

# KALLIOPE



THE MUSE OF EPIC POETRY

SUMMER UNIVERSITY 2003 PATRA

## KALLIOPE

KALLIOPE was the chiefest of the nine [MOUSAI](#), the goddesses of music, song and dance. She was also the goddess who granted the gift of eloquence to princes and kings.

In late Classical times, when the Mousai were assigned specific literary and artistic spheres, she was named muse of epic poetry. In this role she was depicted with a tablet and stylus and sometimes a scroll.



"Kalliope, who is the chiefest of them all [the Mousai], for she attends on worshipful princes: whomsoever of heaven-nourished princes the daughters of great Zeus honour, and behold him at his birth, they pour sweet dew upon his tongue, and from his lips flow gracious words. All the people look towards him while he settles causes with true judgements: and he, speaking surely, would soon make wise end even of a great quarrel; for therefore are there princes wise in heart, because when the people are being misguided in their assembly, they set right the matter again with ease, persuading them with gentle words. And when he passes through a gathering, they greet him as a god with gentle reverence, and he is conspicuous amongst the assembled: such is the holy gift of the Muses to men." - *Theogony* 75

## HOMER

### *Homer and the Beginning of Writing in Greece*

Lived after the Trojan War and before about 700 BCE; most probably in the eighth century BCE. Legend of the "Blind Homer" in part reflects the tradition that poetry transcends the limits of the senses in rescuing the past from oblivion, that the "seer" possesses insight that goes beyond ordinary vision.

The "**Homeric Question**": really a group of related questions or uncertainties, beginning with, Did an actual singer, Homer, ever exist? When? Were the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* composed by a series of singers over multiple generations, or by a single poet? How much of his stories did "Homer" inherit from tradition? Which of the two surviving epics came first? On which Greek island was "Homer" born? And so on.

Homer was essentially a "singer of tales," a **rhapsode** (like Ion, in Plato's dialogue) who improvised his performance, borrowing from well known stories, and accompanying himself on a stringed instrument (cp. Phemios and Demodokos in the *Odyssey*). Blindness thus signifies the manner of **memorial improvisation**, as well as godly inspiration, divine possession, and unusual talent. The *Iliad* and *Odyssey* contain a high proportion of **oral formulaic verse** (in **dactylic hexameter**, each line measured out into six feet, each "foot" containing one long and two short syllables like the digits of a finger [*dactyl*]). These poems were performed before an aristocratic audience. The oral formulas (including phrases, epithets, and longer passages) passed from singer to singer, and were refashioned in live performance. *Guslars* (accompanying themselves on a stringed "gusle") offer similar improvisational performances in Yugoslavia today, and many traditional African tribal singers perform in oral formulas. The text of Homer was recorded (in the technology of writing) around 550 BCE, by order of Peisistratos, the same tyrant who reestablished the dramatic festival contests in Athens.

### *Patterns of Narrative in Homer's Poems*

Despite differences in tone and subject matter, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* share a common approach to narrative. Both epics focus on a few weeks out of a period extending for more than ten years and both stories begin, as the Roman critics who studied Homer noticed, *in medias res* (a Latin phrase meaning "in the middle of things"), for Homer assumes his audience is familiar with the traditional narrative. The works repeat significant motifs that reflect their own individual emphasis: the *Iliad*, a poem about war and death, is punctuated by extended descriptions of mourning rites and funerals; the *Odyssey*, a poem about survival and renewal, is punctuated by frequent short scenes of awakening. As you read, notice the way repetition accentuates the action in the poems, not only in formulaic devices and recurring motifs, but also in the reverberation of whole episodes. Although studying the poems in excerpts inevitably obscures the symmetry of their structure, virtually every anthology offering selections from the *Iliad* includes both Book 1 and Book 24, the beginning and the ending, and an excellent example of the organization of a Homeric narrative. Book 1 depicts a quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon, the king of Mycenae; Book 24 shows a reconciliation between Achilles and Priam, the king of Troy. The ending of the poem, one might say, provides a mirror image of its beginning. The following outlines of the poems should help you link the episodes you will read and give some sense of Homer's artful balancing of episodes and characters.

