



STORIES FROM
THE ODYSSEY

RETOLD BY

H. L. HAVELL B.A.

LATE READER IN ENGLISH IN THE UNIVERSITY OF HALLE
FORMERLY SCHOLAR OF UNIVERSITY COLLEGE OXFORD

Author of "Stories from Herodotus" "Stories from Greek Tragedy"
"Stories from the Æneid" "Stories from the Iliad" etc.

*"O well for him whose will is strong!
He suffers, but he will not suffer long;
He suffers, but he cannot suffer wrong:
For him nor moves the loud world's random mock
Nor all Calamity's hugest waves confound
Who seems a promontory of rock,
That compass'd round with turbulent sound
In middle ocean meets the surging shock,
Tempest-buffeted, citadel-crown'd."*

TENNYSON

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

TELEMACHUS, PENELOPE, AND THE SUITORS

THE ASSEMBLY; THE VOYAGE OF TELEMACHUS

THE VISIT TO NESTOR AT PYLOS

TELEMACHUS AT SPARTA

ODYSSEUS AND CALYPSO

ODYSSEUS AMONG THE PHÆACIANS

THE WANDERINGS OF ODYSSEUS

THE VISIT TO HADES

THE SIRENS; SCYLLA AND CHARYBDIS; THRINACIA

ODYSSEUS LANDS IN ITHACA

ODYSSEUS AND EUMÆUS

THE RETURN OF TELEMACHUS

THE MEETING OF TELEMACHUS AND ODYSSEUS

THE HOME-COMING OF ODYSSEUS

THE BEGGAR IRUS

PENELOPE AND THE WOOERS

ODYSSEUS AND PENELOPE

THE END DRAWS NEAR; SIGNS AND WONDERS

THE BOW OF ODYSSEUS

THE SLAYING OF THE WOOERS

ODYSSEUS AND PENELOPE

CONCLUSION

PRONOUNCING LIST OF NAMES

ILLUSTRATIONS

READING FROM HOMER

(L. Alma Tadema)

PENELOPE

(The Vatican, Rome)

TELEMACHUS DEPARTING FROM NESTOR

(Henry Howard)

ODYSSEUS AND NAUSICAA

(Charles Gleyre)

ODYSSEUS AND POLYPHEMUS

(J.M.W. Turner)

CIRCE

(Sir E. Burne-Jones)

THE RETURN OF ODYSSEUS

(L.F. Schützenberger)

ODYSSEUS AND EURYCLEIA

(Christian G. Heyne)

INTRODUCTION

The impersonal character of the Homeric poems has left us entirely in the dark as to the birthplace, the history, and the date, of their author. So complete is the darkness which surrounds the name of Homer that his very existence has been disputed, and his works have been declared to be an ingenious compilation, drawn from the productions of a multitude of singers. It is not my intention here to enter into the endless and barren controversy which has raged round this question. It will be more to the purpose to try and form some general idea of the characteristics of the Greek Epic; and to do this it is necessary to give a brief review of the political and social conditions in which it was produced.

I

The world as known to Homer is a mere fragment of territory, including a good part of the mainland of Greece, with the islands and coast districts of the Ægæan. Outside of these limits his knowledge of geography is narrow indeed. He has heard of Sicily, which he speaks of under the name of Thrinacia; and he speaks once of Libya, or the north coast of Africa, as a district famous for its breed of sheep. There is one vague reference to the vast Scythian or Tartar race (called by Homer Thracians), who live on the milk of mares; and he mentions a copper-coloured people, the "Red-faces," who dwell far remote in the east and west. The Nile is mentioned, under the name of Ægyptus; and the Egyptians are celebrated by the poet as a people skilled in medicine, a statement which is repeated by Herodotus. The Phœnicians appear several times in the *Odyssey*, and we hear once or twice of the Sidonians, as skilled workers in metal. As soon as we pass these boundaries, we enter at once into the region of fairyland.

