

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.I)

- Introduction to Homeric Epic
 - The Epic Cycle: The Story of the Trojan War
 - Milman Parry and Oral Poetry
- *The Iliad*, Book 1: Overview and Analysis
- Grammar 2: Adjectives and Adverbs

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.I)

The Epic Cycle

- collectively, the poems and stories of the Trojan War are called the **epic cycle**
- put together, the poems of the epic cycle originally told the complete story of the Trojan War
- from its cause through the return of the Greek warriors to their homelands

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.I)

The Epic Cycle

- the epic poem, *The Cypria* (now lost), narrated the first episode of the Trojan War, the background to Homer's epics
- named for Aphrodite (also called Cypria)
- the island of Cypros was a center of Aphrodite worship

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.I)

The Epic Cycle

- we know about other epic poems (also lost now), e.g.
 - *The Little Iliad*
 - *The Aethiopis*
 - *The Iliupersis* (“The Sack of Troy”)

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.I)

The Epic Cycle

- *The Iliad* (Homer)
 - the story of Achilles
 - set near the end of the Trojan War
- *The Odyssey* (Homer)
 - story of the *nostos* (“return home”) of Odysseus

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.I)

The Cypria

Thetis (an Oceanid)

- an oracle says that Thetis' son will be greater than his father
- a warning to Zeus not to have sex with her
- so Zeus arranges to marry Thetis off to a mortal named **Peleus** (a Greek king)
- Achilles is the child they will have

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.I)

The Cypria

Eris (the goddess of Discord)

- she was not invited to the wedding of Peleus and Thetis
- out of anger, she crashes the wedding and throws the “apple of discord” into the midst of the festivities

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.I)

The Cypria

Eris (the goddess of Discord)

- inscribed on the apple is the Greek word ΚΑΛΛΙΣΤΗΙ (“for the most beautiful”)
- three goddesses claim to be “the fairest”: Hera, Athena and Aphrodite

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.I)

The Cypria

The Judgment of Paris

- Zeus defers the decision of choosing “the fairest” to the mortal **Paris** of Troy (also called **Alexander**)
- the goddesses appear before him
- each goddess attempts to bribe him

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.I)

The Cypria

The Judgment of Paris

- Aphrodite promises Paris the most beautiful woman in the world, Helen
- Helen is currently the wife of Menelaus, the king of Sparta
- Paris chooses Aphrodite

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.I)

The Cypria

Leda (the mother of Helen)

- a mortal woman ravished by Zeus, when Zeus is disguised as a swan
- subsequently, Leda lays two eggs (?)
- from each egg come two children: Helen and Pollux, Clytemnestra and Castor
- Castor and Pollux are the Gemini

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.I)

The Cypria

- Helen grows up to be very beautiful and is pursued by many men
- to avoid bloody conflicts, her suitors agree to pick a husband for her at random
- thus, the **Oath of the Suitors**: they all swear to defend with arms the winner's right to have Helen

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.I)

The Cypria

- Menelaus, the King of Sparta, is allotted Helen's hand in marriage
- his brother Agamemnon, the King of Mycenae, takes Helen's sister Clytemnestra as the "booby prize"
- Clytemnestra will kill Agamemnon when he returns home in victory to Mycenae

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.I)

The Cypria

- because Aprodite promised Helen to Paris in the Judgment of Paris, she helps Paris abduct Helen
- Helen and Paris run away to Troy
- Menelaus calls for the suitors' assistance
- Agamemnon organizes a naval expedition against the Trojans

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.I)

The Cypria

- Agamemnon marshalls the Greek forces at **Aulis** (a seaport in NE Greece)
- but Artemis sends contrary winds and the Greeks cannot leave the harbor
- priests of Artemis tell Agamemnon that, to pay for some sin he committed, he must sacrifice his oldest daughter **Iphigenia**

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.I)

The Cypria

- Agamemnon tricks his wife Clytemnestra into bringing Iphigenia to Aulis
- he claims he has arranged for the girl to wed the hero Achilles
- instead, he sacrifices her over the altar where he said she would be married

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.I)