### *Epic Conventions*

The notion of "conventions" is based upon Aristotle's more or less **descriptive** account of Homer's practice, in the *Poetics*. What was descriptive with regard to the **popular epic** became prescriptive for the **literary epic** (Virgil, Milton, and so on). A definition of epic poetry might include among its central features:

**A hero:** a central figure of exceptional character and position (though not necessarily exemplary in any moral sense), around whose actions the plot turns. This character's legendary, religious, mythic, or (less commonly) historic significance transcends time and space (that is, he is not a national hero, at least in the earliest epics).

**Narrative:** a story (as opposed to lyric or dramatic poetry) taking in a grand subject or theme, and broad in the scope of its contents and length.

**Elevated style:** descriptions and speeches that reflect established rhetorical traditions, elegant meter, conventionalized lexicon.

**Supernatural elements:** the intervention of gods and their interest in the outcome of events demonstrate transcendent meaning of story.

**Unity:** One hero, one theme, but numerous episodes, with reversals [*peripeteia*] and recognition scenes [*anagnoresis*], leading to reconciliation.

**Vast Scope:** narrative of heaven and earth, deeds of great valor, extreme prowess and spirit, cataclysmic violence.

**Invocation:** Opening invocation of the Muse, together with statement of **theme**.

**In medias res:** Beginning in the middle of things, with a narrative that makes use of flashbacks and foreshadowings, rather than a progressive, chronological narrative.

**Catalogues:** of warriors, ships, armies, genealogies: grandeur, order, and decorum.

**Formal speeches:** narratives, boasts, taunts, arguments, pleas -- all as public performance.

**Epic Simile:** extended comparisons that broaden the plane of action, and move its frame of reference beyond fighting and adventure, connecting heroic exploits with other human action.

**Epithets:** formulaic descriptions that establish or stabilize characterization, and help fill out improvised lines of poetic performance.

There are two very important words repeatedly used throughout the Homeric epics: honor (*timé*) and virtue or greatness (*areté*). The latter term is perhaps the most reiterated cultural and moral value in Ancient Greece and means something like achieving, morally and otherwise, your greatest potential as a human being. The reward for great honor and virtue is fame (*kleos*), which is what guarantees meaning and value to one's life. Dying without fame (*akleos*) is generally considered a disaster, and the warriors of the Homeric epics commit the most outrageous deeds to avoid dying in obscurity or infamy (witness Odysseus's absurd insistence on telling Polyphemos his name even though this will bring disaster on him and his men in the Polyphemos episode). The passage from *Odyssey* XI discussed above presents Achilles's final judgement on *kleos* and its value when he tells Odysseus that he would rather be alive and the most obscure human on earth than dead and famous.

ἀρετή  
Areté  
Virtue  
Excellence  
Goodness

The most articulated value in Greek culture is *areté*. Translated as "virtue," the word actually means something closer to "being the best you can be," or "reaching your highest human potential." The term from Homeric times onwards is not gender specific. Homer applies the term of both the Greek and Trojan heroes as well as major female figures, such as Penelope, the wife of the Greek hero, Odysseus. In the Homeric poems, *areté* is frequently associated with bravery, but more often, with effectiveness. The man or woman of *areté* is a person of the highest effectiveness; they use all their faculties: strength, bravery, wit, and deceptiveness, to achieve real results. In the Homeric world, then, *areté* involves all of the abilities and potentialities available to humans. We can, through the frequent use of this term in Homer's poems, make some tentative conclusions about the early Greek world view. The concept implies a human-centered universe in which human actions are of paramount importance; the world is a place of conflict and difficulty, and human value and meaning is measured against individual effectiveness in the world.

