**Introduction to Homer**

**Lesson 1 - Fate and Death**

‘Come, sit here, and we will shut away our sorrows, despite our grief, since there is but cold comfort in lament. The gods have spun the thread of fate for wretched mortals: we live in sorrow, while they are free from care. Two urns stand in Zeus’ palace containing the experiences he grants mortals, one holds blessings, the other ills.  Those who receive a mixture of the two meet with good and ill, but those whom the Thunderer only serves from the jar of ills becomes an outcast, driven over the face of the earth by despair, a wanderer honoured neither by gods nor men.’

[Homer, *The Iliad*, xxiv]

Why do you think fate makes a

good theme for Greek myth?

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**Sources on the ‘good death’**

‘If your champion slay me, let him strip me of my armour and take it to your ships, but let him send my body home that the Trojans and their wives may give me my dues of fire when I am dead. In like manner, if Apollo vouchsafe me glory and I slay your champion, I will strip him of his armour and take it to the city of Ilius, where I will hang it in the temple of Apollo, but I will give up his body, that the Achaeans may bury him at their ships, and the build him a mound by the wide waters of the Hellespont. Then will one say hereafter as he sails his ship over the sea, 'This is the monument of one who died long since a champion who was slain by mighty Hector.' Thus will one say, and my fame shall not be lost.’

[Homer, *The Iliad*, vii]

Having there arrived he was entertained as a guest by Crœsus in the king's palace; and afterwards, on the third or fourth day, at the bidding of Crœsus his servants led Solon round to see his treasuries; and they showed him all things, how great and magnificent they were: and after he had looked upon them all and examined them as he had occasion, Crœsus asked him as follows: "Athenian guest, much report of thee has come to us, both in regard to thy wisdom and thy wanderings, how that in thy search for wisdom thou hast traversed many lands to see them; now therefore a desire has come upon me to ask thee whether thou hast seen any whom thou deemest to be of all men the most happy." This he asked supposing that he himself was the happiest of men; but Solon, using no flattery but the truth only, said: "Yes, O king, Tellos the Athenian." And Crœsus, marvelling at that which he said, asked him earnestly: "In what respect dost thou judge Tellos to be the most happy?" And he said: "Tellos, in the first place, living while his native State was prosperous, had sons fair and good and saw from all of them children begotten and living to grow up; and secondly he had what with us is accounted wealth, and after his life a most glorious end: for when a battle was fought by the Athenians at Eleusis against the neighbouring people, he brought up supports and routed the foe and there died by a most fair death; and the Athenians buried him publicly where he fell, and honoured him greatly."

[Herodotus, *Histories*, i]

What would be on the Ancient Greek hero’s bucket list?

**Burial Rites**

Watch the following clip from the movie Troy. What would the Greeks think of Achilles’ actions?



‘Godlike Achilles, think of your own father, who is of my generation, and so is likewise on the sad threshold of old age. Perhaps his neighbours are troubling him, and there is no one to protect him from harm, or ward off ruin. But he at least can rejoice in the knowledge that you live, and each day brings the hope of seeing you return from Troy. While I, I am a victim of sad fate. Of the best of my sons, the best in all of Troy, not one is left. Fifty sons I had, when you Achaeans landed, nineteen by the one wife, and the rest by other ladies of my court. Most of them have fallen in furious battle, and the defender of the city and its people, my prime recourse, Hector, you have killed, as he fought for his country. I come now to the ships to beg his corpse from you, bringing a princely ransom. Respect the gods, Achilles, and show mercy towards me, remembering your own father, for I am more to be pitied than he, since I have brought myself to do what no other man on earth would do, I have lifted to my lips the hand of the man who killed my sons.’

[Homer, *The Iliad*, xxiv]

Why is Priam able to convince Achilles to return Hector’s body?

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*Antigone*: What, hath not Creon destined our brothers, the one to honoured burial, the other to unburied shame? Eteocles, they say, with due observance of right and custom, he hath laid in the earth, for his honour among the dead below. But the hapless corpse of Polyneices-as rumour saith, it hath been published to the town that none shall entomb him or mourn, but leave unwept, unsepulchred, a welcome store for the birds, as they espy him, to feast on at will.

Such, 'tis said, is the edict that the good Creon hath set forth for thee and for me,-yes, for me,-and is coming hither to proclaim it clearly to those who know it not; nor counts the matter light, but, whoso disobeys in aught, his doom is death by stoning before all the folk. Thou knowest it now; and thou wilt soon show whether thou art nobly bred, or the base daughter of a noble line.

*Ismene*: Poor sister,-and if things stand thus, what could I help to do or undo?

