in the poem's ninth book an embassy is sent to Achilles, and there are sometimes two ambassadors and sometimes three. Clearly there were originally two and the third was then added. A purely oral transmission should have corrected the anomaly. The only plausible explanation is that the poet changed his plan, did not adjust what he had already composed (after all, an oral poet has no concept of erasure), and the anomaly remained because the fact of writing had fixed it. The date of these two works is very uncertain. A common estimate is that the *Iliad* was composed in the late eighth century, but a good case can be made for a dating in the seventh. The *Odyssey* probably came into being between twenty and fifty years after the *Iliad*.

The Greeks possessed an enormous store of mythology, and a curious characteristic of classical literature, throughout its history, is that so much of it is based on myth. One among a number of heroic legends was the Troy story; it told that Paris, son of the Trojan king Priam, abducted Helen, wife of Menelaus, king of Sparta, and that to recover her an alliance commanded by Agamemnon, king of Mycenae, besieged Troy and destroyed it. The *Iliad* ('Tale of Troy') tells of an incident within this Trojan War. The *Odyssey* looks back on the war, and relates the subsequent adventures of one of its heroes. Much later, in the first century BC, Virgil told in the *Aeneid* how one of the Trojans escaped his city's destruction and founded a new people in Italy; and this became the central classic of Latin literature. The tale of Troy has thus come to have a large and enduring place in the western imagination.

There are simple plots in literature and there are complex plots; the *Iliad* has one of the greatest simple plots. During the siege of Troy, Agamemnon quarrels with Achilles, the best warrior in the army, and takes away his concubine Briseis. Achilles withdraws from battle. The sea-nymph Thetis, Achilles' mother, appeals to Zeus, king of the gods, who agrees to give the Trojans the upper hand in the fighting. Facing defeat, Agamemnon sends an embassy to Achilles, offering an enormous recompense and the return of Briseis. Unexpectedly, Achilles refuses, but yields to his friend Patroclus' entreaty to allow him to re-enter the fray. The Trojans' leading warrior, Hector, son of King Priam, kills Patroclus. The grief-stricken Achilles now returns to battle himself, kills Hector, and refuses to return his corpse. The gods tell him that they are angry at this; Priam comes alone to collect the body; and Hector is buried with full honours.

Every student knows that the Trojan War was fought between the Greeks and Trojans, and as far as Homer is concerned, every student is wrong. The Greeks have always called themselves Hellenes; the Romans, for some reason, called them Graeci, and Greeks they have been to most of the world ever since. But Homer never calls the besieging side Hellenes: they are Achaeans, or alternatively Argives or Danaans. The Trojans have the same language, gods and customs as their attackers, and are treated with equal sympathy. The *Iliad* is a story without villains: even the Trojan prince Paris, whose abduction of Helen was the cause of the war, is quite attractive, disarming in accepting his brother Hector's rebukes, and a usually brave and effective, if inconstant, warrior. The formulae tell a similar tale, for they are not meaningless: they present a good world, in which men are godlike, women beautiful, the earth fertile and the sea full of fish. The sense of the world's goodness is a part of the poem's tragic character: there is so much to lose.

When Aristotle in the fourth century analysed the nature of literature in his *Poetics*, and thereby invented literary theory, he observed that the Homeric epics each handle a single action. So the *Iliad* is not in fact the story of the Trojan War, but of one short episode within its ten-year length. After Homer, the work was divided into twenty-four books. Books 2 to 23 of the *Iliad* cover a period of one

three days; the first and last books extend the whole action to a few weeks. Such expansiveness might seem to make Wagner feel terse; yet Matthew Arnold, poet and critic, famously described Homer as 'eminently rapid'. This is true in two senses. Although the grand narrative unfolds across an immense distance, the battle scenes are a multiplicity of small incidents; there is no lingering. The speeches too are fast and forceful; the longest of them, Achilles' explosion in Book 9, is furious in its pace.

The *Iliad* is also rapid in metre. English verse scans by stress. Thus 'The cúrfew tólls the knéll pártíng dáy' is a five-foot iambic line, because an iambic foot is an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable, and that pattern comes five times. Ancient Greek, unlike its modern descendants, seems not to have had a significant stress, and ancient Greek verse scans by quantity – that is, by the length of time that it takes to speak a syllable. So an iambic foot in Greek is a short syllable followed by a long one (di-dum). The *Iliad*'s metre is the dactylic hexameter. There are six feet to the line; each of the feet may be either a dactyl (dum-di-di) or a spondee (dumdum), except for the last, which is always a spondee. The great majority of feet are dactyls. So the verse moves lightly: the combination of ease and speed with epic elevation is the essence of Homeric style. The hexameter is a very flexible and expressive form: it was to be used throughout antiquity for epic always, but for many other purposes as well.

The *Iliad* is strictly contained not only in time but in place. With one small exception in the first book, the human actors remain in the city of Troy or the plain outside it throughout. The gods are more mobile, but even they are usually seen gathered together on Mount Olympus, or present on the plain of Troy, or in transit between these places. The combination of breadth and concentration is again essential to the poem's character. It is a story about human beings that gives much space to the gods. Those gods caused surprise even to the Greeks. They can seem trivial, frivolous and careless. Plato in the fourth century would not allow Homer into his ideal republic, because his idea of the gods was unworthy and set a bad example; and the best literary critic of antiquity, an anonymous author usually known as Longinus, remarked that Homer seemed to him to have made his men gods and his gods men. Formulae such as 'equal to the gods' apparently confirm that impression. Men and gods may fight one another: the Achaean hero Diomedes actually manages to wound Ares and Aphrodite. Much that existed in Greek religion – pollution, oracles, hero cult, fertility cult, ecstatic cult – is kept out of the poem, although it indicates that it is aware of most of these things. Homer, or his tradition, has shaped a distinctive picture of the divine. In a few places he gives a mighty representation of the gods' numinous transcendence, but mostly he sucks the numen out of them. If a warrior meets a god in the field, his response is not to fall on his knees in worship, but to consider whether to stand or retreat.