II

In speaking of the religion of the Homeric Greeks we have to draw a distinction between the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. In the *Iliad* the gods play a much livelier and more human part than in the latter poem, and it is highly remarkable that the only comic scenes in the

first and greatest of epics are those in which the gods are the chief actors—as when the lame Hephæstus takes upon him the office of cupbearer at the Olympian banquet, or when Artemis gets her ears boxed by the angry Hera. It would almost seem as if there were a vein of deliberate satire running through these descriptions, so daring is the treatment of the divine personages.

In the *Odyssey*, on the other hand, religion has become more spiritual. Olympus is no longer the mountain of that name, but a vague term, like our "heaven," denoting a place remote from all earthly cares and passions, a far-off abode in the stainless ether, where the gods dwell in everlasting peace, and from which they occasionally descend, to give an eye to the righteous and unrighteous deeds of men.

In his conception of the state of the soul after death Homer is very interesting. His *Hades*, or place of departed spirits, is a dim, shadowy region beyond the setting of the sun, where, after life's trials are over, the souls of men keep up a faint and feeble being. It is highly significant that the word which in Homer means "self" has also the meaning of "body"—showing how intimately the sense of personal identity was associated with the condition of bodily existence. The disembodied spirit is compared to a shadow, a dream, or a waft of smoke. "Alas!" cries Achilles, after a visit from the ghost of Patroclus, "I perceive that even in the halls of Hades there is a spirit and a phantom, but understanding none at all"; for the mental condition of these cold, uncomfortable ghosts is as feeble as their bodily form is shadowy and unsubstantial. They hover about with a fitful motion, uttering thin, gibbering cries, like the voice of a bat, and before they can obtain strength to converse with a visitor from the other world, they have to be fortified by a draught of fresh blood. The subject is summed up by Achilles, when Odysseus felicitates him on the honour which he enjoys, even in Hades: "Tell me not of comfort in death," he says: "I had rather be the thrall of the poorest wight that ever tilled a thankless soil for bread, than rule as king over all the shades of the departed."

III

Homeric society is essentially aristocratic. At its head stands the king, who may be a great potentate, like Agamemnon, ruling over a wide extent of territory, or a petty prince, like Odysseus, who exercises a sort of patriarchal authority within the limits of a small island. The person of the king is sacred, and his office is hereditary. He bears the title of *Diogenes*, "Jove-born," and is under the especial protection of the supreme ruler of Olympus. He is leader in war, chief judge, president of the council of elders, and representative of the state at the public sacrifices. The symbol of his office is the sceptre, which in some cases is handed down as an heirloom from father to son.

Next to the king stand the elders, a title which has no reference to age, but merely denotes those of noble birth and breeding. The elders form a senate, or deliberative body, before which all questions of public importance are laid by the king. Their decisions are afterwards communicated to the general assembly of the people, who signify their approval or dissent by tumultuous cries, but have no power of altering or reversing the measures proposed by the nobles. Thus we have already the three main elements of political life: king, lords, and commons—though the position of the last is at present almost entirely passive.

IV

The morality of the Homeric age is such as we may expect to find among a people which has only partially emerged from barbarism. Crimes of violence are very common, and a familiar figure in the society of this period is that of the fugitive, who "has slain a man," and is flying from the vengeance of his family. Patroclus, when a mere boy, kills his youthful playmate in a quarrel over a game of knucklebones—an incident which may be seen illustrated in one of the statues in the British Museum. One of the typical scenes of Hellenic life depicted on the shield of Achilles is a trial for homicide; and such cases were of so frequent occurrence that they afford materials for a simile in the last book of the *Iliad*.