The Cypria

Achilles

- the central figure of the Trojan War
- the son of Peleus and Thetis, the couple at whose wedding Eris threw the apple of discord and the Trojan War was born
- thus, he is born from the oracle which predicted Thetis' child would be greater than his father

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.I)

The Cypria

Achilles

- another oracle predicts he will die in the Trojan War
- in an effort to circumvent this fate, Thetis dips him in the Styx River
- contact with the “waters of death” makes him invulnerable to weapons of any sort

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.I)

The Cypria

Achilles

- but Thetis holds him by the heel
- from this comes the modern phrase “an Achilles’ heel” (a weak point)
- also, the Achilles tendon (near the heel)
- eventually, Achilles will be killed by a poisoned arrow shot into his heel

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.I)

Analysis of The Cypria

- *The Cypria* was clearly designed to clarify unexplained features of Homer's story
- e.g. the Oath of the Suitors explains why all sorts of different Greek warriors are fighting at Troy over one man's wife
- Achilles in the Styx explains why he's never wounded even once in *The Iliad*

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.I)

Analysis of The Cypria

- the Sacrifice of Iphigenia explains why Clytemnestra hates Agamemnon so much that she kills him when he returns home from Troy
- the Judgment of Paris explains why Hera and Athena hate the Trojans, and Aphrodite supports them

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.I)

Analysis of The Cypria

- Conclusion: if *The Cypria* is “explaining” the story found in Homer, it must have been written **after** Homer composed his epics
- thus, even if *The Cypria* narrates an earlier episode in the Trojan War, it must have been written later than Homer’s epics
- it’s the world’s first known “prequel”

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.I)

Milman Parry and Oral Poetry

- there are several curious features of Homer's poetry
 - he uses repetitive phrases, e.g. “thus he spoke in winged words”
 - also, there are many **epithets**, e.g. “Achilles of the swift knees”
 - these are called “**(oral) formulas**”

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.I)

Milman Parry and Oral Poetry

- other curious features of Homer's poetry
 - Homer's story does not always make sense, especially across long stretches
 - e.g. more than once, the same warrior dies twice in different parts of the epic
 - these inconsistencies are called “**weak joins**”

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.I)

Milman Parry and Oral Poetry

- **Milman Parry** was an American graduate student in the 1930's
- he was studying “**oral bards**” in the former Yugoslavia
- these oral bards could compose hundreds, even thousands, of lines of verse spontaneously during performance

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.I)

Milman Parry and Oral Poetry

- Parry discovered that oral poets could compose poetry on the spot because they had memorized many oral formulas
- he called his discovery “**oral theory**”
- he then realized that the same applied to Homer and from this concluded that Homer must have been an oral bard!

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.I)

Milman Parry and Oral Poetry

- oral theory explains several of the idiosyncrasies of Homeric epic
- for instance, the presence of so many formulaic phrases
- Homer was using these formulas to create poetry spontaneously in performance

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.I)

Milman Parry and Oral Poetry

- oral theory also explains why there are “weak joins” in Homeric epic
- could anyone in an oral poet’s audience have remembered a passage word for word which had been sung hours before?
- would passages far apart in the epic even have been sung at the same performance?

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.I)

Milman Parry and Oral Poetry

- if Homer's epics were **oral poetry**, it also explains why the ancients said that Homer was blind
- blind people often have very good oral memory
- in antiquity, oral poetry would be one of the few jobs the blind could perform

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.I)

Milman Parry and Oral Poetry

- but oral poetry is a product of a society which does not have writing
- in other words, why have oral poets if there are scribes?
- so was Homer's Greece an illiterate society?

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.I)

Milman Parry and Oral Poetry

- archaeological research has, in fact, confirmed that the Greeks in Homer's day (ca. 800-750 BCE) were largely illiterate
- there is very little evidence of writing in Greece from 1100-750 BCE
- so all evidence points to Homer as an oral poet

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.I)

Milman Parry and Oral Poetry

- but if Homer was an oral poet, then how were Homer's poems recorded?
- perhaps he stood at an important juncture when writing was being imported into Greece
- that is, scribes who belonged to a society that was just learning how to write recorded Homer's oral poems

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.I)

Milman Parry and Oral Poetry

- but then we are relying on the dictational skills of newly minted scribes, aren't we?
- how can we be sure these epics represent Homer's own words?
- we can't!