This idea of the gods is, yet again, part of the poem's tragic vision. Gods differ from men in hardly more than two ways. First, gods are immortal, and men die. Elsewhere in Greek religion we find that great men, like Heracles, could be promoted and made gods after their death; other heroes, even if they did not become gods, were felt to have enduring power, and became the objects of cult, honoured with sacrifice or libations. In the *Iliad*, however, the division between mortals and immortals is absolute. So near and yet so far – that is the drama of the conception. Second, more loosely, gods are happy and men unhappy. Once more, the formulae tell the story: 'the blessed ones', gods 'living in ease', 'wretched mortals'. The Christian idea is that God loves us, and that is part of his greatness. To understand the *Iliad* we must invert that notion: the gods do not need to care, and therefore are the gods.

When Achilles chases Hector round the walls of Troy, the poet compares the scene to a chariot race, 'and all the gods looked on'. The comparison is telling: when we go to the big match, we believe ourselves to be passionately involved, but we leave the stadium and our lives are unchanged. The gods

too, of whom some support the Achaeans, others the Trojans, can seem passionately partisan, but in the end their emotions are superficial. One might compare the apocryphal Chinese curse: 'May you live in interesting times.' It is the gods' blessing to be flat and simple, and the curse of man to be interesting. The last book contains two reconciliations or comings together. That between the gods is fairly brief and straightforward. That between two men, Achilles and Priam, is far more difficult, complex and profound.

The *Iliad* uses little metaphor, with one huge exception: the formal simile. Most of the similes fall into one of a fairly small number of types. The commonest of these is the animal simile: a warrior like a lion or wolf or (once) a stubborn donkey. Many similes are taken from the natural world, and while single combat is the form of fighting that predominates in the poem, similes of clouds and waves are a way of representing mass battle. Similes help to enliven and diversify the battle narrative, but collectively they have a larger effect: they show the place of warfare within a world that contains so much else. That idea is also expressed by the shield that the god Hephaestus makes for Achilles. It depicts the whole world, with Ocean around its edges. A city under siege is one of the scenes upon it, but there are also images of marriage, dancing, reaping and vintaging. We are reminded that battle, of which our attention is so fiercely concentrated, is only one part of human experience.

Homer uses leaves as a simile several times. In every place but one the likeness is that of a multitude ('as many as the leaves . . .'). The exception is peculiar in another way too, for it is the only simile spoken by any character in the story other than Achilles, given to the colourless figure of Glaucus because the poet has an idea of his own that he wants to convey: 'As the generation of leaves so is that of men also. The wind sheds the leaves to the ground, but the forest burgeons and grows others, and they come forth in the season of spring.' We expect a plangent inflection, a sigh over the brevity of life, but instead we find a gathering energy – new growth, the inexhaustible vitality of the world. Here is the ethos of the whole poem in miniature, not low-spirited and melancholy but high-spirited and tragic. The poem is also down to earth. It celebrates everyday acts and appetites. When someone cooks meat, the poet describes the process. The description of fighting is in many ways stylized, but the actual killing is faced head on: bones smashed, guts spilled. The poem is not gruesome – death is always immediate – but it is direct and unflinching.

The *Iliad* is unusual in that its theme is not simply a hero but a hero's particular behaviour: the *Odyssey's* first word declares its subject to be a man, but the *Iliad* announces its subject not as Achilles but as Achilles' wrath. In most heroic story the protagonist needs courage and endurance to win through, but essentially he responds to the challenges that external circumstances lay upon him. Achilles, however, shapes his own story. It is made clear, for example, that any other hero would have accepted the fabulous recompense offered by the embassy. In much heroic story the leading man is a kind of splendid brute (Siegfried, for example, in German saga), but Achilles is intelligent. He was brought up by his father to be both a speaker of words and a doer of deeds. He says himself that he is the best of the Achaeans in battle, but others are superior in debate. For pure eloquence, though, he surpasses everyone in the poem. Even more unexpectedly, he is also an aesthete: when the ambassadors approach, they find him singing about the famous deeds of men, accompanying himself on the lyre. That makes him the *Iliad's* only poet and only musician.

In the *Odyssey* poets are honoured but subordinate people who perform in the halls of chieftains, a picture which surely reflects a historical reality. It was a remarkable idea to give the greatest warrior imagination and sensitivity. The poetry of his mind comes out in two strange similes that he uses. In his most furious speech he likens himself to a bird collecting morsels for her young and going hungry herself – an odd image, and for all his passion almost a humorous one. Later, talking to Patroclus, he

compares him to a little girl running alongside her mother and tugging her dress until the mother picks her up; that simile is teasing and affectionate, but also self-aware, for Achilles recognizes that he is going to give in to his friend's request. And both times this supreme example of masculinity has the quirkiness to compare himself to a female. No one else in the poem talks like this.

There are two strange people in the *Iliad*. The other is the enigmatic figure of Helen, also self-reflective and also an artist, who is first seen in the poem embroidering a tapestry on which she is depicting the Trojan War itself. How shall we judge Achilles, this unusual hero? One reading sees the *Iliad* as a moral tragedy pivoting on the embassy. On this account Achilles has been essentially in the right in his quarrel with Agamemnon, but when he turns down the embassy's offer, pride and anger have led him into error, and he only recovers his moral dignity at the end of the poem, in showing magnanimity to Priam. This interpretation owes much to the idea, which we shall meet again, that tragedy depicts an essentially good person who falls as the result of a fault of character or some particular error. The moral breadth of the *Iliad* is such that perhaps it allows this as one way of understanding the story, but it suggests that this is not the best or deepest way. Why does Achilles so unexpectedly refuse? Ajax, the last of the delegation to speak, tells him that the gods have put an implacable spirit in him 'for the sake of a girl, just one girl', and this has been taken for the voice of stalwart common sense. But Ajax cannot be right: Agamemnon has offered to return Briseis, and that is what Achilles principally wants, he is bound to accept the offer. The key lies elsewhere.