*Antigone:* Consider if thou wilt share the toil and the deed.

*Ismene:* In what venture? What can be thy meaning?

*Antigone:* Wilt thou aid this hand to lift the dead?

*Ismene:* Thou wouldst bury him,-when 'tis forbidden to Thebes?

*Antigone:* I will do my part,-and thine, if thou wilt not,-to a brother. False to him will I never be found.

*Ismene:* Ah, over-bold! when Creon hath forbidden?

*Antigone:* Nay, he hath no right to keep me from mine own.

[Sophocles, *Antigone*]

Why do you think this is chosen as a theme in a Greek play?

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**Lesson 2 - The Bard in Greek Society**

**The language of Homer**

Here is an extract from Oliver Taplin’s article *Homer* in the *Oxford History of the Classical World*:

[Homer’s] language is evidently nothing like the Greek that any native speaker ever spoke. Most of the word-forms are variants drawn from the dialects of different places and periods, but never spoken together in any one time or place. Some of the forms are even, it seems, completely artificial, the word-forging of poets, especially under metrical pressure. Philologists are largely agreed that, while the basic dialect of Homeric Greek is that of Ionia in the archaic period, there are many features quite foreign to that time and place. The most interesting is perhaps the occurrence of outcrops of the so-called ‘Arcado-Cypriot’ The evidence of Linear B tablets confirms that this is the language of mainland Greece. The oral tradition can accommodate all this: travelling bards will over the years have picked up some phrases and discarded others according to their tastes and needs. Gradually a language comes into being which is special to epic poetry. Some phrases go back hundreds of years; others are recent acquisitions; others are new on the very day of performance. In this sense hundreds of anonymous bards may well have contributed to the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, in that they will have contributed phrases, lines, or scene-sequences which became part of the tradition.

How does Taplin think the Homeric epics arrived at their current form and what evidence does he offer?

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**Story-telling**

Martin Thorpe identifies three main characteristics needed for a bard to maintain his audience’s interest:

1. Variety
2. Suspense
3. Structure

Variety

There are a number of ways the Homeric epics introduce variety to the audience:

* Types of episode – The Odyssey has historical-like stories, whilst the adventures at sea seem magical and fantastical. The bards in the *Odyssey* (see below) show a different, sophisticated style.
* Scenes in Olympus provide varied breaks in the story of the *Iliad*.
* Short glimpses at everyday life, e.g. ‘[Axylus’ father] lived beside the road and gave hospitality to all men.
* Homeric simile (a technique we will study in depth)

‘So, with spirits high, all night long they sat in their lines of war, beside the many fires. And just as the stars shine bright in windless air, about the gleaming moon, and every mountain peak and glade and high headland stands out clear, and the skies reveal their infinite depths, displaying all the stars to gladden the shepherd’s heart; so, between the ships and [Xanthus](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexRSTUWXZ.htm#Scamander)’ streams, the fires the Trojans lit before Troy shone in their multitude. A thousand fires were glowing in the plain, and fifty men by each in the light of its blaze, their horses feeding on white barley and rye, waited for Dawn to mount her golden throne.’

[Homer, *Iliad*, 8]

How is the technique used in this example? Why is it effective?

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Suspense

The audience would already know the stories of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. But instead the audience would wonder **how** the hero would get out of their predicament. Look at the length of passage between the stabbing and screaming of Polyphemus:

**‘They held the sharpened olivewood stake, and thrust it into his eye**, while I threw my weight on the end, and twisted it round and round, as a man bores the timbers of a ship with a drill that others twirl lower down with a strap held at both ends, and so keep the drill continuously moving. We took the red-hot stake and twisted it round and round like that in his eye, and the blood poured out despite the heat. His lids and brows were scorched by flame from the burning eyeball, and its roots crackled with fire. As a great axe or adze causes a vast hissing when the smith dips it in cool water to temper it, strengthening the iron, so his eye hissed against the olivewood stake. **Then he screamed**…’

[Homer, *Odyssey*, 9]

How is the technique used in this example? Why is it effective?

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Structure

The structure of the poem includes the order of events, as well as the amount of detail and pace. Here is an example of repetition after three laments for Hector which bring the *Iliad* to an end:

Such was her lament, and the women added their grief to hers. Now [Hecabe](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexFGHILMN.htm#Hecabe) took up the impassioned dirge…

… So she lamented, and stirred endless grief. Now [Helen](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexFGHILMN.htm#Helen) followed with a third lament…

…So [Helen](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexFGHILMN.htm#Helen) lamented, and the whole crowd wept…

[Homer, *Iliad*, 24]

How is the technique used in this example? Why is it effective?