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.II)

Overview of *The Iliad*, Book 1

- several different names for the Greeks
 - Danaans
 - Achaeans
 - Argives
 - Pelasgians
- evidence that there is no unified Greece at this point in history

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.II)

Overview of *The Iliad*, Book 1

There are other alternate names used by Homer:

- he often calls Menelaus and Agamemnon the **Atreides** (**Atreidai**), i.e. the “sons of Atreus”
- Troy is often referred to as **Ilium** (**Ilion**)
- and the Trojans are called **Dardanians**

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.II)

Overview of *The Iliad*, Book 1

- *The Iliad* leaps *in medias res* (“into the middle of things,” Horace)
- the epic begins nine years into the war
- the Greeks are fighting among themselves as much they are fighting the Trojans
- the first word is “**Anger** . . .”

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.II)

Overview of *The Iliad*, Book 1

- Agamemnon has taken as “spear-prize” **Chryseis**, the daughter of the **Chryses** who is a priest of Apollo
- this is a grave offense against the god
- Chryses tries to reclaim his daughter but Agamemnon rebuffs him

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.II)

Overview of *The Iliad*, Book 1

- Chryses goes down to the beach and prays for help from Apollo
- the god sends a plague of “arrows” on the Greeks
- Greek men and animals begin to die off in large numbers

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.II)

Overview of *The Iliad*, Book 1

- the Greek chieftains call a council meeting to deliberate over what to do
- with the priest Calchas' backing, Achilles blames Agamemnon for the plague
- he insults the general, calling him all sorts of names, e.g. "Sack of wine, you with your cur's eyes and your antelope heart!"

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.II)

Overview of *The Iliad*, Book 1

- the aged **Nestor** counsels that they both should calm down
- the quarrel resumes
- in the end, Agamemnon agrees to return Chryseis to her father but demands in recompense Briseis, one of Achilles' spear-prizes

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.II)

Overview of *The Iliad*, Book 1

- stripped of his spear-prize and dignity, Achilles refuses to fight for Agamemnon or the Greek cause any longer
- he also withdraws his special forces, the **Myrmidons** (“Ant-men”), from the war
- the meeting breaks up and **Odysseus** leaves to return Chryseis to her father

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.II)

Overview of *The Iliad*, Book 1

- Achilles goes down to the seashore and calls out to his mother, the sea-nymph Thetis, who appears from the mist
- he tells her all that has happened, especially how Agamemnon dishonored him by taking Briseis

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.II)

Overview of *The Iliad*, Book 1

- in oral poetry, this sort of **recapitulation** is useful
- it reminds the listener of what's happening
- Thetis promises to defend Achilles' cause to Zeus and leaves for Mount Olympus
- Odysseus delivers Chryseis to her father

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.II)

Overview of *The Iliad*, Book 1

- on Mount Olympus, Thetis finds the gods holding a feast
- she pulls Zeus aside and beseeches him to help the Trojans against the Greeks
- Zeus agrees but Hera sees her husband speaking in private with Thetis and nodding to her

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.II)

Overview of *The Iliad*, Book 1

- Hera accuses Zeus of plotting against the Greeks whom she favors over the Trojans (the Judgment of Paris!)
- Zeus threatens to “lay his inexorable hands upon her,” if she doesn’t “sit down, be still” and obey him
- Hera sulks

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.II)

Overview of *The Iliad*, Book 1

- Hephaestus attempts to reconcile his parents' quarrel
- he limps around serving the gods . . .
 “And quenchless laughter
broke out among the blissful gods
to see Hephaistos wheezing down the hall.”