Odysseus, the first to speak, has been told what to say by Agamemnon, and he delivers the message more or less verbatim. But he wisely leaves out Agamemnon's last words: 'Let him be tamed . . . and submit to me, since I am the more kingly . . .' Achilles has not heard this, but it is as though he has, because in his great denunciation he refuses to marry Agamemnon's daughter, saying that he should find another Achaean for her, one who is 'more kingly'. Achilles differs from the other heroes not because he has seen less but because he has seen more deeply. Outwardly, Agamemnon has climbed down, but inwardly he is still asking his antagonist to yield. And the greatest of heroes must not yield. Achilles' father instructed him 'always to be the best and to excel over others'. That is the hero's imperative.

Homer shows the nature of heroism through a speech of Sarpedon to Glaucus; these two are Lycians fighting on the Trojans' side. Unlike the Trojans themselves, who are struggling for their survival, they fight as the Achaeans fight, because it is what heroes do. Sarpedon observes that the two are held in greatest honour among the Lycians, enjoying the best food and wine and possessing rich farmland, and therefore they should now stand in the front line, so that one of the Lycians may say, 'Not without fame do our kings rule over Lycia . . .' Sarpedon adds that if he could be ageless and immortal, 'neither would I myself fight among the first nor would I be urging you into battle glory-oriented men'. This is not an idea of social contract or duty to others: if he were fighting on the Lycian behalf, exemption from death would enable him to help them all the more. The hero's only duty is to himself: he has a certain position and he must act commensurately; he would be ashamed to do otherwise. Sarpedon does not want to fight: if he were immortal, he would not trouble to do so. The tragic paradox is that the fighting is worth while because it is useless, and because the greatest glory is only inches from the misery and humiliation of death.

Anthropologists distinguish between shame culture and guilt culture. The shame-culture ideal that Sarpedon expounds is not selfish in the ordinary sense of the word. It is the pursuit of virtue, of trying to be the most glorious human being that one can be, and the greatest glory is won in battle. Some people try to minimize the shame culture in the poem, feeling that it makes Homer look embarrassingly primitive; that is a great mistake. The shame culture is what makes the tragedy :

stark. If Sarpedon could feel that he was giving his life for others, or for his country, there would be some consolation. But that softening thought is absent. Does Achilles, for his part, feel guilt or remorse after Patroclus' death? Some have thought that he does, but if we attend to the poem we shall see that it is not so. True, Agamemnon uses the language of fault, wriggling awkwardly around the question of whether he is to blame or not, but that is one of the ways in which he and Achilles differ. Of his friend, Achilles says merely, 'I have lost him', bare words of heartbreaking simplicity. He reflects that he 'was not to help' Patroclus or 'be a saving light' to him: 'If only strife would perish from among gods and men, and anger . . .' 'I am not to blame,' says Agamemnon; 'I am to blame' Achilles might have said, but instead he neither condemns nor excuses himself. He looks inside himself from without and sees that there is anger in him. For Achilles that is a plain fact, not something that can be altered and repented. This stark objectivity is again part of the poem's tragic vision. Remorse can be comforting: it suggests that things could have been otherwise and better; it offers the hope of healing. Achilles does not have that consolation.

Before Hector faces Achilles, Homer gives us something rare in this poem, a soliloquy. We hear Hector talking to himself, and enter into his thoughts. Why does he go to meet his foe? His father and mother have told him, rightly, that Achilles will kill him, and that will be the end of Troy. And he is scared. The imperative is again shame: 'I feel shame before the Trojan men and Trojan women with their trailing robes, lest someone worse than I may say, "Hector trusting in his own might lost the people."' The terror and horror of the shame demand is that it compels him not only to his own humiliation but to the ruin of everyone he loves.

At the point of death Hector receives the momentary gift of second sight – an idea otherwise alien to the poem: he tells Achilles that Paris will kill him by Troy's Scaean Gate. This vision of a future event is ironic, for Hector has hitherto been the man who has not seen what lies ahead. In this he is contrasted with Achilles, who has known that if he continues to fight at Troy he will die there, and accepts that fate. What Achilles resists is the truth that he can do no more for Patroclus. He tries to do more to avenge him, attempting to mutilate Hector's body, killing prisoners at Patroclus' pyre, but this is all useless, and when Patroclus' ghost appears to him – ghosts too have hitherto seemed alien to the ethos of the *Iliad* – it can want only to be released into nothingness. Finally the gods show Achilles that he should put an end to his mourning and return Hector's body, for as the god Apollo says, 'the Destinies have put an enduring heart in men'. Or as Odysseus has earlier more dourly put it, one must bury whoever dies, hardening the heart, weeping for a day.

With Hector's death the story might seem more or less complete, but there are nearly two thousand more lines to come, and some astonishing surprises. Achilles holds funeral games for Patroclus' honour, and here the poet introduces a new tone: lively social comedy. A hitherto minor character becomes prominent, young Antilochus, high-spirited, shrewd, clever at manipulating his elders. He provokes Achilles to smile, for the first and only time in the poem – a great moment. Achilles himself is generous to Agamemnon, and gracious in soothing the bickering of others – irony in a man whose quarrel with Agamemnon has made the story, but for once a warming irony. And here we bid goodbye to the Achaean chieftains, Achilles alone excepted. This buoyant episode is a vital part of the tale, for it shows the hero restored to his society, but once the games are over, it is as though they had never been. Achilles returns to his obsessive mourning, refusing to eat or, despite his mother's urging, to sleep with a woman. He turns away from those ordinary appetites that the poem celebrates.

What follows astonishes Achilles himself: he marvels as Priam appears before him, unannounced and alone, come to ask for the return of Hector's corpse. The encounter is difficult: Achilles is edged

at one point threatening to kill the king if he provokes him further. The two men weep, and the sound of their weeping fills the house. They weep together, in a sense, but they also weep apart, for Priam weeps for Hector, and Achilles for his father, distant and bereft, and for Patroclus. An essential loneliness abides. But Achilles discovers in himself a new generosity: he returns part of the ransom that Priam has brought, himself laying it on Hector's body. He also speaks to Priam with a new pity, the same time studying his own situation and seeing its futility, 'since far from my country I sit in Troy, distressing you and your children'. But he does not think only of himself, for his vision is now enlarged: he declares that Zeus gives a mixture of good and ill to some, nothing but ill to others, and he contemplates the life of a wretched fugitive without honour. He recognizes, that is, that there are people whose lot is worse than his own. Then he encourages Priam to eat. In the midst of this sublime scene the poem does not disdain a simple truth: that when people have food and drink inside them they feel better. Only now do the two men enjoy one another's company.

