

## **Milestones in Humanism**

### **The Iliad of Homer**

Homer's Iliad may seem a curious choice as a milestone in humanism, since the one thing that any fool knows about the Iliad is that it has gods and goddesses dripping off every page. I hope to show that as well as being the very first extant work of European literature, it launched the entire European model of enlightened humanism.

I will arrange my remarks under four main headings: the nature of Greek religion, the origins of the Iliad, the narrative, and the meaning.

### **The nature of Greek religion**

The Greek pantheon may be divided into three main kinds of deity. First, and probably the most primitive, are the nature gods, whose function is to explain the otherwise inexplicable: Zeus, the sky god, controlling the weather, the rain and the thunderbolt; Poseidon, the sea god and the bringer of earthquakes; the story of Demeter and her lost daughter Persephone, explaining the cycle of the seasons.

Second, and in a sense an extension of the first from the outward to the inward world, are those who represent human instincts and activities: Aphrodite, goddess of love and procreation; Dionysus, god of wine and ecstatic revels; Ate, the spirit of revenge; Ares, the war god; Hephaestus, the smith.

Third are those who regulate human affairs, such as Nemesis the bringer of retribution, or Nike the bringer of victory. Commonly they form committees: the Three Graces, the Nine Muses, the Furies.

These categories are not of course of exclusive: Zeus, in addition to his natural functions, also regulated the laws of hospitality; Apollo represents both the sun and human knowledge.

Greek religion operated at several levels: at the public, civic level were the cults of the patron god or goddess of the particular city: Athene at Athens, Hera at Corinth, Artemis at Sparta. At a more private level there were cults of initiation such as the Eleusinian Mysteries. By their nature these chthonian rituals are much less well documented than the Olympian cults, but none the less powerful for

that. Also at a private level were the many devotional, placatory or petitional acts at the sanctuaries of the oracles at Delphi or Dodona, or those dedicated to the god of healing, Aesculapius.

The liberating thing about this theology was its inclusiveness. The motto at Delphi was 'Nothing to excess': the proper regulation of human affairs involved recognising the conflicts between, for example, Artemis' virginity and the indulgence of Aphrodite, or the control of Athene or Apollo and the ecstatic release offered by Dionysus, and keeping it all in balance.

### **The origins of the Iliad**

It is generally agreed that the events of the Iliad, and the Trojan War of which it is a part, insofar as they have a historical background, date from the late Bronze Age, known in Greece as the Mycenaean period, around 1400-1200 BC. Certainly the material world, with its bronze armoury, reflects this era. The boar's tusk helmet, which Homer describes in detail, is seen illustrated on Mycenaean vases, and one has been excavated, along with a full suit of bronze armour, from a Mycenaean tomb at Dendra, in the Argolid.

The social world on the other hand is totally unlike the highly bureaucratic palace economies that archaeology has revealed at Mycenae, Pylos, Knossos and other centres. It much more closely resembles the chiefdoms of the ensuing 'Dark Age' of Archaic Greece.

The art of writing, which was used to maintain the Bronze Age palace bureaucracies, was lost during this period, and was not rediscovered until the import of the alphabet from the east around 700 BC.

Throughout these centuries, the cycles of myths and legends which were the common inheritance of the Greek-speaking peoples – Perseus, Herakles, Theseus, the Argonauts, Oedipus, and above all the Trojan War – were orally transmitted by travelling bards, the rhapsodes, who would recite from memory fragments from their repertoire of verse, strung together, with musical accompaniment, perhaps to reflect credit on their host and his ancestry.

Out of this tradition emerged, probably around 750 BC, a more or less stable text, referred to as the Monumental Iliad. The Odyssey

probably dates from about 50 years later. There was thus no single poet Homer, although it is possible that each of the two poems owes its final form to a single poet. They were not written down until around 550 BC, in Athens, under the tyrant Peisistratus. They thus represent over half a millennium of reflection, refinement and distillation – in the case of the Iliad, some 18,000 lines, divided into 24 books.

## **The Narrative**

By convention, the story of the Trojan War starts with a prophecy that the sea-nymph Thetis would bear a son greater than his father. This prophecy gave even such a devoted connoisseur of nymph flesh as Zeus pause for thought, and it was decided that the safest course of action was to marry her to a mortal.

The favoured candidate was Peleus, and the guests at the wedding included all the immortals except one – Eris, the goddess of strife. Accordingly, as a piece of calculated mischief, she inscribed a golden apple ‘for the fairest’ and left it in view. In due course a number of claimants emerged: Hera, the consort of Zeus; Athene, goddess of wisdom; and Aphrodite, goddess of love. Zeus wisely declined to make a decision, and delegated the task to a prince of Troy named Paris.