**Aristotle, *areté* is explicitly linked with human knowledge. Plato repeatedly returns to the question of *areté*, and the evidence of his earliest writings suggest that Socrates, Plato's teacher, was equally obsessed with the**

question. Various Platonic dialogues deal with questions such as: Can areté be taught or learned (Meno )? What is areté (The Republic )? The famous Socratic paradox, "Virtue is knowledge," is in Greek, "Areté is knowledge." This would be the foundation of both Socratic and Platonic philosophy: the highest human potential is knowledge and all other human abilities are derived from this central capacity. Aristotle also locates the highest human potential in knowledge: theoretical knowledge. If areté is knowledge and study, the highest human knowledge is knowledge about knowledge itself; in this light, the theoretical study of human knowledge, which Aristotle called "contemplation," is the highest human ability and happiness.

## BACKGROUNDS FOR READING THE *ILIAD* AND THE *ODYSSEY*

### Historical Backgrounds

#### *The People and the Languages of Early Greece*

The first human beings to settle in the area we now call Greece were of Mediterranean origins. During the second millennium B.C., a rich and brilliant civilization, known today by the name of its most powerful king Minos, was established on the island of Crete around Knossos. At approximately the same time, another empire emerged on the Greek mainland. Its center was a large group of edifices at Mycenae, a city situated favorably in the fertile valley called the Argolis (an important geographical location because so much of Greece is mountainous, arid land). The Mycenaeans are the people known later in Homer's epic as Achaians. Unlike the Minoans, the inhabitants of Mycenae spoke Greek. They descended from a population that lived in the Caucasus; when they moved away, they brought with them a language considered an ancestor to most European dialects from India through Europe (named later Indo-European).

Archaeological finds show the extensive activity of the Mycenaeans in the eastern basin of the Mediterranean, where they came into contact with the Minoans. The relationship between the two kingdoms remains unclear, but it seems that for a while neither civilization dominated the other and that considerable interaction existed. Around 1400 B.C. Crete was captured, although by whom we cannot be sure. Probably economic and commercial competition led Mycenae finally to subjugate the Minoans. Since the Minoans were not Greek speaking and evidence of Greek language has been found around the Knossos palace, we suspect that Mycenaean overseers began to run the Knossos administration.

Mycenae's last military incursion took place during the thirteenth century B.C. in a war against a trading partner, Troy, a city strategically positioned on the coast of Asia Minor, along the sea route between Europe and the Near East. Although the Mycenaeans won the war, as Homer's epics show, within a short period their supremacy declined in favor of Dorian Greeks, ancestors of the inhabitants of Sparta. While the Mycenaean Kingdom as a political entity disappeared, its population intermingled with the newcomers, as did the dialects of these various Greek tribes.

The story of the war between the Trojans and Mycenaeans is the subject of the *Iliad*. "Ilium" is another name for the city of Troy, supposedly founded by one Ilus, the grandfather of King Priam of Troy. For centuries, the *Iliad* was regarded as a pure fiction, until an amateur German archeologist, Heinrich Schliemann, set out to prove the historical basis of the events described in Homer's poem. Between 1870 and 1894, Schliemann organized excavation teams that succeeded in uncovering the remains of both Troy and Mycenae. In Troy, Schliemann found traces of thirteen different settlements, each new town built on the ruins of the last. The seventh layer excavated showed a city completely destroyed by fire in approximately the thirteenth century B. C., which appears to validate the basic outlines of Homer's story of the fall of a great city.

#### *The Story of Troy and the Oral Tradition*

That human beings often reflect on the past and compare the present with it unfavorably explains why the story of the siege of Troy by the Greeks loomed so large in the imagination that bards sang of Troy for century after century. From roughly 1200 B. C. to around 700 B. C.--close to five hundred years--the same stories were retold, exaggerated, and magnified, so that Homer's audience, living in the Iron Age, listened with wonder to tales of the Bronze Age, the "olden days" when, the poet said, one man could lift a stone that no two men would be capable of moving in their diminished world. This long tradition of story telling accounts for inconsistencies that scholars note such as impossible combinations of anachronistic customs, and a language containing idioms of different eras combined to form a special epic diction that no living Greek would ever have spoken.