But the poet remains unsentimental. Priam marvels at Achilles, a man who looks like the gods. Achilles marvels at Priam's noble mien and speech. A distance remains. In his last words Priam asks for a truce: for nine days they shall mourn Hector, on the tenth bury him, on the eleventh raise a mound, 'and on the twelfth we shall fight, if it must be'. Achilles is last seen sleeping with Briseis. He can now be dismissed from the poem; and the final part of it describes the mourning for Hector. The last major speeches in this intensely masculine poem are given to women, as his wife, his mother and Helen lament over him in turn.

The *Iliad's* conclusion shows natural appetites and rhythms restored: the man who had refused to eat has eaten and urged another to eat; the man who had refused sex is in bed with Briseis; Hector, once denied burial, receives the ritual honours, as the women keen over him and the body is burned. On the surface, we see rightness and goodness, and human nature has never seemed more splendid. Underneath, there is no change; Achilles has seen the uselessness and misery of his situation, but nothing can be done about it. The counterpoint between these things is profoundly tragic. The rituals for Hector conclude with a basic satisfaction, as at the end of a children's story: 'a glorious banquet in the halls of Priam'. Food and drink, those good, plain pleasures, are where we end. But beyond the immediate moment is war, with yet worse to come: Achilles will die, and Priam, and Troy be destroyed. It is the eleventh day, and on the morrow the fighting will resume, 'if it must be'. But Priam knew that the plea in those words was hopeless. The *Iliad* ends with feasting, and on the brink of hell.

THE *ODYSSEY* IS set ten years after the Trojan War. Odysseus has not returned home: the goddess Calypso has imprisoned him on a remote island, while his palace on his own island of Ithaca is occupied by local nobles, suitors for the hand of his wife Penelope. He has also incurred the enmity of Poseidon, god of the sea, for blinding his son, the cannibal giant Polyphemus. Zeus decrees that Calypso must let Odysseus go. Telemachus, Odysseus' son, leaves Ithaca in search of his father. Odysseus is shipwrecked, but makes landfall on the land of the Phaeacians, where he is found by the princess Nausicaa. In her parents' palace he tells his adventures, and how in stages he lost all his ships and companions. The adventures mostly involve monsters, like Polyphemus, but also the goddess Circe, with whom he had a dalliance, and an encounter with the spirits of the dead. Back in Ithaca, he is sheltered by the swineherd Eumaeus. Disguised as a beggar, Odysseus enters the palace and with his bow kills all the suitors. A coda ties up some loose ends.

Like the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey* can now be seen as essentially the creation of one great shaping mind working upon traditional material. Like other works, it may of course have suffered later alteration

interpolation; in particular, there has been much debate about whether its strangely scrappy ending is authentic. Who was the author? Almost everyone in antiquity supposed that Homer wrote both epics with only a very few 'separators' dissenting. The arguments for the poet of the *Odyssey* being a different man are of two kinds. The first kind is based on the linguistic details of the two poems; the second kind claims that the values and beliefs expressed in these works differ too much from one another to have come from the same mind. The linguistic evidence is ambiguous, and does not point entirely in one direction. The differences in ethos might be the consequence of a great imagination attempting a different kind of poem. The majority view today is that there were two poets, but the issue cannot be conclusively determined. We may, however, use 'Homer' as shorthand for the two poems taken together.

Clearly the *Odyssey* takes the *Iliad* as its pattern. Like the older poem it handles a single action: this is a tale of what the Greeks called *nostos*, 'homecoming' – how Odysseus returned and slew the suitors. The *Odyssey* is therefore not an odyssey, in the modern sense of the term: the hero relates his years of wandering in retrospect. We saw that the *Iliad* is as tightly controlled in space as in time, and here the *Odyssey* is in extreme contrast: Odysseus begins at the furthest distance imaginable, on an island in outer Ocean, and the narrative takes him into ever smaller spaces, first back into the Mediterranean world, then to his island, to his house, and lastly to the most narrow and intimate place in bed with his wife. And this, as an ancient scholar observed, is the 'end' of the poem, the goal towards which the whole story has been moving.

The *Odyssey* also contrasts with the *Iliad* in the breadth of its social range. The cast includes slaves and beggars and even a dog, and Odysseus apart, most of the more interesting characters are women. Recurrent in the poem are the themes of hospitality and test. People are tested by the treatment of strangers and the destitute. The suitors are bad hosts (they treat strangers with contempt); Polyphemus is a very bad host (he eats them). Alcinous, king of the Phaeacians, is a good host, but so is the slave Eumaeus. 'All strangers and beggars are from Zeus,' says Alcinous' daughter Nausicaa, 'and giving is a small thing and welcome.' Much later Eumaeus speaks the very same words, with a humble addition, 'giving, such as mine'. Princess and pigman can alike be hospitable. But the *Odyssey* remains aristocratic in its values: slaves and subordinates are required to be loyal and the disloyal are savagely punished.

Unlike the *Iliad*, this poem has a sub-plot. Indeed, Odysseus himself does not appear until the fifth book. Until then, the tale is of Telemachus, who moves outwards as his father moves inwards. He leaves Ithaca, visiting King Nestor, who had fought at Troy, and then the glamorous court of Menelaus and Helen at Sparta, which seems to his young eyes like the house of Zeus himself. When he returns home, the suitors notice in him an assurance that he had lacked before; and when his mother tells him to go off, he replies, 'I know and understand everything in my spirit, both the good and the bad; before I was still a baby.' Later, he will order her to her room, and she will obey in amazement, 'for she laid her son's shrewd words to her spirit'. He is now a man. His tale is the ultimate ancestor of the *Bildungsroman*, the story of a person's growth and formation.