The mother of Paris, King Priam’s wife Hecabe, dreamt while she was pregnant that she gave birth to a firebrand. The soothsayers decided that this spelt danger, and the boy was banished from the palace and brought up as a shepherd on Mount Ida.

The three goddesses presented themselves before him, and, by way of assisting his judgment, offered him gifts: Hera offered him power, Athene wisdom, and Aphrodite the most beautiful woman in the world as his wife.

Paris was young, and the choice was a no-brainer. In due course he returned to his family, and was sent on a diplomatic mission to Sparta, where Menelaus, brother of Agamemnon, ruled, with his queen Helen, who was also the sister of Agamemnon's wife Clytemnestra. Paris seduced Helen and abducted her to Troy. Menelaus complained to Agamemnon, who as King of Mycenae was the pre-eminent king among the Achaeans. Agamemnon recruited all

the kings and princes of the Greek world to mount a punitive expedition, including the son of Peleus and Thetis, now grown to manhood, Achilles.

The fleet mustered at Aulis, but was unable to sail because of contrary winds. Calchas the seer told Agamemnon that the only way Artemis, who had sent the wind, could be placated was by the sacrifice of his eldest child, Iphigenia. Agamemnon realised that a direct message home to this effect was unlikely to succeed, so he sent to Clytemnestra to tell her that Iphigenia was to be married to Achilles. Iphigenia duly came, and was duly sacrificed. This act was to cost Agamemnon his life when, ten years later, he returned in victory to Mycenae. However, the wind changed, and the fleet sailed.

There followed nine years of warfare, during which neither side was able to gain a decisive advantage. The Trojans were confined to their city; the Achaeans to their fortified camp on the shore.

At this point the Iliad begins. The Greeks are suffering an outbreak of plague in the camp. Calchas divines that it has been sent by Apollo, who favours of the Trojans anyway, because of Agamemnon's abduction of the daughter of one of his priests. Agamemnon says that he will give her back, but what will he do for a bedfellow? Achilles accuses him of being more interested in his own comfort than in the welfare of the army. In retaliation Agamemnon declares that he will confiscate Achilles' bedmate, Briseis. Achilles promptly declares that he personally has no quarrel with the Trojans, and is withdrawing his labour.

This is a more significant statement than it might appear. Achilles is the son of an immortal, and his mother has told him that if he pursues this war to its end he will die on the field of battle, but enjoy a glorious reputation in posterity; if not, then he will live a long life but die in obscurity.

There follow some 14 books during which the absence of Achilles allows the other heroes –Agamemnon, Menelaus, Ajax, Diomedes, Odysseus – to show their mettle. But the time comes when the Trojans and their Olympian supporters gain the upper hand and breach the wall of the Achaean camp. Ships are being burnt, heroes are being wounded, when Patroclus, the intimate of Achilles, finds his

loyalty stretched too far, and begs Achilles to rejoin the battle. Achilles continues to refuse, but the compromise is reached that Patroclus will borrow Achilles' armour and impersonate him on the battlefield. But, says Achilles, if you succeed in driving Hector and the Trojans from the camp, do not pursue him to Troy. Above all do not attempt single combat with Hector. He will kill you, and anyway, if anybody is going to kill Hector it should be me.

The plan succeeds, the Trojans withdraw, but Patroclus in the heat of battle ignores Achilles' warning and pursues Hector back to Troy. Under the walls, Hector turns, and that with the help of Apollo defeats and kills Patroclus. A battle develops over Patroclus' corpse. Hector succeeds in stripping it of Achilles' armour, but then the Achaeans retrieve the body and return it to Achilles.

Achilles is smitten with grief and guilt, but above all with a lust for revenge against Hector. But with no armour he cannot yet re-enter the battle. (Note that the one thing everybody knows about Achilles, that his mother made him invulnerable by dipping him in the Styx, except for the ankle by which she held him, is unknown, or at least unacknowledged, by Homer. Unlike the *Odyssey*, the *Iliad* is almost devoid of magic.)

Accordingly, Thetis prevails upon Hephaestus to forge new armour for Achilles, including a monumental shield, and Achilles ventures forth. In Book 22, the narrative climax, he catches up with Hector, and kills him, with the help of Athene, who disguises herself as Hector's brother Deiphobus in order to urge him forward into the final duel ('I'm right behind you, brother!'), and then retrieves Achilles' spear for him when he overshoots. Achilles hitches the body behind his chariot and drags it back to the camp. Day after day he does the same, but it brings him no solace.

The gods are offended by this breach of the heroic code: he has the right to the armour, but the body must be returned to its family, and Achilles is demeaning himself by his present conduct. Zeus is persuaded to intervene.