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**Bards in Homer and Society**

Two bards appear in the *Odyssey* that give us a glimpse at their place in Homeric society. These are Phemius, court poet of Odysseus’ kingdom, Ithaca, and Demodocus, the bard of King Alcinous.

Phemius

‘As they sat listening in silence, the famous minstrel sang to them of the [Achaeans](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/OdindexA.htm#Achaeans)’ troubled return from [Troy](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/OdindexRSTWZ.htm#Trojans), inflicted by [Pallas](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/OdindexOP.htm#Pallas) [Athene](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/OdindexA.htm#Athene). Wise [Penelope](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/OdindexOP.htm#Penelope), [Icarius](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/OdindexFGHILMN.htm#Icarius)’ daughter, heard his marvellous song from her chamber, and descended the stairs, accompanied by her two maids. As she neared the [Suitors](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/OdindexRSTWZ.htm#Suitors) she drew her shining veil across her face, and stopped by the doorpost of the well-made hall, a loyal handmaid on either side. Then, with tear-filled eyes, she spoke to the divine bard:

          ‘[Phemius](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/OdindexOP.htm%22%20%5Cl%20%22Phemius), you know many another tale of men and gods, that the bards made famous, with which to charm us mortals. Sing one of those while you sit here, as they drink their wine in silence, but end this sad song that always troubles the heart in my breast, since above all women I bear a sadness not to be forgotten. I ever remember my husband’s dear face, he whose fame resounds through [Hellas](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/OdindexFGHILMN.htm#Hellas) to the heart of [Argos](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/OdindexA.htm#Argos).’

          Wise [Telemachus](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/OdindexRSTWZ.htm#Telemachus) answered her: ‘Mother, why grudge the good bard his right to please us as the spirit stirs him? Bards are not to blame, surely: it is [Zeus](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/OdindexRSTWZ.htm#Zeus) we must blame, who deals with each eater of bread as he wishes. No one can be angry if this man sings the [Danaans](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/OdindexBCDE.htm#Danaans)’ dark fate: since men always praise the most the newest song they hear. Suffer you heart and mind to listen, for [Odysseus](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/OdindexOP.htm#Odysseus) was not alone in failing to return from Troy, many another perished too.’

[Homer, *Odyssey*, 1]

‘And now the minstrel, [Phemius](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/OdindexOP.htm#Phemius), [Terpius](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/OdindexRSTWZ.htm#Terpius)’ son, whom the [Suitors](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/OdindexRSTWZ.htm#Suitors) forced to sing, tried to flee his dark fate. He stood by the side door, with the clear-voiced lyre in his hands, uncertain whether to slip from the hall, and seat himself by the massive altar of [Zeus](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/OdindexRSTWZ.htm#Zeus), God of the Court, where [Laertes](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/OdindexFGHILMN.htm#Laertes) and Odysseus had burned so many offerings, or whether to run forward and clasp Odysseus round the knees in supplication.  He decided the better course was to clasp the knees of Odysseus, Laertes’ son, so he set the pyre on the ground between the mixing-bowl and the silver-embossed chair, and rushing forward gripped Odysseus by the knees, and entreated him in winged words: ‘Odysseus, respect the suppliant at your knees: I ask for mercy. Sorrow will come to you later if you kill a minstrel who sings for gods and men. I am self-taught, and the god has filled my mind with every kind of song. I am worthy of singing for you, as for a god. Don’t be eager to cut my throat. [Telemachus](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/OdindexRSTWZ.htm#Telemachus), your brave son, is my witness, too, that I never came to sing in your house willingly, but the Suitors dragged me here by force of numbers.’’

[Homer, *Odyssey*, 22]

Demodocus

‘The herald returned, leading their skilful bard, whom the [Muse](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/OdindexFGHILMN.htm#Muse) loved more than other men, though she gave him both good and evil: she robbed him of his sight, but gifted him the power of sweet song. [Pontonous](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/OdindexOP.htm#Pontonous), the herald, placed a silver-embossed chair in the midst of them all, with its back against a high pillar, and hung the ringing lyre on a peg above his head, and showed him how to find it with his hands. And he set a handsome table by his side, with a basket of bread, and a cup of wine to drink if he was so minded. Then they all stretched out their hands to the fine feast spread before them.