Telemachus' adventure does not at all advance the main plot, but the poet likes to put different stories beside each other. We can see this with the hero himself. For there seem to be two kinds of Odysseus in the poem: there is the folk-tale trickster, cousin to Sinbad the Sailor and Jack the Giant Killer, and there is the heroic warrior whom we met in the *Iliad*. Far from trying to disguise this doubleness, the poet enjoys it. The lying stories that Odysseus tells in the main narrative after his return to Ithaca, when he needs to conceal who he is, refer to real places, like Crete and Egypt; his 'real' adventures occur nowhere that we know at all. He begins his wanderings in the familiar world

the Aegean, but once he has been blown west of Greece in a great storm he enters fairyland. Inhabitants are gods or monsters or, if human, monstrous, like the cannibal Laestrygonians or the lethally entrancing Lotos-eaters. Some of these stories are likely to have been borrowed from other places, especially the saga of the Argonauts, as the poet seems cheekily to acknowledge when he has Odysseus describe the clashing rocks which, he says, had previously been passed only by the 'Argonauts known to everybody'.

The poet also enjoys the transition between fairyland and our own familiar world, for he invents the land of the Phaeacians, delicately poised between the two. Their world is half magical: their ships can steer themselves, King Alcinous' garden is fresh at every season, the gods visit them. But they are also reassuringly ordinary, and treated with delicate humour. Alcinous proposes some sporting contests 'so that the stranger may tell his friends when he returns home' how his people excel at these things. After Odysseus beats them all, Alcinous observes blandly that they are not outstanding sportsmen, but that they like feasting, hot baths and changes of clothing, and (in the same language as before) that the stranger will be able to report that they excel in dancing and song. It takes no great skill, we may reflect, to enjoy good food and fresh linen. The Phaeacians are both everyday and elusive, and in the end they disappear from the story in the middle of a sentence: 'Thus the leaders and rulers of the people of the Phaeacians prayed to lord Poseidon, standing round the altar, while noble Odysseus awoke . . .' We never learn whether their prayer to Poseidon, who has threatened to punish them for helping the hero, is granted; indeed no one will see them again, for Alcinous has decided that they shall have no further dealings with other mortal men. It is curiously fitting that they should fade from the poem with this mysterious evanescence.

There are five principal women in Odysseus' life. Three of them he meets in the course of his wanderings, and each of these is seen in a landscape expressive of her character. The goddess Circe first tries to turn the hero into a pig, then has an affair with him, then freely helps him on his way. She is, as it were, a divinized *demimondaine*, easy come, easy go. Her palace of polished stone set among forest and thicket conveys her mixture of wildness and sophistication. In a world of palaces, Calypso dwells in a cave, aromatic with burning cedar and juniper, with a vine rich in clusters running around its mouth. Outside is a wood of alder, poplar and sweet-smelling cypress. Dark, hidden, heavy with fruitage, this is the landscape of passion. Unlike these two, Nausicaa is a mortal woman, and yet she shares an aura of divinity, for the poet compares her to Artemis, and Odysseus tactfully asks her if she is a mortal or a goddess, Artemis perhaps. Odysseus first sees her by the stream of a clear-flowing river, the natural landscape for a young maiden, while he himself, naked and shaggy, is hiding in rough brushwood.

Like the Phaeacians as a whole, Nausicaa blends the charms of domesticity with the enchantment of distance. She has come with her maidens ostensibly to wash her menfolk's clothes. But she has another thought in mind when she asked her father's permission for the excursion, and he in turn realized this but said nothing about it. This gentle comedy has a moral element, in a poem much concerned with civility: reticence is a form of good manners. The scene of Nausicaa and her girls playing ball – a dance, not a competition – is the first depiction of ordinary, simple happiness. And nothing is to shatter it. She is clearly attracted to the stranger, and we seem to have here the beginning of a folk-tale pattern: the traveller who comes to a far land and marries the king's daughter. But Odysseus cannot marry Nausicaa, because he has a wife already. The poet could have contrived a tale of heartbreak, but he does something more subtle. She fades from the story, returning only when Odysseus is feasting with the Phaeacian nobles. Standing at a distance, she speaks two lines only: 'Farewell, stranger' – for she has not even learned his name – 'so that when you are in your homeland

you may still remember me, since you owe me thanks for first saving you.’ Odysseus briefly promises to remember her with honour, and that is all. The pathos is very light, the poet masterly in his restraint.

A fourth woman in Odysseus’ life is his particular patron and protector, the goddess Athena. When he arrives on Ithaca, he encounters a herdsman, and prudently tells him a lying story about who he is. But the trickster has been tricked: the herdsman is Athena disguised, who grasps him and declares delightedly that even a god would have to be crafty to outwit him. There is something like friendship in this, such as one could not imagine between an Olympian and a mortal in the *Iliad*. The Olympian gods in general now have a more overtly moral function. Zeus delivers the first speech in the poem and there sets out the rules: mortals suffer also from their own follies, like Aegisthus, who committed crimes against which the gods had warned him. And the poem itself is more overtly moral, declaring that Odysseus’ men likewise perished through their own folly, for they ate the cattle of the Sun. This sounds grim indeed, but adventure stories often depend on the suspension of ordinary sympathies; in a western we do not mind if many subordinate characters are killed, provided that the hero and heroine survive. Similarly, although Odysseus loses every one of his companions, and there are many other killings, the poem is essentially a comedy: the hero triumphs and the transgressors die.

It would be wrong, however, to deduce from this that the *Odyssey* inhabits a different moral universe from the *Iliad*: the difference is rather a matter of the sort of story that each is. Both poems are, in a sense, experiments in feeling. In the country of the good king, Odysseus tells Penelope, the black earth bears wheat and barley, the trees are laden with fruit, the sea gives fish in abundance, and the people prosper. That was not something that anyone was likely to believe literally in the bleak circumstances of dark-age Greece. We might instead be guided by Miss Prism: ‘The good ends happily and the bad unhappily. That is what fiction means.’