## Events Preceding the Action Described in the Homeric Epics

### *The Marriage of Thetis and Peleus*

Thetis, the leader of the Nereids or sea-nymphs, plays a much more important role in the *Iliad* than her relatively minor status would seem to warrant. She can exercise a degree of leverage over Zeus, whom she reputedly saved from a plot by his siblings. Her beauty was so great that Zeus wanted to marry her, but with the prediction that the son of Thetis would outshine his father, the Olympian gods hastily arranged for her to marry a mortal.

That mortal was the hero Peleus, the son of the king of the Myrmidons, Aeacus, who was himself a son of Zeus, and the brother of Telamon. All of the gods, except for Eris (Discord), were invited to the wedding of Peleus and Thetis. In retaliation for this slight, Eris threw a golden apple marked "For the fairest" into the midst of the partygoers. Paris, prince of Troy and well known as a connoisseur of feminine charms, was asked to choose "the fairest." The contest pitted the three most powerful Olympian goddesses against each other: Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite. Paris awarded the golden apple to the latter, who promised him in return the hand of the most beautiful woman in the world, Helen, wife of Menelaus, King of Sparta. Paris subsequently abducted Helen while he was a guest in the palace of Menelaus. After so inauspicious a beginning to married life, Thetis did not remain in Peleus' palace for very long after their marriage. Wishing her child Achilles to be immortal, she tried to temper the infant's body by holding him in fire. Appalled, Peleus intervened, and Thetis left him. As a consequence, Achilles was brought up by a succession of surrogate parents. Yet Thetis continued to be concerned about her husband and especially her son, emerging from her father's house in the depths of the sea to help Achilles whenever she could. . A later Roman story has Thetis protect her infant son by immersing him in one of the four rivers of Hades, the Styx. Since she held him by his heel, that portion of his anatomy (his "Achilles' heel") remained vulnerable to attack.

### *The Sacrifice of Iphigenia and Its Consequences*

Agamemnon and Menelaus, sons of Atreus, belong to one of the most troubled families in all of Greek mythology. From one generation to the next, the members of the House of Atreus, their father, inflict atrocities on one another so that long-held grudges fester. Agamemnon in particular is doomed by this disastrous inheritance. Without some understanding of this history, neither the *Iliad* nor the *Odyssey* can fully be appreciated.

The brothers Agamemnon and Menelaus marry sisters, Clytemnestra and Helen. While Menelaus and Helen not only survive the Trojan War, but also (according to the *Odyssey*) resume an apparently stable marriage when it is over, Agamemnon and Clytemnestra do not. Too much bitterness lies buried in their past for Clytemnestra to excuse the faults of Agamemnon as Menelaus excuses Helen's.

Before the Achaeans embark on their expedition to Troy to recover Helen, Agamemnon summons the allies to the port of Aulis, from which the ships are to debark. Dependent upon the winds to fill their sails, the ships sit stalled in calm weather while the allied troops become restless. Agamemnon consults the seer Kalchas, who informs him that the goddess Artemis demands a human sacrifice before she will permit the winds to blow. The crafty Odysseus goes to Clytemnestra in Mycenae to say that Agamemnon intends to give their daughter Iphigenia to Achilles in marriage. When Iphigenia arrives, she is sacrificed to the goddess rather than wed to the hero, and the winds rise. But Clytemnestra never forgives her husband.

Also unforgiving is Agamemnon's cousin Aegisthus, whose father Thyestes had long feuded with Atreus. Atreus invited Thyestes to a banquet at which two murdered children of Thyestes were served to their father in a pie. During the Trojan War, Aegisthus becomes the lover of Clytemnestra; after the war, the two conspire to kill Agamemnon when he returns in triumph to Mycenae. In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus hears often about the brutal murder of Agamemnon, a fate which makes him cautious as he prepares to return to a wife whom he has not seen for almost twenty years.