Where life is held so cheap, opinion is not likely to be very strict in matters of property. And we find accordingly a general acquies-

cence in "the good old rule, the ancient plan, that they may take who have the power, and they may keep who can." Cattle-lifting is as common as it formerly was on the Scottish border. The bold buccaneer is a character as familiar as in the good old days when Drake and Raleigh singed the Spanish king's beard, with this important difference, that the buccaneer of ancient Greece plundered Greek and barbarian with fine impartiality. A common question addressed to persons newly arrived from the sea is, "Are you a merchant, a traveller, or a pirate?" And this curious query implies no reproach, and calls for no resentment. Still more startling are the terms in which Autolycus, the maternal grandfather of Odysseus, is spoken of. This worthy, we are informed, "surpassed all mankind in thieving and lying"; and the information is given in a manner which shows that the poet intended it as a grave compliment. In another passage the same hero is celebrated as an accomplished burglar. So low was the standard of Homeric ethics in this respect; and even in the historical age of Greece, want of honesty and want of truthfulness were too often conspicuous failings in some of her most famous men.

Even more shocking to the moral sense is the wild ferocity which sometimes breaks out in the language and conduct of both men and women. The horrible practice of mutilating the dead after a battle is viewed with indifference, and even with complacency, by the bravest warriors. Even Patroclus, the most amiable of the heroes in the *Iliad*, proposes to inflict this dastardly outrage on the body of the fallen Sarpedon. Achilles drags the body of Hector behind his chariot from the battlefield, and keeps it in his tent for many days, that he may repeat this hideous form of vengeance in honour of his slaughtered friend. When the dying Hector begs him to restore his body to the Trojans for burial he replies with savage taunts, and wishes that he could find it in his heart to carve the flesh of Hector and eat it raw! And Hecuba, the venerable Queen of Troy, expresses herself in similar terms when Priam is preparing to set forth on his mission to the tent of Achilles.

Turning now to the more attractive side of the picture, we shall find much to admire in the character of Homer's heroes. In the first place we have to note their intense vitality and keen sense of pleasure, natural to a young and vigorous people. The outlook on life is

generally bright and cheerful, and there is hardly any trace of that corroding pessimism which meets us in later literature. Cases of suicide, so common in the tragedians, are almost unknown.

In one respect, and that too a point of the very highest importance, the Greeks of this age were far in advance of those who came after them, and not behind the most polished nations of modern Europe. We refer to the beauty, the tenderness, and the purity of their domestic relations. The whole story of the *Odyssey* is founded on the faithful wedded love of Odysseus and Penelope, and the contrasted example of Agamemnon and his demon wife is repeatedly held up to scorn and abhorrence. The world's poetry affords no nobler scene than the parting of Hector and Andromache in the *Iliad*, nor has the ideal of perfect marriage ever found grander expression than in the words addressed by Odysseus to Nausicaä: "There is nothing mightier and nobler than when man and wife are of one mind and heart in a house, a grief to their foes, and to their friends a great joy, but their own hearts know it best."¹

Hospitality in a primitive state of society, where inns are unknown, is not so much a virtue as a necessity. Even in these early times the Greeks, within the limits of their little world, were great travellers, and their swift chariots, and galleys propelled by sail and oar, enabled them to make considerable journeys with speed and safety. Arrived at their destination for the night they were sure of a warm welcome at the first house at which they presented themselves; and he who played the host on one occasion expected and found a like return when, perhaps years afterwards, he was brought by business or pleasure to the home of his former guest. Nor were these privileges confined to the wealthy and noble, who were able, when the time came, to make payment in kind, but the poorest and most helpless outcast, the beggar, the fugitive, and the exile, found countenance and protection, when he made his plea in the name of Zeus, the god of hospitality.

V

This frankness and simplicity of manners runs through the whole life of the Homeric Greek, and is reflected in every page of the two great epics which are the lasting monuments of that bright and

happy age. As civilisation advances, and life becomes more complicated and artificial, human activity tends more and more to split up into an infinite number of minute occupations, and the whole time and energy of each individual are not more than sufficient to make him master in some little corner of art, science, or industry. A vast system of commerce brings the products of the whole world to our doors; and it is almost appalling to think of the millions of toiling hands and busy brains which must pass all their days in unceasing toil, in order that the humblest citizen may find his daily wants supplied. To give only one example: how vast and tremendous is the machinery which must be set at work before a single letter or post-card can reach its destination! This multiplication of needs, and endless subdivision of labour, too often results in stunting and crippling the development of the individual, so that it becomes harder, as time advances, to find a complete man, with all his faculties matured by equable and harmonious growth.