          When they had satisfied their need for food and drink, the Muse inspired her [bard](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/OdindexBCDE.htm#Demodocus) to sing of the heroes’ glorious deeds, part of that tale whose fame had risen to high heaven, the quarrel between [Achilles](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/OdindexA.htm#Achilles), [Peleus](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/OdindexOP.htm#Peleus)’ son, and [Odysseus](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/OdindexOP.htm#Odysseus), who argued fiercely at the gods’ rich festival, though [Agamemnon](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/OdindexA.htm#Agamemnon), king of men, was secretly pleased to see a dispute between the [Achaeans](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/OdindexA.htm#Achaeans)’ finest. For [Phoebus](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/OdindexOP.htm#Phoebus) [Apollo](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/OdindexA.htm#Apollo) had prophesied, at sacred [Pytho](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/OdindexOP.htm#Pytho), where Agamemnon had crossed the stone threshold to consult the oracle, that after a quarrel sorrow would begin to overtake the [Trojans](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/OdindexRSTWZ.htm#Trojans), though by [Zeus](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/OdindexRSTWZ.htm#Zeus)’ will it was the beginning of sorrow for the [Greeks](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/OdindexBCDE.htm#Danaans) as well. This was the bard’s song, and Odysseus clutched at his long purple cloak with his great hands, and dragged it over his head to hide his handsome face, ashamed lest the [Phaeacians](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/OdindexOP.htm#Phaeacia) see the tears pouring from his eyes. Whenever the divine bard stopped singing, Odysseus wiped the tears away, drew the cloak from his head, and reaching for his two-handled cup made libations to the gods. But when the bard began again, prompted by the Phaeacian lords who enjoyed his song, Odysseus covered his head once more and groaned.’

‘The herald rose at godlike [Alcinous](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/OdindexA.htm#Alcinous)’ words and brought the hollow lyre from the king’s hall. Then nine elected officials, who organised the games, cleared a space, and marked out a wide arena for the dance. Next, the herald came forward carrying [Demodocus](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/OdindexBCDE.htm#Demodocus)’ ringing lyre. The bard stood in the centre and round him a group of dancers, boys in the first flush of youth, skilled in dancing, and Odysseus marvelled as he gazed at their flashing feet, striking the sacred dancing floor.

          Then the bard struck the chords that began his sweet song, and told of the love of [Ares](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/OdindexA.htm#Ares) and [Aphrodite](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/OdindexA.htm#Aphrodite) of the lovely crown, how they lay together in secret in [Hephaestus](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/OdindexFGHILMN.htm#Hephaestus)’ house, and how Ares gave her a host of gifts while dishonouring the Lord Hephaestus’ bed… This was the song of the famous bard, that delighted [Odysseus](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/OdindexOP.htm#Odysseus) and the [Phaeacians](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/OdindexOP.htm#Phaeacia) famed for their long-oared ships.’

‘With that he seated himself next to King [Alcinous](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/OdindexA.htm#Alcinous), since they were already serving the food and mixing the wine. Then the herald approached leading good [Demodocus](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/OdindexBCDE.htm#Demodocus) the bard, whom all honoured, and seated him in the midst of the throng, on a chair that leant against a tall pillar. Resourceful [Odysseus](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/OdindexOP.htm#Odysseus), first cutting slices from the chine of a white-tusked boar rich with fat on either side, of which there was plenty left, spoke to the herald: ‘Take this portion of food to Demodocus, Herald, and let me welcome him, despite my grief. Bards are honoured and revered by every man on earth, for the Muse has shown them the path to poetry, and loves the tribe of poets.’

          He finished, and the herald took the food and handed it to noble Demodocus, who was delighted. So they stretched out their hands to the good things before them, and when they had sated their desire for food and drink, resourceful Odysseus spoke to the bard, saying: ‘Demodocus, I praise you above all mortal men, one taught by the [Muse](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/OdindexFGHILMN.htm#Muse), [Zeus](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/OdindexRSTWZ.htm#Zeus)’ daughter, or perhaps by [Apollo](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/OdindexA.htm#Apollo), for you sang the [Achaeans](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/OdindexA.htm#Achaeans)’ fate with truth and feeling, all of their actions and their suffering, all the efforts they exerted, as if you had been there, or heard it from one who was. Now, come, change your theme, and sing of the making of the Wooden Horse, that [Epeius](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/OdindexBCDE.htm#Epeius) fashioned with [Athene](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/OdindexA.htm#Athene)’s help, that noble Odysseus contrived to have dragged inside the citadel, filled by cunning with warriors who then sacked [Troy](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/OdindexRSTWZ.htm#Trojans). Tell the tale as it happened, and I will say to all mankind that the god has given you freely of the power of divine song.’

          At his words the bard, inspired by the god, began, and raising his voice picked up the tale… So sang the famous bard. And [Odysseus](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/OdindexOP.htm#Odysseus)’ heart melted, and tears poured from his eyes.’

[Homer, *Odyssey*, 8]

1. How are the two bards described?
2. What impact do they have on the audience?
3. What is going on when they feature and how do they contribute to this?