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.II)

Overview of *The Iliad*, Book 1

- as the gods' party breaks up and they go to bed, a peace of sorts settles over Olympus and earth
- thus, Book 1 ends on this note of uneasy resolution
- very different from the prayer and plague with which it started

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.II)

Analysis of *The Iliad*, Book 1

- the book is arranged in **ring composition**:

A B C D C B A

- the first (A) and last (A) element echo each other
- the elements inside those (B) do also, and so on

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.II)

Analysis of *The Iliad*, Book 1

- Prayer and Plague: Chryses invokes Apollo
 - **Council of Men**: Agamemnon and Achilles
 - Odysseus leaves to return Chryseis to Chryses
- **ACHILLES AND THETIS**
 - Odysseus delivers Chryseis to Chryses
 - **Council of Gods**: Zeus and Hera quarrel
- Feast and Joy: the Gods Party on Olympus

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.II)

Analysis of *The Iliad*, Book 1

Ring composition serves several purposes:

- the symmetrical balance imitates nature and is artistically satisfying
- the return to A at the end of a section signals closure to the audience
- probably most important, using ring composition helps an oral poet remember where he is in the story

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.II)

Overview of *The Iliad*, Books 2-9

Book 2

- Agamemnon musters the Greek troops and marches into battle
- as the army marches forth, Homer recites a “Catalogue of Heroes,” all the various men and tribes fighting at Troy
- catalogues are impressive in oral poetry

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.II)

Overview of *The Iliad*, Books 2-9

Book 3

- Menelaus and Paris duel one-on-one, as everyone including Helen and **Priam** (the King of Troy) watch
- Paris is about to lose when Aphrodite rescues him

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.II)

Overview of *The Iliad*, Books 2-9

Book 3

- Menelaus is declared the winner, and a truce is called
- back in Troy, Aphrodite forces Helen into bed with Paris

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.II)

Overview of *The Iliad*, Books 2-9

Books 4 and 5

- Athena incites battle again by inducing a Trojan fighter to shoot Menelaus in the leg without warning
- there ensues much death and carnage

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.II)

Overview of *The Iliad*, Books 2-9

Book 6

- the Trojans' greatest warrior **Hector** appears for the first time in the epic
- he finds Paris in bed with Helen
- he upbraids his brother and sends him back to battle
- Helen comes onto Hector (!)

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.II)

Overview of *The Iliad*, Books 2-9

Book 6

- Hector rejects Helen's advances and goes off to meet his wife Andromache
- he finds her with their baby Astyanax at the Scaean Gate (an important gate leading into Troy)

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.II)

Overview of *The Iliad*, Books 2-9

Book 6

- Andromache begs him not to fight and imagines her life as a “spear-prize” after he has been killed
- Hector responds with the “Warrior’s Creed” (*Iliad* 6.440-465): a man has no choice but to fight!

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.II)

Overview of *The Iliad*, Books 2-9

Book 6

- as he leaves, Hector leans over to kiss the baby Astyanax who recoils in terror at the plume on his father's helmet
- Hector and Andromache laugh at the baby's distress (!)

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.II)

Overview of *The Iliad*, Books 2-9

Books 7 and 8

- Zeus abides by his promise to Thetis and favors the Trojans
- the Trojans begin to defeat the Greeks badly and push them back to the shore
- they nearly burn the Greeks' ships

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.II)

Overview of *The Iliad*, Books 2-9

Book 9

- the Greeks start to panic
- they desperately need Achilles back
- Agamemnon sends an embassy of warriors to Achilles' tent to reason with him
- Agamemnon agrees to return Briseis and pay Achilles even more for the insult

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.II)

Overview of *The Iliad*, Books 2-9

Book 9

- the embassy arrives in Achilles' tent
- Odysseus pleads with him to take the money and return to the fighting
- Phoinix reminds Achilles of his duty to his family and their honor
- Achilles rejects them both

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.II)

Overview of *The Iliad*, Books 2-9

Book 9

- finally, Ajax talks to Achilles as one warrior to another, arguing that the men need help
- Achilles rejects him, too

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.II)

Overview of *The Iliad*, Books 2-9

Book 9

- pattern:
 - pride
 - ↓
 - hubris (an excessive act)
 - ↓
 - tragedy and sorrow(Patroclus' death in Book 16)