

Singapore Management University Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University

Research Collection School of Social Sciences
(Open Access)

School of Social Sciences

1-2003

Iliad and Odyssey: Areté and Timé

Gemino Abad

Singapore Management University, geminoabad@smu.edu.sg

Follow this and additional works at: http://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/sooss_research



Part of the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

Citation

Abad, Gemino, "Iliad and Odyssey: Areté and Timé" (2003). *Research Collection School of Social Sciences (Open Access)*. Paper 16.
http://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/sooss_research/16

Available at: http://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/sooss_research/16

This Working Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Social Sciences at Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Research Collection School of Social Sciences (Open Access) by an authorized administrator of Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University. For more information, please email libIR@smu.edu.sg.

Iliad and Odyssey: Areté and Timé

Gemino Abad

October 2003

Paper No. 5-2003

ILIAD AND ODYSSEY: *ARETÉ* AND *TIMÉ*

Homer called the ancient Greeks Danaans, Argives, Achaeans. They were in history the Myceneans, the first Greek-speaking people to settle Greece. They emigrated about 2000 B.C. from somewhere northwest of the Black Sea, and absorbed and displaced the Minoan civilization in Greece.

The Mycenaean empire lasted from 1600 to 1100 B.C. The sack of Troy (Ilium) was dated in classical times at 1184 B.C.; modern excavations at Hissarlik in Turkey show the violent destruction of Troy in 1220 B.C.

The Mycenaean empire in turn collapsed during the Dorian invasion in 1100 B.C. The Dorians, also Greek-speaking, came from the north. During those “dark ages,” 1200 to 800 B.C. – “dark” because we have scanty historical information – there arose the *polis* or city-state, each one proudly independent; yet, the city-states participated in common activities and institutions, so that there emerged a national consciousness: one country, *Hellas*; one people, the *Hellenes*. There was the pan-Hellenic games, the Olympiad, 776 B.C.; there was the oracle at Delphi that everyone heeded; there was the spread of the Greek alphabet adapted from the Phoenicians. And then there was Homer of Chios.

The *Iliad* is dated about 730 B.C. Most scholars believe Homer was a real historical person. As early as late 6th century B.C., there was on the island of Chios in the Aegean Sea a guild of *rhapsodoi* (professional singers/reciters of poems) called Homeridae who claimed descent from Homer.

The *Iliad* celebrated the first collective effort against an external force. It established a common cultural point of reference; a view of the gods that transcended local varieties; a standard pan-Hellenic poetic language; and a standard – in effect, the very concept – of a national literature. In 6th century Athens, Pisistratus established by law the public recitation of Homer’s *Iliad*, in full and in the proper order, at the great Athenian festival, the pan-Athenaea.

In Homer’s time, the wandering rhapsode or singer had a repertoire of poems about the glorious deeds of a legendary aristocracy. He provided serious artistic entertainment in the courts of princes and at public festivals in the various city-states.

What the rhapsode did was improvised performance: that is to say, the performance, as in jazz, was the composition itself. We should remind ourselves that by Homer’s time there was already a long poetic tradition or practice, given to experiment, in which among poets and rhapsodes, there was much mutual awareness, competition at festivals, imitation, and cross-fertilization.

Then one poet – Homer – in 8th century B.C. must have glimpsed the latent possibilities of the new technology of writing. He saw in it an opportunity to achieve something of value and a means of perpetuating that achievement indefinitely. He undertook a prolonged experiment and practice leading to the perfection, over many years, of a monumental epic poem, the *Iliad* – over 15,000 verses in dactylic hexameter in archaic Ionic Greek. In performance, that work became increasingly fixed, and so eventually available for memorized transmission to rhapsodes.

