



Historically Speaking

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The Homeric Question

Who was Homer?

The name Homer comes from the Greek name *Homeros*, meaning "hostage, pledge". Homer may have been a Greek epic poet who told the stories of the *Iliad*, about the Trojan War, and the *Odyssey*, about the journey home of Odysseus after the war. Others have suggested that the works attributed to him were written by one or more other poets. If there was an epic poet named Homer, there is some debate about when he lived, though most scholars place him in the 8th century BC. For my part, I believe that he was a blind poet living around 850 BCE and he sang the poems to scribes who wrote them down.

The Bardic Tradition - Phrases and Meter

An epic is a long poem, each line of which is in the same meter. The meter of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* is dactylic hexameter. "Dactylic" means that the basic unit of each line is a hard or accented syllable followed by two soft or unaccented syllables. It is called dactylic because it is like our finger, one long joint followed by two short ones. Dactylic is Greek for "finger-like". Hexameter means that six of these dactyls make up a line. There can be other patterns mixed in among the dactyls.

In practice, the poet seems to have a long list of dactylic hexameter lines and phrases they could draw upon as they sang the stories of Greek tradition. These useful words, phrases, and lines were passed down from poet to poet until, by Homer's time it was possible to compose a long epic of great complexity and originality that was made up largely of formulas (the lines, phrases and words mentioned above). It is thought that some of these formulas date back to the Trojan War itself and were handed down intact from generation to generation.

Over a period of centuries, more and more phrases were retained in the collective memory of the minstrels, thus increasing the store of formulas. By Homer's time, every common word appeared in a number of formulas. The Greeks used the word "ship," for example, in the phrases "balanced ship", "dark-prowed ship", "proud-masted ship", and "curved ship". These four formulas fit at the end of the line. Thus, as the bard sings the first part of the line, he plans ahead to end the line with one of the "ship" formulas. In this way the bard can perform for long periods of time, assembling the lines as he goes. Other formulas include "wine-dark sea", "black, shining sea" and "rosy-fingered dawn". I use several of these phrases in my books to add a sense of authenticity to my writing.

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