When Odysseus tells the Phaeacians his name, he also says that he comes from Ithaca and gives the names of the three islands near it, describing how they sit in relation to one another. He is fixing himself, giving his coordinates, as it were; Ithaca has its individuality, just as he has. He adds that his home is ‘rough but a good nurse of young men’, and explains how he rejected Calypso and Circe because nothing is sweeter than home and parents, however splendid a foreign palace may be. Here literature begins the exploration of identity and belonging. Ithaca may not be the finest place, but it is where his affections are attached, ‘a poor thing but mine own’. Likewise, he has rejected Calypso’s beauty and offer of immortality in favour of the lesser beauty of mortal Penelope. Critics have sometimes asked whether it is Penelope or his possessions that Odysseus really wants back, but the man himself might find no need to make the distinction. The poem places a high value on the marriage relation. Odysseus tells Nausicaa that there is nothing better than when a man and woman live together in harmony; it brings pain to their enemies, joy to their friends – and then follows a phrase of puzzling Greek. It may mean only ‘and they themselves are in high repute’, but possibly means ‘and they know it best themselves’. If the latter is the case, the words are a tribute to the private depths of married love.

Penelope is the fifth, and ultimately the most important, woman in Odysseus’ life. One of the *Odyssey*’s puzzles is why she is unable to recognize him, although his dog and his old nanny can readily do so. In naturalistic terms there can be no answer. Even before Odysseus reaches the palace she seems seized by a new hilarity. After he comes, in disguise, she is inspired to display herself to the suitors and make their hearts flutter, so that she may win more honour from her son and husband, and she laughs at her idle thought. It is as if she knew: somehow the mere fact of Odysseus’ presence illuminates her, without her knowing how. Her trouble in finally recognizing him is inexplicable but

mysteriously fitting: it is harder for her because there is so much more at stake. We can compare the ending of the *Iliad*: in both poems the hero is made whole through the sexual act; in both, a public restoration is followed by a private one; and in both, the private one is more complex and difficult because it goes deeper into the heart of the human condition.

But whereas the *Iliad* suggests the ultimate loneliness of the hero, the *Odyssey* is a social poem. Most of it takes place on islands. Islands can be places of isolation, like Calypso's Ogygia or Circe's Aiaia, but they can also be the units within which a whole society is contained, as is Ithaca. The *Odyssey* studies both man the individual and man as a social animal, and understands that these two elements of human experience are indivisible: at the end of it the hero has recovered his people, his property and his most private place.

Chapter 2

ARCHAIC GREECE

THROUGHOUT ANTIQUITY the Homeric epics enjoyed a special prominence and authority. The Greeks had no sacred texts, in the sense of a body of canonical scripture demanding assent. This left a gap for another kind of text to assume a commanding cultural authority, and Homer filled the gap. These poems were the common possession of the Greeks. Aeschylus is alleged to have said that his plays were merely slices cut from the great banquet of Homer. The idea in this seems to be less that the plots for tragedies were drawn from Homer (in most cases they were not) than that Homer provided the pattern by which human experience might be nobly represented. As we shall see, the first true history-writing too was to be regarded, with reason, as Homeric in character. Homer's example may also have strengthened the Greeks' attachment to mythology as a source for imaginative literature. But from the start there was always a quite different strand of hexameter poetry. As with the *Iliad*, its first representative, Hesiod, is probably the inheritor of a long tradition of verse that only becomes visible to us at the point where it could first be written down.

Hesiod came from the rough mountains that formed the southern rim of the territory of Boeotia north-west of Attica; he was active around 700 BC. Two of his poems remain essentially complete: the *Theogony* ('Birth of the Gods') and *Works and Days*. To turn from Homer to *Works and Days* is to exchange the past for the present and heroism for hard scrabble. This is a didactic poem, and an aid to living. The 'days' at the end of the piece are a list of lucky and unlucky times: the thirteenth of the month is a bad day for sowing but good for setting plants out; geld pigs and cattle on the eighth and mules on the twelfth. This is useful information. The 'works' have much in common with the 'wisdom literature' found in various Near Eastern cultures, and most familiar to us from the Book of Proverbs in the Old Testament. There are adages conveying proverbial wisdom, often pungently expressed, and nuggets of gnomic instruction. Drink freely from the wine jar when it is full (the poet advises) and when it is running out, but be sparing with it in between. This is useful too, advising the hearer how best to make life tolerable in tough conditions.

Works and Days also contains aetiologies; that is, 'just so' stories which explain the origin of things. Thus the story of Prometheus (told in its full form only in the *Theogony*) explains where fire came from and why the gods get hardly any of the meat after a sacrifice. The story of the ages (the gods created and then destroyed first a golden race of men, then silver, then bronze, and we are now in the age of iron) is a 'soft primitivist' myth – a myth, that is, which supposes that mankind has lost an original paradise (like the story of the Garden of Eden). And Hesiod adds another element to the myth himself. He gives us details about his family, his experiences and his way of life, and he is thus Europe's first individual. He reveals that his father migrated from Asia Minor to Boeotia and that he lives himself in Ascra, which he calls 'a miserable village, bad in winter, harsh in summer, never good'. He also says that he has never been to sea, except once, when he crossed from Aulis in Boeotia

to Chalcis on the island of Euboea, where he won a poetry prize. This is wryly humorous: Chalcis is less than two hundred yards from the mainland. Some of his moral admonitions are addressed to the powerful generally, others to his brother Perses, with whom he has quarrelled over an inheritance. This is odd but vivid, and gives the poem a tang of individuality.

The dour peasant flavour of his work does not mean that he lacked the epic poet's high sense of his calling. He tells in the *Theogony* of how the Muses visited him as he was tending his lambs on Mount Helicon, gave him a staff and breathed into him a divine voice. This poem tells how Earth bore Sky and Night bore Air and Day, how Sky lay with Earth and bore Ocean and other Titans, how Sky was castrated by Cronus his son. We naturally categorize the *Theogony* as poetry and as mythology, but there is another way of looking at the matter. The poem is an attempt to explain how the world came into being, by what laws it is governed, and why the human condition has come to be as it is. We can see here the prehistory of Greek science and Greek thought.