Homer's art was oral-improvisatory. It is, you might say, like jazz, the only developed improvisatory art native to the modern Western world. In jazz, you have creative individuals who learn their craft from a living tradition of fellow-artists in a milieu of mutual respect, personal ambition, and restless experiment. In Homer's time – and long before Homer – the bard or rhapsode, singing or reciting at a feast, would be questioned by his listeners and asked to repeat the telling or to give more details. There would be a free conversation or interaction. Someone might ask, "How did Patroclus die?" and the singer would make that part of the story more vivid without, however, changing the basic plot which everyone knew. So, the epic singer was "poised phrase by phrase, verse by verse, between enduring tradition and momentary improvisation" (Fränkel). The singer or bard didn't comment on the action he narrated, and appeared detached, but he conveyed emotion – the emotion of the experience narrated – through the details he chose. Sometimes the singer would seem to the audience to become the characters whose words he was speaking, giving the listeners a shock of surprise and a sense of intimacy.

Society in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* is less a particular historical reality than a sophisticated fiction, its elements drawn from different traditions and different periods and localities, while other elements are purely imaginary. For example, the Myceneans buried their dead, but fallen warriors in Homer are cremated.

The values and institutions in Homer's epics are on the whole post-Mycenean. The society is stratified: on top, the warrior aristocracy where the leader is *primus inter pares*, and then the mass of free peasants and occupational groups who may enjoy some citizen status but count for nothing in the council or in war. There is also the institution of guest-friendship: the beneficiary or guest gains honor, the benefactor or host the other's future aid or support. The Trojan Glaucus and the Greek warrior Diomedes in the *Iliad* refuse to fight because they are descendants of guest-friends. The *casus belli* of the Trojan War is Paris, guest of Menelaus, who stole Menelaus' wife, the beautiful Helen.

Above all is the individualistic heroic ideal of *arête* and *time*. *Areté* is personal excellence and glory in what one does best: this means prowess in battle, courage in facing death. *Timé* is personal honor and esteem among one's peers. *Areté* and *time* give rise to competitive ambition: always to be best: *aristos* (in the English word

“aristocracy”: rule of the best). That “best” implies mutual recognition, esteem, and fellowship. In the Homeric outlook, conscience (our word and concept for inner moral sanction) didn’t weigh heavy. The chief sanction was external – risking the loss of one’s face with one’s peers. You have a “shame culture” rather than a “guilt culture”.

Underlying all the hero’s striving for excellence and honor is a deep sense of tragic pathos because human existence is transitory. What is certain is only death, and there is only one choice: oblivion, because in Hades, one is merely a shade of his former existence, or glory and fame, which is a kind of immortality in men’s memory.

If we draw out the contrasts between Achilles and Odysseus, we shall see the complexity of the Greek heroic ideal of *arété* and *timé*.

First of all, the first word in the *Iliad* is “Wrath,” in the *Odyssey*, “Man.” This is followed by a statement of divine purpose: in the *Iliad*, the will of Zeus is accomplished, in the *Odyssey*, offence against the gods is severely punished: Odysseus wanders for twenty years because he blinded the Cyclops Polyphemus, son of Poseidon, and all his companions perish because from hunger they slaughtered the sacred cattle of Helios (Apollo).

The atmosphere, the ethos and feeling, are different in Homer’s epics: over-all, the scenes in the *Iliad* are passionate and violent, in the *Odyssey*, touching and melancholy. When Achilles, after a vehement speech against Agamemnon in the public assembly, hurls the scepter to the ground, he rejects the assembly and its justice. The whole gathering is seized with fear and apprehension because Achilles is their champion warrior. The scepter is held by judges as the symbol of justice, and a speaker at a public assembly holds it to show that he has the floor. In contrast, Telemachus, son of Odysseus, after denouncing in the public assembly the abusive Suitors of his mother, Penelope, and begging for the people’s support, throws down the scepter and bursts into tears, and “pity seized the whole gathering.” Again, after rejecting the public assembly, Achilles sits by himself on the seashore, in tears gazing over the sea, until his mother, the sea nymph Thetis, comes and promises to intervene with Zeus for him against Agamemnon. This scene shows Achilles’s self-imposed isolation from his society, his passionate and solitary nature, and his privileged access to the gods. In contrast, when we first meet Odysseus, he is also sitting on the seashore, inconsolably weeping and longing for his island home Ithaca and his wife Penelope. He goes to the shore each day, without hope.