**Lesson 3 – Homeric Characteristics**

There are a number of features of Homeric writing that we might call characteristic of Homer. These are:

* Flashbacks
* Retardation (delay in the completion of phrases)
* Episodes
* Formulae (repetitions and epithets)
* Simile
* Supernatural elements (including monsters)
* Realism
* Fantasy
* *nostos* (homecoming)
* Disguise and recognition
* *timé* (honour) and *kleos* (glory/reputation)
* Justice and revenge
* *xenia* (hospitality and guest friendship)

Some of these are more common in the Odyssey. However, let’s look at some examples in the *Iliad* first in order to get a clearer picture of these.

**Formulae**

When they had offered their petition and scattered grains of barley, they drew back the victims’ heads, slit their throats and flayed them. Then they cut slices from the thighs, wrapped them in layers of fat, and laid raw meat on top. These the old man burnt on the fire, sprinkling over them a libation of red wine, while the young men stood by, five-pronged forks in their hands. When the thighs were burnt and they had tasted the inner meat, they carved the rest in small pieces, skewered and roasted them through, then drew them from the spits. Their work done and the meal prepared, they feasted and enjoyed the shared banquet

[Homer, *Iliad*, 1]

When they had offered their petition and scattered grains of barley, they drew back the victims’ heads, slit their throats and flayed them. Then they cut slices from the thighs, wrapped them in layers of fat, and laid raw meat on top. These they burned on billets of wood stripped of leaves, then spitted the innards and held them over the [Hephaestean](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexFGHILMN.htm#Hephaestus) flames. When the thighs were burnt and they had tasted the inner meat, they carved the rest in small pieces, skewered and roasted them through, then drew them from the spits. Their work done and the meal prepared, they feasted and enjoyed the shared banquet

[Homer, *Iliad*, 2]

What are the benefits of the bard employing this formula?

Here is a list of epithets applied to a single character, Athena, in Homer:

* Pallas (Παλλάς *Pallás*)
* gray-, bright-eyed (γλαυκ-ῶπις *glauk-ôpis*)
* daughter of Zeus
* third-born of the gods
* whose shield is thunder
* hope of soldiers
* tireless one

Why were epithets used in Homer and why was there a list of these for each character?



A full list of all Homeric epithets can be found on this Wikipedia page.

**Homeric Similes**

Brave Diomedes’, Hippolochus’ son replied, ‘why ask my lineage? Like the generations of leaves are those of men. The wind blows and one year’s leaves are scattered on the ground, but the trees bud and fresh leaves open when spring comes again. So a generation of men is born as another passes away.

[Homer, *Iliad*, 6]

How would this simile enhance the poetic nature of Homer?

**Realism**

Meriones chased him down, and when he caught him speared him through the right buttock, beneath the bone and into the bladder, so that he slumped to his knees with a groan, and death enveloped him.

          Then [Meges](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexFGHILMN.htm#Meges) killed [Pedaeus](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexOP.htm#Pedaeus), a bastard son of [Antenor](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexA.htm#Antenor)’s, whom Lady [Theano](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexRSTUWXZ.htm#Theano) had raised with care as if he were her own, to please her husband. Meges the mighty spearman, [Phyleus](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexOP.htm#Phyleus)’ son, caught him and struck him in the neck-joint with his sharp spear, so the bronze blade severed his tongue at the root and exited between his teeth.

          And [Eurypylus](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexBCDE.htm#EurypylusEuaemon), [Euaemon](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexBCDE.htm#Euaemon)’s son, killed noble [Hypsenor](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexFGHILMN.htm#HypsenorTrojan), the son of proud [Dolopion](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexBCDE.htm#Dolopion), priest of Scamander, whom the people honoured like a god. Mighty Eurypylus chased him as he fled, and striking him on the shoulder with his sword, lopped off his mighty arm, which tumbled to the ground in a shower of blood. Implacable fate, dark death, enveloped his eyes.

[Homer, *Iliad*, 5]

What does realism do for a story so full of fantasy and myth?

**Disguise and Recognition**

At this, the Messenger God, the Slayer of [Argus](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexA.htm#Argus), quick to obey, bound his beautiful sandals on his feet, the sandals of imperishable gold that carry him swift as the gale over the ocean waves and the boundless earth. He took with him that wand with which he lulls to sleep or rouses from slumber whomsoever he will. He flew with it in his hand, and soon came to the [Hellespont](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexFGHILMN.htm#Hellespont) and Troy. There he appeared in the likeness of a young prince at that age when a beard first starts to grow, and youth’s charms are at their greatest…

Godlike Priam, the aged king, replied: ‘Dear son, it is as you say. Yet some god has extended his hand above me, since he sends a traveller such as you to meet me, a fine omen, for you are of marvelous beauty and stature, and wise beyond your years. Happy are the parents from whom you spring.’