The early Greek thinkers have become known, with the wisdom of hindsight, as the Presocratics – the ones before Socrates (469–399). Thales, the first of them (in the early sixth century), said that all things are full of gods. Is this theology? He said that water is the beginning of all things. Is this physics? Later, in the fifth century, Empedocles said that the world is a balance or conflict between Love and Strife (and he mythologized these forces as the gods Aphrodite and Ares). Again, this does not easily fit our modern categories. Homer had been both poet and historian: he appeals to the Muses before, of all things, his dry catalogue of the Achaean fleet that sailed to Troy, because they have knowledge and we know nothing. But the achievement of Greek thought in the sixth and fifth centuries was to discover differences. They learned that fact was different from fiction, history from myth, natural science from philosophy. These are not the obvious truths that they seem to us. They also learned to separate the functions of verse and prose. Some of the Presocratics wrote in prose, but others used verse, Empedocles being the last of them. His surviving fragments convey strength and energy.

THE *ILIAD* AND *Odyssey* always stood alone in scale and quality, but in the seventh and sixth centuries other epics appeared about heroes and heroic events; some of these were as much as half the length of the Homeric pair. We have only very meagre remnants of them. However, a number of 'Homeric hymns' have survived, so called because they were attributed to the supposed author of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. These are not hymns in the modern sense but poems in honour of gods and goddesses usually narrating some event in which they were concerned; they vary in size from a handful of lines to more than five hundred. Most of the authors of archaic Greece – that is, the period from the eighth century to the early fifth century – whom we know at all exist today only in a few fragments, and this circumstance forces us to take account of how classical texts have survived.

Until late antiquity the usual form of a book was a papyrus roll. The amount of writing that could be fitted on to a roll without it becoming unmanageable was limited: in a verse text two thousand lines seems to have been an absolute maximum, and most verse books are half that or less. So longer works were divided into books, which were much shorter than the word 'book' suggests to us. The book as we think of it today, a sequence of sheets bound together – technically a codex – first appeared around the first century AD, and gradually became the dominant form. In a world without printing, texts endured only if they were repeatedly copied. Most of the classical literature that we have comes down to us in a manuscript tradition, that is to say from one or more manuscripts copied from an earlier manuscript at some time in the Middle Ages. All these manuscripts are copies of copies of copies; we have no autograph text of any classical author. For some texts the oldest manuscript remaining was

written in the ninth century AD, but often it dates from some centuries later. In rare cases the manuscripts are earlier; thus we have a few manuscripts of Virgil, always the most widely read and admired of Latin poets, dating from the fifth or sixth centuries, none of which is complete. Some scribes make corrections; all scribes make mistakes. So the texts of all classical authors have suffered some degree of distortion. To describe a surviving text as complete, therefore, is to make an approximate statement, which does not mean that we have every single word; not only may the scribe have written the wrong word, but sentences may have been added or left out; in some cases fifty lines or more have gone missing.

Works survived only if people went on wanting to read them. Some very dull works of history survive because they were useful for teaching and learning. Greek lyric poetry perished because people lost interest. Even so, losses and survivals could be chancy. Homer and Virgil were pretty sure to endure because they were part of every schoolboy's education, but otherwise even the best authors were insecure. Among the Latin poets of the first century BC Lucretius and Catullus remain, while Gallus and Varius have perished, but it might have been different; these lost authors were much admired in their time. Our entire knowledge of Catullus, one poem apart, comes from a ninth-century manuscript found in the fourteenth century and copied before it was lost again. Our entire knowledge of Lucretius comes from two ninth-century manuscripts deriving from an earlier manuscript long lost. In the eighth century a scribe began to copy out the *Thyestes* of Varius and then changed his mind, thus destroying our chance of reading the most important drama of the Augustan age.

There are ways in which words which have not descended in a manuscript tradition can nevertheless survive, three in particular. They may be quoted by other authors. They may have been inscribed in bronze or stone. Or they may be found on papyrus. Papyri, mostly unearthed in upper Egypt from the late nineteenth century onward, have transformed our understanding of some areas of Greek literature, lyric poetry and comedy among them. Occasionally a papyrus gives us a text complete, but far more often these are literally tattered fragments, scraps ragged at the edges, or with holes in them. These accidents have an important consequence for the interpretation of classical literature, because they limit our ability to give a balanced history of it at any period. The Roman historian Velleius Paterculus, in the first half of the first century AD, thought that Rabirius, lost to us, was the best of the Augustan poets after Virgil. Would we agree? If Lucretius had perished, we would not have guessed his greatness or his influence. With Gallus and Varius we are left guessing. We should be guided by the spirit of Socrates, who allowed that he might after all be the wisest of men because at least he knew that he knew nothing, whereas the rest knew not even that.

BESIDES THE HEXAMETER, another verse form was widely used throughout the whole length of classical antiquity: this was elegy. For the Greeks the genre of elegy was defined simply by its metre: it was a verse composed in the elegiac couplet. This consists of an alternation between hexameter and pentameter. The hexameter is as in Homer; the pentameter is symmetrical: it takes the metre of the hexameter's first two and a half feet, and then repeats it. The last two feet are always dactylic. Tennyson provides an English example of this couplet, scanned in the Greek way by quantity, not stress:

These lame hexameters the strong-winged music of Homer!
No – but a most burlesque barbarous experiment.

The couplet structure encouraged poets to think and compose in blocks of two lines; it was admirable

suitable to epigram and to verse that aimed at neatness and concision, but given its comparative inflexibility its great popularity throughout antiquity is perhaps surprising.

The word 'elegy' would come to be associated in the western tradition with two subjects, love and lamentation, but from the start this metrical form was actually used for many purposes. Tyrtaeus and Callinus in the mid-seventh century BC wrote martial stuff, stiffening the sinews of the young, and the Athenian statesman Solon (died c.560) used it for his policy statements. The largest corpus of early elegy to survive is attributed to Theognis (mid-sixth century), but the greater part of it is not his, and so he has had the misfortune to become as much a problem as a poet. Another sixth-century elegist was the ironic Xenophanes. He observed that the Germans' gods have blond hair, like themselves, and added that if horses had gods they would look like horses. That was not scepticism; rather, a lively but serious attempt to probe the nature of the divine, to argue that the anthropomorphic idea of the gods was merely a local representation of a deeper reality. He is also classed among the Presocratics, and indeed he shows how indivisible poetry and philosophy might be at this time.