Very different were the conditions of life in the Homeric age. Then the wealthy man's house was a little world in itself, capable of supplying all the simple wants of its inhabitants. The women spun wool and flax, the produce of the estate, and wove them into cloth and linen, to be dyed and wrought into garments by the same skillful hands. On the sunny slopes of the hills within sight of the doors the grapes were ripening against the happy time of vintage, when merry troops of children would bring them home with dance and song to be trodden in the winepress. Nearer at hand was the well-kept orchard, bowing under its burden of apples, pears, and figs; and groves of grey olive-trees promised abundance of oil. In the valleys waved rich harvests of wheat and barley, which were reaped, threshed, ground, and made into bread, by the master's thralls. Herds of oxen, and flocks of sheep and goats, roved on the broad upland pastures, and in the forest multitudes of swine were fattening on the beech-mast and acorns.

And the owner of all these blessings was no luxurious drone, living in idleness on the labour of other men's hands. He was, in the fullest sense of the word, the father of his household. His was the vigilant eye which watched and directed every member in the little army of workers, and his the generous hand which dealt out bountiful reward for faithful service. If need were he could take his share

in the hardest field labour, and plough a straight furrow, or mow a heavy crop of grass from dawn till sunset without breaking his fast. Nothing was too great or too little to engage his attention, as the necessity arose. He was a warrior, whose single prowess might go far in deciding the issue of a hard-fought battle—an orator, discoursing with weighty eloquence on grave questions of state—a judge, whose decisions helped to build up the as yet unwritten code of law. Descending from these high altitudes, he could take up his bow and spear, and go forth to hunt the boar and the stag, or wield the woodman's axe, or the carpenter's saw and chisel. He could kill, dress, and serve his own dinner; and when the strenuous day was over, he could tune the harp, discourse sweet music, and sing of the deeds of heroes and gods.

Such was the versatility, and such the many-sided energy, of the Greek as he appears in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. And as these two poems contain the elements of all subsequent thought and progress in the Greek nation, so in the typical character of Odysseus are concentrated all the qualities which distinguish the individual Greek—his insatiable curiosity, which left no field of thought unexplored—his spirit of daring enterprise, which carried the banner of civilisation to the borders of India and the Straits of Gibraltar—and his subtlety and craft, which in a later age made him a byword to the grave moralists of Rome.

In the *Iliad* Odysseus is constantly exhibited as a contrast to the youthful Achilles. Wherever prudence, experience, and policy, are required, Odysseus comes to the front. In Achilles, with his furious passions and ill-regulated impulses, there is always something of the barbarian; while Odysseus in all his actions obeys the voice of reason. It will readily be seen that such a character, essentially intellectual, always moving within due measure, never breaking out into eccentricity or excess, would appeal less to the popular imagination than the fiery nature of Pelides, "strenuous, passionate, implacable, and fierce." And on this ground we may partly explain the unamiable light in which Odysseus appears in later Greek literature. Already in Pindar we find him singled out for disapproval. In Sophocles he has sunk still lower; and in Euripides his degradation is completed.

VI

Space does not allow us to give a detailed criticism of the *Odyssey* as a poem, and determine its relation to the *Iliad*. We must content ourselves with quoting the words of the most eloquent of ancient critics, which sum up the subject with admirable brevity and insight: "Homer in his *Odyssey* may be compared to the setting sun: he is still as great as ever, but he has lost his fervent heat. The strain is now pitched in a lower key than in the 'Tale of Troy divine': we begin to miss that high and equable sublimity which never flags or sinks, that continuous current of moving incidents, those rapid transitions, that force of eloquence, that opulence of imagery which is ever true to nature. Like the sea when it retires upon itself and leaves its shores waste and bare, henceforth the tide of sublimity begins to ebb, and draws us away into the dim region of myth and legend."²

1. Butcher and Lang's translation. (return)

2. Longinus: "On the Sublime." Translated by H.L. Havell, B.A. p. 20. Macmillan & Co. (return)