The Iliad: Myth-Making Inside and Out
by G.I.C. Robertson

The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are the oldest surviving works of Greek poetry, indeed of the whole of Western literature, and they deal with certain events in the lives of two Greek heroes involved in the Trojan War: Achilleus and Odysseus. Neither epic presents the entire life story of its central hero; as Aristotle wrote in his *Poetics* (1451a), a hero's whole *life* will not necessarily make for a unified *plot*, and the epic poet must focus on a particular episode that can be said to have a clear beginning, middle, and end. But this does not preclude the poet from incorporating other stories and story-patterns; he draws on a vast store of traditional tales, selecting certain episodes to include in his poem, and the final work is shaped not only to include these events but also to allude to others which are relevant to his presentation of the myth. Although the action of the *Odyssey*, for example, is set at the very end of the hero's wanderings, a large part of the poem is 'flashbacks' covering the whole ten-year period between the sack of Troy and the homecoming of Odysseus. The *Iliad*, too, though set in the last year of the fighting at Troy, alludes to the beginning of the war in such passages as the catalogue of Greek and Trojan forces and the abortive duel between Menelaos and Paris (Books 2 and 3 respectively); towards the end of the poem, events which lie in the future outside the poem's boundaries (the death of Achilleus, the sack of Troy) are foreshadowed in the encounter between Achilleus and Priam (Book 24).

The above examples are direct references looking forward or backward in narrative time to particular events in the story of the Trojan War, events which were covered in other early epics (now lost) and survive in later works of ancient literature. But some Homeric allusions to other stories are less direct, and can be seen in the poems' characters and actions rather than in specific references. In the *Iliad*, for example, many aspects of Achilleus' withdrawal from the fighting and subsequent return seem to mirror other events in the mythic tradition: his quarrel with Agamemnon has counterparts in other quarrels between Agamemnon and Menelaos and between Achilleus and Odysseus, both of which are alluded to in the *Odyssey*. At *Iliad* 6.326, Hektor rebukes his brother Paris for staying out of the fighting, saying, 'you should not keep this anger in your heart', which is a little puzzling since Paris (as he says in his reply) is not in fact angry at the Trojans; this may be an allusion to a similar mythic tradition, now lost, in which Paris played a role like that of Achilleus in the *Iliad*. Achilleus' return to the fighting to avenge the death of Patroklos seems to have been mirrored in another early epic poem, the *Aithiopis*, in which (according to a summary by a later writer) Achilleus avenged the death of another friend, Nestor's son Antilochos (who in fact is seen mourning Patroklos with Achilleus at *Iliad* 18.32). These few examples – and there are many more – give some idea of how the poet of the *Iliad* re-shapes traditional material and applies it to his own story.

There is a very striking example of a similar technique at work in the ninth book of the poem, where Achilleus' old tutor Phoinix recounts another myth in his attempt to persuade Achilleus to return to the fighting. The story he tells is not one from the Trojan saga; it is the tale of Meleagros, prince of Kalydon. According to the most common version of this story, the Fates told Meleagros' mother Althaia that her new-born son's life would end when a certain log was burned to ashes; Althaia prudently hid this log

away in order to save her son. But after Meleagros killed a monstrous boar that was threatening his homeland, he argued with his uncles over who should receive the animal's skin as a trophy, and killed them. Althaia was so grieved at the deaths of her brothers that she burned the log, causing the death of her own son. There is not much in this story that is immediately relevant to Achilleus' situation in the *Iliad*, but Phoinix makes some important changes, saying that the quarrel over the hide led to a full-scale war, and that it was in this war that Meleagros killed his uncle; he was then cursed by his mother, and withdrew from the battle in anger. Many attempts were made to persuade Meleagros to return: first the elders and priests of the city approached him, then his parents and sisters, and his dearest friends, all without success; finally, his wife was able to convince him to return and fight.

This is now looking a little more like the Iliad: an angry hero withdraws from the fighting, and (at least initially) cannot be persuaded to return. The attempts to persuade the hero in the story told by Phoinix, in fact, closely follow the pattern in the *Iliad*: in Book 9, the first speech to Achilleus is made by Odysseus, delivering the 'official' offer made by the commander-in-chief Agamemnon; then comes the plea of Phoinix, who addresses Achilleus as if he were his own child; and the last attempt in Book 9 is made by Achilleus' good friend and comrade Aias. These correspond to the Kalydonian elders, the family members, and the friends of Meleagros in the revised version told by Phoinix. But after Phoinix has taken the myth apart and stitched it together again, some of the seams still show: the mother's curse doesn't quite fit the new pattern, since (according to the usual version) the 'curse' was in fact an irrevocable sentence of death, and Meleagros would not have lived to nurse his anger. Also, the appearance of his mother in the list of those who try to persuade him to return seems out of place; did she not curse him to begin with? It is clear that Phoinix has some trouble accommodating the traditional story in his version, and glosses over inconvenient details for the sake of making a closer parallel with the anger of Achilleus. Perhaps the most obvious parallel is the final persuasion of Meleagros, accomplished by his wife. Her name was traditionally Alkyone, but Phoinix claims that this was just a nickname – she was really called Kleopatra. This is a blatant attempt to assimilate her to Achilleus' friend Patroklos; the same elements (meaning 'father's glory') appear in both names, and it is indeed Patroklos who will finally convince Achilleus to return to the fighting – by dying at the hands of Hektor in Book 16. After hearing Phoinix, Achilleus sees the point of the story, and takes the first step on the road to his re-integration into heroic society: though he flatly refused the entreaty of Odysseus, saying that he would sail home the next day, the revised myth of Meleagros softens his rage. He invites Phoinix to stay with him, and says they will decide later whether to stay at Troy or go home.

Greek myths are always fluid, and here Phoinix alters a traditional story in order to fit the context and purpose of his own narrative; his version of the Meleagros myth is almost a very condensed epic poem with Achilleus as the audience. Achilleus, in turn, learns not only how to 'read' such a story but how to compose one. In his conversation with Priam in the final book of the *Iliad*, he effects a similar revision of the story of Niobe's grief: he says that her children (like Priam's son Hektor in the *Iliad*) lay unburied for nine days before being buried by the gods (as the gods prompted Achilleus to return Hektor's body for burial), and that Niobe broke her period of mourning by eating (as Achilleus is encouraging Priam to do). The encounter between Phoinix and Achilleus

mirrors that between Homer and his audience, and that between Achilleus and Priam illustrates that all audiences are potentially narrators; in fact they *must* be, if the myths are to survive. But what they re-tell will not usually be exactly what they have heard. Homer was an audience for the traditional tales told by his poetic predecessors, but he did not simply repeat those tales without alteration; he re-shaped them according to his own narrative purposes. We, Homer's audience, will do the same in our turn.