When we regard the men and women in Homer, more values are foregrounded in the *Odyssey*. In the *Iliad*, the focus is narrow: we have warriors facing death at the hands of other warriors, and we get that dreadful instant transit from godlike brilliance in life (the *aristeia* or glory) to oblivion in death as their shades flit to Hades. The *Odyssey* has wider interests and sympathies – women, servants, even animals (Odysseus’

faithful dog Argus). Loyalty is treasured: Penelope is often contrasted with unfaithful Clytemnestra, Agamemnon's wife; Odysseus's loyal servants are rewarded and the disloyal hanged.

Self-mastery, or self-control and restraint, is most prized. In this, Odysseus fails only once when, after escaping with his men from Polyphemus's prison-cave, he yields to the temptation of rash heroism – he shouts out his real name in triumph (he had cleverly told Polyphemus that his name was “No man”): a disastrous error because the Cyclopes then rain down boulders on his ships. After that, he never again loses his self-control. The final test is his endurance of insults and blows from the Suitors as he bides his time in their company disguised as a beggar; even when Penelope weeps in her lonesome helplessness, he does not yet reveal himself. He growls “like a bitch over her litter when a stranger approaches,” he tosses in bed like a blood-pudding over seething fire, as he listens to the laughter of his disloyal maid servants having their night of pleasure with the Suitors. He keeps his cool, biding his time. Penelope also never loses her self-control with the importunate Suitors who are shamelessly wasting the substance of her house.

Guile, cunning and tact are also aspects of this self-discipline. Oedipus and his men escape from the blinded Polyphemus when, as the Cyclops lets his flock of sheep out of his cave, touching each sheep with his hands, they attach themselves to the sheep's belly. Penelope outwits the Suitors by weaving in the day and unweaving at night the shroud she intends for old Laertes, Odysseus's father; she had promised the Suitors that she would decide whom to wed after finishing the shroud. She also tests Odysseus the beggar to see if he were really Odysseus by referring to their marriage-bed as though it had been moved: that bed as immovable is a fitting symbol for the solidity of their relationship.

A strongly devoted family is stressed in the *Odyssey*. Odysseus says that nothing is better than husband and wife living together in harmony: “they themselves [he says] know it best.” Laertes paid a high price for Eurycleia as servant maid when she was young and pretty, but he “never had to do with her in bed, so to avoid his wife's indignation.” He is broken in his old age by the long absence of his son Odysseus and the death of his wife Anticlea who died from grief at Odysseus' probable destruction. Odysseus comes from this close and affectionate family, and so, his attitude toward Penelope and Telemachus is that of a good husband and father. Such a man does not throw his life away for *aristeia* (glory).

There is, in fact, a gallery of feminine types in the *Odyssey*, developed much more than in the *Iliad*, simply as interesting in themselves: the nymph Calypso, the sorceress Circe, Queen Arete of the Phaeacians, her daughter, the young Nausicaa, Athena, and of course Helen. The *Odyssey* takes delight in the inscrutability of women to men.

As to the heroic ideal of *arête* and *timé*, the contrast between Achilles and Odysseus is most sharp. In the *Iliad*, the hero stands against other heroes; in the *Odyssey*, the individual stands against the group as a homogeneous mass or collectivity: Odysseus against mutinous sailors; Odysseus and Telemachus and Penelope against more than a hundred Suitors.

Achilles is heroic, Odysseus more like other men: he has human attachments – food, family, material comfort – while Achilles seems detached from such things. Achilles is unmarried, alone in the world; his mother is a sea goddess, his father Peleus is far away; of his son Neoptolemus, he says he does not know whether he is alive or dead; as to the young woman Briseis, his war-prize that Agamemnon took away, he says: “I wish she had died before she caused our quarrel.” Achilles is indifferent to worldly possessions: when Agamemnon restores Briseis to him with rich treasures, he says: “You can give them, or you can keep them. Now let us join battle” against the Trojans. When King Priam ransoms the body of Hector with treasures, Achilles does not even look at them, and even wraps Hector’s body in some of the rich garments from Priam. Odysseus, in contrast, comes home laden with treasures from the Phaeacians. Property and material well-being are important in the *Odyssey*.