The most appealing fragments of early elegy come, in the late seventh century, from Mimnermus, in whom we first meet a note of voluptuous pessimism which has sounded in later European literature from time to time. He was also to give to the simile of leaves the plangent quality that seems so natural to us: we are like leaves that open out in the spring sunshine, and like them our time is brief. Death comes soon, or age, and once our prime is past it is better to die than live. What is life, he asks in another poem, what is pleasurable, without golden Aphrodite? Once hidden love and gifts and beauty, those flowers of youth, are over, may he die, for old age is wearisome and despised. Even nature can seem languid in his view: the Sun's lot is labour every day, and there is never rest for him. At the risk of anachronism, one may fancy a touch of Ecclesiastes in all this, and a touch of Oscar Wilde. Some of his verses seem to have been rather different from those that we can still read, but the Alexandrian scholar poet Callimachus in the third century was to reckon him more successful on the small scale than the large.

Archilochus (who died c.652) used elegiacs for an epigram declaring that he had abandoned his shield on the field of battle; never mind, he will soon get another as good. This deliberately flouted the code of honour. Archilochus is Europe's first pain in the neck: perhaps he was original in this, or perhaps he is the earliest survivor from an older tradition of cussedness. Mostly, however, he used metres based on the trochee (long short) and the iambus (short long); *iambi* was to become a term for invective verse. The most scabrous of invective poets was to be Hipponax (in the late sixth century), a bawdy thief and brawler who favoured the 'limping iambic', a line in which a spondee replaces the iambus in the last foot. His was the name most often invoked by later poets when they wanted to be abusive.

Archilochus was sometimes a purveyor of proverbial wisdom ('The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog one big thing'), and he had an eye: his description of the island of Thasos, 'like a donkey's back, crowned with wild woodland', is the first description, as far as we know, that conveys the individual character of a named landscape in the real world. He was notorious for his abuse of one Lycambes, supposedly because he had betrothed his daughter Neobule to Archilochus and then broken the agreement. His verses told about his and others' sexual activity with her in explicit terms; in one poem he rejects her contemptuously and seduces her sister instead. The longest surviving piece of archaic iambics is a mid-seventh-century exercise in misogyny by Semonides of Amorgos, in which different types of women are likened to different animals (all unpleasant, except for the woman like a bee). It is not much fun.

THE TERM 'LYRIC' had a more precise meaning for the Greeks than it has for us: lyric verse was very often written in order to be sung. The lyric poets fell into two classes: the monodists, who wrote pieces for themselves or for some other single person to sing; and those who wrote for choral performance. These two classes were distinguished by metrical form. The monodists chose their stanzas from a repertoire of known stanza forms: the menu was large but not unlimited. Some of these forms are named from the poets who principally used them, and are likely to have invented them: the sapphic and alcaic stanzas, for example. The choral poet, on the other hand, devised a new stanza for each work. Typically he would write a 'strophe' (a stanza, literally a 'turn'), followed by an answering stanza (the 'antistrophe') in identical metre (and presumably using the same tune); there would then usually follow an 'epode', in a variant of the preceding metre. This pattern could then be repeated once or more times. The Greek dramatists were to compose their choral lyrics on the same principle.

The scholars of Alexandria, which became a centre of learning and research in the third century BC, collected the works of those whom they judged to be the nine best lyric poets, thus forming a canon. The earliest of these is Alcman, who lived and worked in the second half of the seventh century BC in Sparta, before it had fully developed the militarism for which it would become famous. He was especially known for 'maiden songs', composed for performance by choirs of young women. Typically these pieces seem to have had the maidens bantering among themselves, and they admit a good deal of homoerotic sentiment. One includes the words '. . . with desire that loosens the limbs and she makes glances more melting than sleep and death'. This is the first time in European literature that sex is associated with death, an unexpectedly *Tristan*-like note in this archaic place. Elsewhere, in a context unknown, he was the first to expand the pathetic fallacy beyond a word or phrase: 'No sleep the mountain peaks and gullies, the headlands and torrents' – and he adds beasts and bees, the 'monsters in the depths of the purple sea' and 'the tribes of long-winged birds'. Four hexameter lines also remain, in which he speaks in his own person, lamenting his old age and telling the honey-voiced maidens that his limbs can no longer carry him in the dance. If only he were that dark-blue seabird which flies with the halcyons over the flower of the wave, having a resolute heart. More than fifty lines of one maiden song survive, apparently simple in expression, yet remarkably difficult to interpret. But we hear a distinctive if elusive voice.

The earliest monodists of whom we have knowledge, Sappho and Alcaeus, both came from the island of Lesbos. She was born around 630, he perhaps a little later. Most monodists performed their pieces at the *sumposion* (in anglicized form, 'symposium'). The word means 'drinking party', and these all-male gatherings were an important social institution. Sappho could not be part of them; instead, she seems to have been at the centre of a changing circle of young women, in which homoerotic feelings could be openly expressed. Vulnerability is the spur to love poetry; it is when the beloved is able to say no that the poet has something to write about. Greek men typically had sexual relations with two types of woman: their wives, who obeyed, and prostitutes, whom they paid. So it is no accident that the best Greek love poetry is homosexual, for the boy must be courted, and he can refuse. The best love poet of all was doubly vulnerable, being both homosexual and a woman: not only can the girl say no, but she will in due course go off to get married. Indeed, several of Sappho's poems are concerned with parting or absence.

We are lucky to have one substantial poem of hers surviving complete; that this counts as luck shows how scant are the remains of lyric verse. It is a hymn or prayer to Aphrodite, but a prayer unlike any other. The goddess is addressed as dapple-throned, immortal, weaver-of-wiles: she is a fascinating mixture, remote, glittering, mischievous. In simple words, Sappho asks for her help, and recalls her previous visit, when she came from her father's house in her golden chariot, drawn by sparrows over

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