          ‘Indeed, Sir,’ Hermes answered, ‘it may be so. But tell me truly, do you carry this heap of noble treasure to safety in some foreign part, or are you all fleeing Troy in fear, having the lost the best of warriors, your fine son, who never ceased to fight the Achaeans?’

          Godlike Priam replied: ‘Who are you, noble youth? Who are your parents? You speak so eloquently of my unfortunate son.’

          The Messenger God, the Slayer of [Argus](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexA.htm#Argus), answered: ‘You are testing me, I see, my venerable lord, in asking about [Hector](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexFGHILMN.htm#Hector)…I am Achilles’ squire…

Godlike Priam, the aged king, replied: ‘If you are truly Achilles’ squire, tell me this. Is my son’s body still by the ships, or has Achilles hewn him limb from limb and scattered him to the dogs?’

          Again the Slayer of Argus answered: ‘The dogs and carrion birds have not devoured him yet…

…This gate Hermes the Helper opened for the aged king, ahead of the glorious gifts destined for fleet-footed Achilles. Then he stepped down from the chariot saying: ‘Venerable lord, my Father sent me to guide you on your way. You have been visited by an immortal god, for I am Hermes. Now I must leave you and return, and not be seen by Achilles, for it would be wrong for a god to be entertained openly by a mortal man. But you must go in, and clasp his knees, and invoke his father [Peleus](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexOP.htm#Peleus), and his [mother](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexRSTUWXZ.htm#Thetis), of the shining tresses, and his [child](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexFGHILMN.htm#Neoptolemus), and so move his heart.

[Homer, *Iliad*, 24]

Why do you think Hermes takes on a disguise?

What help does Hermes provide?

What does he not give Priam? Why do you think this is?

**Justice and Revenge**

Then Adrastus clasped him by the knees and begged: ‘Take me alive, son of Atreus, and win a noble ransom; there are great treasures of iron, bronze, and gold finely-worked in my rich father’s house. He would pay you a mighty ransom if he heard I’d been taken alive to a Greek ship.’

So he tried to soften the other’s heart, and Menelaus, it is true, was about to send him off with a squire to the swift Achaean ships, when Agamemnon arrived at the run, calling out: ‘Dear Menelaus, why such compassion? Were these Trojans kind to you back home? Let none escape death at our hands, not even the child in the womb; let not a one survive, let all [Ilium](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexFGHILMN.htm#Ilium) die: leave none behind as witnesses to mourn.’

His brother’s mind was changed by his words of wisdom; and Menelaus thrust Adrastus away for the king to spear him in the side. Backward he fell and the son of Atreus, planting his foot on his chest, drew forth the ashen spear.

[Homer, *Iliad*, 6]

Why would the Greeks consider Agamemnon to be advising just action?

How does this show the relationship between justice and revenge?

***xenia***

Planting his spear in the fertile earth, he spoke to the Lycian general courteously: ‘You are, then, a friend of long-standing to my father’s house, since noble [Oeneus](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexOP.htm#Oeneus) once entertained peerless Bellerephon in his palace, and kept him there twenty days. Moreover they exchanged fine friendship gifts. Oeneus gave him a bright scarlet belt, and Bellerephon replied with a two-handled gold cup, which was there in the palace when I came away. But Tydeus my father I scarce remember, since I was a little child when he left, when the Achaean warriors died at [Thebes](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexRSTUWXZ.htm#ThebesBoeotia). So I will be your good friend at home in Argos, and you will be mine in Lycia, should I come to visit. Let us avoid each other’s spear in the battle, there are plenty more Trojans and their worthy allies for me to slay, if a god lets my feet overtake them, and many Greeks for you to kill, if you can. Let us exchange our armour then, that those around may know that our grandfather’s friendship makes us two friends.’

          At this, the two leapt down from their chariots, and clasped each other’s hands as a pledge of their good faith. But Zeus, the son of [Cronos](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexBCDE.htm#Cronos), robbed Glaucus of his wits, for he gave Diomedes, son of Tydeus, golden armour for bronze, a hundred oxen’s worth for that of nine.

[Homer, *Iliad*, 6]

Why do the two warriors decide not to fight one another?

Why do you think the Greeks valued *xenia*?

What do we learn about the system of exchanging gifts from this passage?

