

Lecture One: With a song in your heart.

- 1) Greek society was a *song culture*, one that used the medium of music/voice as a conduit for social memory. The notion of song is *not* a dead metaphor. Take a look at the opening of the *Iliad*:
- 2) Sing, O goddess, the anger [*mênis*] of Achilles son of Peleus, which brought countless pains [*algos* pl.] upon the Achaeans. Many a brave soul [*psukhê*] did it send hurrying down to Hades, and many a hero did it yield a prey to dogs [5] and birds, and the Will of Zeus was fulfilled—starting from the day on which the son of Atreus, king of men, and great Achilles, first quarreled with one another. And which of the gods was it that set them on to quarrel? It was the son of Zeus and Leto [=Apollo]; for he was angry with the king and sent a pestilence upon the host of warriors to plague the people, because the son of Atreus [=Agamemnon] had dishonored Chryseis his priest.
- 3) The translation above is in prose, but the original Greek is in strictly regulated meter, composed of six feet per line: a hexameter. Here's the original Greek:
- 4) μήνιν ᾠείδε θεὰ Πηληϊάδεω Ἀχιλῆος
 οὐλομένην, ἣ μυρὶ Ἀχαιοῖς ἄλγε' ἔθηκε,
 πολλὰς δ' ἰφθίμους ψυχὰς Ἄϊδι προΐαψεν
 ἠρώων, αὐτοὺς δὲ ἑλώρια τεύχε κύνεσσιν
 οἰωνοῖσι τε παῖσι, Διὸς δ' ἐτελείετο βουλή, 5
 ἐξ οὗ δὴ τὰ πρῶτα διαστήτην ἐρίσαντε
 Ἀτρεΐδης τε ἄναξ ἀνδρῶν καὶ Διὸς Ἀχιλλεύς.
 τίς τ' ἄρ σφωε θεῶν ἔριδι ξυνέηκε μάχεσθαι
 Λητοῦς καὶ Διὸς υἱός· ὃ γὰρ βασιλῆϊ χολωθεὶς
 νοῦσον ἀνὰ στρατὸν ὄρσε κακὴν, ὀλέκοντο δὲ λαοὶ ... 10
- 5) The whole of the *Iliad* is compressed into those first two words: “wrath/sing.” The theme is of *mênis*, of a story of rage, and the *medium* is song, the conduit for *kleos*, the ‘fame’ or ‘story’ of a person (particularly a hero).
- 6) Important to defamiliarize yourself to a ‘book’ of Homer. At most, the Homer in your hand is a *transcript* of an oral performance; more likely, it is a collation of many different, unique, Homeric singings.
- 7) Oral basis of Homer proved by Milman Parry using the comparative method. In the 30's, MP noticed peculiarities of the Homeric style, particularly the use of formulae. Decided to investigate modern oral epic traditions. Tried to go to Russia; visa was denied; ended up in (former) Yugoslavia. With his pupil, Albert Lord, recorded thousands of South Slavic songs (of all genres), mostly in Serbo-Croatian. In 1960, Albert Lord eloquently argued that both South Slavic and Homeric songs are products of *composition-in-performance*, the process of creating new songs, on the fly, from previous singings.
- 8) Most talented singer was Avdo Medjédovitch, a Yugoslav singer. From Albert Lord's *Singer of Tales*:

“Finally Avdo came and he sang for us old Salih's favorite of the taking of Bagdad in the days of Sultan Selim. We listened with increasing interest to this short homely farmer, whose throat was disfigured by a large goiter. He sat cross-legged on the bench, sawing the gusle, swaying in rhythm with the music. He sang very fast, sometimes deserting the melody, and while the bow went lightly back and forth over the string, he recited the verses at top speed. A crowd gathered. A card game, played by some of the modern young men of the town, noisily kept on, but was finally broken up.

The next few days were a revelation. Avdo's songs were longer and finer than any we had heard before. He could prolong one for days, and some of them reached fifteen or sixteen thousand lines. Other singers came, but none could equal Avdo, our Yugoslav Homer.”

- 9) The Homeric poems are complex narratives that work on many levels, including the metaphorical. Heroes are both religious figures—worshipped at shrines throughout the Greek world—but also mythical constructions that embody the contradictions and tensions inherent in the Greek view of society. As such, the Homeric poems—and the Homeric heroes—need to be sensitively examined through *close readings* of the narrative: only by examining the subtle use of *metaphor* (meaning through substitution) and *metonym* (meaning through sequence) will we be able to grasp how representation of a heroic world works.
- 10) How *not* to read ancient heroes: ABC's sportscasters on *Herakles* (video clip).
- 11) Problem: ABC sportscasters flatten the complicating issues of the myth by eliminating the 'questionable' aspects of heroism. For instance, note how they laud Herakles as 'hero of heroes, always victorious in his battle against evil.' See, however, Euripides' *The Madness of Herakles* in which the title character performs some rather 'questionable' actions, indeed.
- 12) Greek heroes are *not* perfect. They are *not* good. They are *not* 'always victorious in their battle against evil': what they are, and what they mean in literature, will be the focus of this course. Through them, we can discern the 'concepts' that constitute Greece's terms for self-definition.

For Tuesday, look especially at the great quarrel, 1.50-1.350; the speech of Thersites, 2.210-265; Alexander and Helen, 3.369-461

Skimmable: 2.490-875; 4.208-539