In the *Iliad* we are to draw the sublimity of personal honor and courage from the narration of struggle and death. In the *Odyssey*, we are to draw serenity of spirit from the narration of suffering and endurance. Odysseus is told that the gods devise disasters so that there may be song among men, for to listen to that sad song gives delight. Life is full of unhappiness, yet through endurance, we achieve harmony, and sorrow is transmuted into song.

A NOTE ON HOMERIC RELIGION

All serious poetry in ancient Greece involves the gods. Their presence – visibly present in what happens – enables the poet to show the meaning of events and the nature of the world.

By comparison with other religions of their time, early Greek polytheism was untidy and unsystematic – there were no sacred texts, no organized priesthood, no theologians. The polytheism simply assimilated elements from Minoan, Mycenaean, and Near Eastern religions. There were innumerable, separate local cults of different deities.

In the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, religion is a distinctive Homeric construct, not the representation of a particular phase in Greek religion nor of a local tradition. Still, there is a recognizable continuity between Iliadic religion and the religion of later Greece. So, religion in Homer is not purely a literary apparatus, but a “real” religion believed in by the

Greeks – but, as befits a culture of external morality, that religion isn't defined by doctrinal beliefs.

The gods in Homer are comprehensible, anthropomorphic beings, each with an individual temperament and attributes, sometimes irrational like us, and with his or her own sphere of influence or power. They are largely amoral, "beyond good and evil," as Nietzsche would say.

In the *Odyssey* the gods are anxious to be justified. "Alas," says Zeus, meditating on Aegisthus (lover of the unfaithful Clytemnestra), "how men blame the gods. They say that evils come from us, while it is they who, by their own reckless folly, incur suffering beyond their fate." In the *Odyssey*, also, justice is both done and seen to be done. The gods draw the same moral as men from the destruction of the Suitors: "Ill deeds come to no good." The gods may not be virtuous themselves, but in the *Odyssey*, they respond to the inextinguishable cry of the human heart for justice.

Homeric religion transcends local variations in mythology and cult. But it presents only the Apollonian side of Greek religion, not its dark side, the Dionysiac, which comprised the "popular" or folk side of religious or mystical experience – e.g., the cult of fertility and worship of the chthonic powers (the gods of the underworld or infernal regions); hero cult; ancestor worship; ritual ecstasy. The folk religions owed much to mystery religions from the East which offered mystical hope and comfort, and paid little heed to social distinctions and might even subvert them. Dionysus, the god of fertility and wine, does not appear in Homer. The suppression of folk religions was central to the *Iliad's* religious orientation.

SOURCES FOR THE TALKS ON GREEK LYRIC POETRY, HOMER, AND VIRGIL

General References

The New Princeton Handbook of Poetic Terms. Ed. T.V.F. Brogan. Princeton University Press, 1994.

Oskar Seyffert. *Dictionary of Classical Antiquities*; rev. and ed., Henry Nettleship and J.E. Sandys. N.Y.: Meridian Books, 1963.

Richard Tarnas. *The Passion of the Western Mind: Understanding the Ideas That Have Shaped Our World View*. Pimlico (Random House), 1991, 1999.

On Greek Lyric Poetry

Greek Lyrics. Tr. Richmond Lattimore. University of Chicago Press, (year 1960).

W.R. Johnson. *The Idea of Lyric: Lyric Modes in Ancient and Modern Poetry*. University of California Press, 1982.

Poets Teaching Poetry: Self and the World, ed. Gregory Orr and Ellen Bryant Voigt. University of Michigan Press, 1996; 1999. For two essays there:

Joan Aleshire, "Staying News: A Defense of the Lyric," and especially,
Renate Wood, "Poetry and the Self: Reflections on the Discovery of the
Self in Early Greek Lyrics"

On Homer and Virgil

Landmarks of World Literature series. Cambridge University Press.

Homer. *The Iliad*. [commentary by] Michael Silk; 1987, 1993.

Homer. *The Odyssey*. [by] Jasper Griffin; 1987, 1992.

Virgil. *The Aeneid*. [by] K.W. Gransden; 1990, 1999.