Hermes is dispatched to Troy to instruct Priam to load a cart with treasure to redeem the body; Iris, the rainbow, is sent to Achilles to

instruct him to accept the exchange. Achilles, up to this point always defiant and wilful, meekly accedes.

In Book 23, the Achaeans hold funeral games for Patroclus; and in Book 24 we come to the moral climax of the work. Hermes as promised gives Priam safe conduct to the tent of Achilles under cover of night. Priam enters the tent and, before Achilles can react, throws himself before him and grasps his hands – the hands that have killed his son. Achilles recognises in Priam the father that he now knows he will never see again; Priam recognises in Achilles the son that he has lost. Both are overcome by tears.

Achilles gently raises Priam to his feet, and says to him that ‘The gods, having no cares themselves, have woven sorrow into the very fabric of our lives.’ And suddenly, after 23 books of a world divided vertically between the Greeks and their supporting gods, and the Trojans and theirs, the entire axis swivels through 90 degrees, and we see where the real divide lies.

Achilles promises Priam at a ten-day truce to allow Hector to be decently buried, and Priam returns to Troy with the body. There is then a moving sequence where the women pay their tributes: Hecabe his mother, Andromache his wife, and Helen herself, who says that of all the princes of Troy, it was only Hector who always treated her with courtesy and consideration. It is difficult at this point not to feel that it is Hector who is the true hero of the Iliad, the model of heroic chivalry.

The pyre is prepared, the body is burnt, and the last line of the Iliad is, ‘So ended the funeral rites for Hector, tamer of horses.’

And we know that in spite of their reconciliation, in spite of their glimpse of shared humanity, tomorrow the fighting will begin again. Whatever we learn today, we will probably need to learn again tomorrow. Even though we may have learned it, every other mortal person will need to learn it for themselves. We are by ourselves, and we had better get used to the idea, and learn to deal with it.

### **And your point is...?**

It is this perception, that the powers that rule our lives are at best neutral, at worst hostile, that forms the basis of the European tragic

tradition, starting with the Athenians Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, through their Roman emulators such as Seneca, to Shakespeare and Racine.

The Odyssey is totally different in character. Throughout Odysseus' travels and hardships – it takes him 10 years just to get home – Athene is constantly on hand to warn, advise, console and even physically protect him. We know that however bleak things look, however alarming the odds, a benign Providence will always ensure that there is happy ending. This is the origin of the comic tradition, which runs through, in the classical world, Menander, Plautus and Terence, and again is most familiar to us through Shakespeare.

There is little doubt which of these traditions has resonated more in the European imagination; which is intuitively recognised as the truer portrayal of the human condition. *Hamlet* or *As You Like It*? *Macbeth* or *Twelfth Night*? *King Lear* or *The Comedy of Errors*? It is surely no coincidence that all Shakespeare's finest and most resonant verse is evoked when he is confronting mortality, staring into the abyss.

Think of Macbeth:

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,  
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day  
To the last syllable of recorded time,  
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools  
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!  
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage  
And then is heard no more: it is a tale  
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
Signifying nothing.

Or Hamlet:

To be, or not to be: that is the question:  
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,  
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,  
And by opposing end them? To die: to sleep;  
No more; and by a sleep to say we end  
The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks  
That flesh is heir to, 'tis a consummation

Devoutly to be wish'd. To die, to sleep;  
To sleep: perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub;  
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come  
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,  
Must give us pause.

Or Claudio, in *Measure for Measure*:

Ay, but to die, and go we know not where;  
To lie in cold obstruction and to rot;  
This sensible warm motion to become  
A kneaded clod; and the delighted spirit  
To bathe in fiery floods, or to reside  
In thrilling region of thick-ribbed ice;  
To be imprison'd in the viewless winds,  
And blown with restless violence round about  
The pendent world; or to be worse than worst  
Of those that lawless and incertain thought  
Imagine howling: 'tis too horrible!  
The weariest and most loathed worldly life  
That age, ache, penury and imprisonment  
Can lay on nature is a paradise  
To what we fear of death.

Or Prospero, in *The Tempest*:

Our revels now are ended. These our actors,  
As I foretold you, were all spirits and  
Are melted into air, into thin air:  
And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,  
The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,  
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,  
Ye all which it inherit, shall dissolve  
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,  
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff  
As dreams are made on, and our little life  
Is rounded with a sleep.

And the most remarkable fact of all is that, by this analysis, the religion that has dominated Europe for two millennia, with its naïve

but seductive conceits of a personal friend in heaven and a happy ending for the just and virtuous, falls so firmly into the comic tradition. As Homer might have said, 'Funny old world, innit?'

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