**Lesson 4 – Odysseus ‘before’ the Odyssey**

Although Homer might be considered the birth of Greek literature, there are hints in Homer that the other traditions about Odysseus existed in an oral form. In fact the two epics of Homer are created for an audience already aware of wider Trojan War cycle. Later writers used their knowledge of this to write about Odysseus.

**Laertes**

* Odysseus’ father was a hero in his own right. He was one of Jason’s Argonauts (along with many of the other fathers of Homeric heroes).
* Laertes took place in the Calydonian Hunt, in pursuit of a monstrous boar sent by Artemis to ravage the countryside of Aetolia.
* Nestor was part of Laertes’ generation and his comments in the *Iliad* suggest they were considered a greater generation of heroes:

You are both younger than I, so listen, for I have fought beside warriors, better men than you, who ever showed me respect. I have never seen the like of them since, men such as [Peirithous](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexOP.htm#Peirithous), and [Dryas](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexBCDE.htm#DryasLapith), the people’s Shepherd, [Caeneus](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexBCDE.htm#Caeneus), [Exadius](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexBCDE.htm#Exadius), godlike [Polyphemus](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexOP.htm#Polyphemus), and [Aegeus](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexA.htm#Aegeus)’ son [Theseus](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexRSTUWXZ.htm#Theseus), one of the immortals. They were the mightiest of earth-born men; the mightiest and struggled with the mightiest, the [Centaurs](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexBCDE.htm#Centaur) that lair among the mountains, whom they utterly destroyed.

[Homer, *Iliad*, 1]

**Odysseus before the Trojan War**

The main sources are Pseudo-Apollodorus and Hyginus, both writing well after Homer (but presumably drawing on an earlier oral tradition). Two well known stories are told about Odysseus before the start of the war:

* Odysseus himself tries to avoid serving in the Trojan expedition under Agamemnon by feigning madness. He attached a plough to a donkey and an ox together and started sowing his fields with salt. Palamedes exposed his trick by placing Telemachus, Odysseus’ son, in front of the plough, at which point Odysseus veered of course. Odysseus got his revenge on Palamedes by framing him as a traitor in league with Priam and had him stoned to death.
* Odysseus himself exposed Achilles, who was disguised as a girl by his mother, so that he could join the Trojan expedition. He caught Achilles examining weapons whilst the women around him did not. Then he sounded a battle horn, only to find only Achilles did not jump.

How do these passages support Odysseus’ reputation?

Are there any ways that we see a different Odysseus to that of Homer?

**Odysseus in the *Iliad***

Wily Odysseus replied with a dark look: ‘What’s that you say, Atreides? Is it we who hold back from the fight when Greeks and Trojans meet? If you care to watch, you’ll see dear [Telemachus](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexRSTUWXZ.htm#Telemachus)’ father challenge the foremost ranks of these horse-taming Trojans. Your speech meanwhile is empty as the wind.’

King Agamemnon, hearing his anger, spoke winningly in apology: ‘Zeus-born son of [Laertes](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexFGHILMN.htm#Laertes), wily Odysseus, you’ll hear no more rebukes, and no commands from me, since I know that inwardly your thoughts accord with mine. Come, I’ll make good later any harsh words I’ve said, and may the gods erase them.’

[Homer, *Iliad*, 4]

What impression does Odysseus give of himself?

What do we learn about Odysseus’ relationship with Agamemnon?

All were silent at his words, except [Diomedes](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexBCDE.htm#Diomedes) of the loud war-cry: ‘Nestor, my pride and courage prompt me to try this Trojan camp, but I’d feel greater security and ease if we were two. With two men, one may see an opportunity the other might miss.  A man on his own sees less, and possesses less resource.’

          Many of them clamoured to go with him: the two warrior [Aiantes](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexA.htm#Ajaxgreater), Meriones and Nestor’s son, and the great spearman [Menelaus](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexFGHILMN.htm#Menelaus). Doughty [Odysseus](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexOP.htm#Odysseus) too, always full of boldness, was more than eager to infiltrate the Trojan camp. Then [Agamemnon](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexA.htm#Agamemnon), king of men, addressed Diomedes: ‘Son of Tydeus, dear to me, yourself select the comrade you desire, the best of those who offer, since many men are eager. Don’t let undue respect for birth, or royalty, cause you to choose the worse, and leave the better man behind.’

          He spoke these words fearing for the safety of red-haired Menelaus his brother. But Diomedes of the loud war-cry replied: ‘If I am free to choose, I cannot ignore godlike Odysseus whose brave spirit is eager for every adventure. Pallas [Athene](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexA.htm#Athene) loves him. Together we might go through blazing fire and return: his is the shrewdest mind of all.’

          Noble long-enduring Odysseus then spoke: ‘Be sparing of your praise, Diomedes, and your blame too, since these Greeks all know me. Let us go, since night advances and dawn draws near; the stars have journeyed two thirds of their course, one third alone is left us.’

[Homer, *Iliad*, 10]

What reasons does Diomedes give for choosing Odysseus to help him?

Noble [Odysseus](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexOP.htm#Odysseus) soon spotted him, and said: ‘[Diomedes](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexBCDE.htm#Diomedes), someone comes from the enemy camp, perhaps as a spy or to strip the corpses. Let him go past us a little way then we can rush him and take him captive. If he is quick enough to outrun us, threaten him with your spear and drive him towards the ships and away from his camp, lest he makes a run for the city.’

[Homer, *Iliad*, 10]

What do we learn about how these two heroes work together?

Swift [Ajax](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexA.htm#Ajaxlesser) the Lesser, and [Odysseus](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexOP.htm#Odysseus), the cunning, stepped forward, with the fastest of the young men, [Antilochus](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexA.htm#Antilochus), Nestor’s son. They took their places at the start, and Achilles pointed out the turning post. Off they ran, and Ajax, son of [Oïleus](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexOP.htm#OileusGreek), hit the front, with noble Odysseus at his heels, as close as a woman weaving holds the shuttle to her chest, as she draws it along skilfully passing its spool through the warp. He trod in Ajax’s footsteps before the dust had settled, and his breath beat on Ajax’s neck as they ran swiftly on. The Greeks shouted for Odysseus as he strained for victory, urging him on to the utmost. As they were nearing the finish, Odysseus prayed urgently in his heart to bright-eyed Athene: ‘Goddess, hear me, help me if you will and quicken my legs.’ He prayed and Athene heard, making his limbs seem lighter, and just as they reached the line, Pallas [Athene](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexA.htm#Athene) made Ajax slip on a patch of offal from the sacrifice of bellowing bulls that fleet-footed Achilles had made in honour of Patroclus. He fell and his mouth and nostrils were filled with offal, while Odysseus came in first, and claimed the silver bowl, leaving the ox for noble Ajax. He stood there, spitting out the offal, grasping the ox’s horn, and complained to the Argives: ‘There, did you see how the goddess made me slip, she who’s always at Odysseus side, helping him!’

          His words raised a shout of laughter. Antilochus lifted his prize, the gold, and addressed the crowd: ‘Friends, I declare, and don’t we know it, the immortals love the older generation. Ajax has only a few years more than I, but Odysseus is of the breed of former times, and as men say, a green old age is his, and he’s a hard man for any Greek to beat, except for Achilles.’

[Homer, *Iliad*, 23]

How does Odysseus win this foot race?

What do we learn about Odysseus’ reputation here?

**Odysseus and Ajax**

Odysseus is constantly portrayed as the rival of fellow Greek Ajax.

At his words, Telamonian [Ajax](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexA.htm#Ajaxgreater) stepped forward, and cunning [Odysseus](http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/IlindexOP.htm#Odysseus) also got to his feet, a man of many wiles. When they had both prepared, they entered the ring, and came to grips, clasping each other in their mighty arms, locked together like the sloping rafters that some skilled craftsman sets in place on a tall house, to resist the winds. Their backs creaked under the pressure of their strong hands, and the sweat ran down in streams, while many a blood-red weal appeared on their shoulders and ribs, as they strove for the ornate tripod and the glory. Odysseus could no more trip Ajax, and floor him, than Ajax could move powerful Odysseus’ firm stance. But when they began to weary the watching Achaeans, Ajax spoke quietly to Odysseus: ‘Zeus-born son of Laertes, Odysseus of the many wiles, you’d best try lift me, or I you, and let Zeus decide the matter.’

          So saying, he tried a lift, but Odysseus knew a trick or two. He kicked Ajax hard in the back of his knee, and toppled him backwards, falling on his chest. The spectators looked on admiringly, as they stood and noble long-enduring Odysseus in turn tried a lift, raising him off the ground a fraction, then failing to lift him further crooking a leg round Ajax’s knee, so they fell side by side, smothered in dust. They sprang up ready for a third round, but Achilles restrained them: ‘No more, don’t wear each other out. You were both victorious, and shall have identical prizes…

[Homer, *Iliad*, 23]

* Odysseus and Ajax combine to rescue the body of Achilles after he is killed by Paris. They both claimed the right to Achilles’ famous armour but the Greeks ruled in favour of Odysseus. Ajax committed suicide after being driven mad by Athena.

In what ways are these two characters portrayed as opposites?

**The Trojan Horse**

How does the Trojan horse epitomize what Odysseus is about?