## An Outline of the Iliad

In the Bronze Age, at the end of the thirteenth century, a loose confederation of Greek kingdoms besieged the walled city of Troy. The legendary reason for this attack was to avenge the abduction of Helen, the wife of Menelaus, one of the Greek kings, by a Trojan prince, Alexandros (Paris). To recover Helen, the King of Mycenae, Agamemnon, sailed with the leaders of various Greek cities and their warriors to the plains of Troy. For nine years, the Achaians and their allies were frustrated in their efforts to conquer the Trojans, who remained in their fortified city except for brief military clashes. From time to time, the Greek troops raided neighboring cities, taking prisoners for ransom. The events narrated in the Iliad occur in the course of fifty-two days, most of them spent in waiting. The real action of the poem takes only nine days.

### *Principal Characters on the Achaian Side*

**Achilles**, son of Peleus, king of Phthia, whose people are called Myrmidons, and of the sea-goddess Thetis; the greatest warrior in the poem.

**Agamemnon**, sometimes called Atreides, the son of Atreus; king of Mycenae.

**Briseis**, a woman captured by Achilles in a raid.

**Diomedes**, son of Tydeus; the ideal Greek warrior hero.

**Menelaus**, Agamemnon's brother, the king of Sparta and the husband deserted by Helen.

**Odysseus**, son of Laertes, king of Ithaca, and the craftiest of the Greeks.

**Patroclus**, the intimate friend of Achilles.

### *Principal Characters on the Trojan Side*

**Hector**, son of Priam and the defender of the Trojans.

**Andromache**, wife of Hector.

**Astyanax**, infant son of Hector and Andromache.

**Priam**, aged king of Troy.

**Hecuba**, wife of Priam.

**Paris** (Alexandros), another son of Priam, the abductor of Helen.

**Glaucus**, a Trojan ally from Lycia.

**Sarpedon**, son of Zeus and a Trojan ally from Lycia.

**Helen**, the cause of the war; daughter of Leda and Zeus; wife of Paris and former wife of Menelaus.

### *Synopsis of the Action*

**Book 1:** A quarrel leads Achilles to withdraw from fighting.

**Book 2:** Agamemnon tries to test his troops' resolve to continue fighting without Achilles by suggesting that they all go home. This tactic backfires when the Greeks start to rush to their ships, and only Odysseus's powers of persuasion convince them to stay.

**Book 3:** Menelaus and Paris, the two husbands of Helen, join in a duel; when Menelaus is about to win, Aphrodite whisks Paris back to Troy in a cloud.

**Book 4:** The gods argue on Olympus; the Greeks and the Trojans begin to fight in earnest.

**Books 5-8:** With the exception of a brief interlude in Book 6, when Hector is seen with his wife and child in Troy, these books relate battle scenes. The Greeks are doing very well until Zeus contrives to give unusual success to the Trojans.



**Book 9:** One of the turning points in the poem occurs when Odysseus, Phoenix, and Ajax go to the tent of Achilles to plead with him to return to battle; despite the promise of treasure from Agamemnon, Achilles refuses.

**Books 10-15:** Fighting resumes, with the gods taking their favorites' sides, and the Trojans achieve their greatest triumphs. Emboldened for the first time, they leave the safety of their walled city and attack the Greek camp.

**Books 16-18:** The next major turning point in the poem occurs when Patroclus, Achilles' closest friend and alter ego, receives permission from Achilles to borrow his armor and fight against the Trojans in his place. Hector kills Patroclus and drags his body in the dirt, preventing burial. Achilles, in despair, prepares to take revenge and returns to battle, armed with a new shield made for him by Hephaestus.

**Books 19-21:** Knowing he is to die soon after he kills Hector, Achilles sets out to kill Hector and punish the Trojans. He is superhuman in his bravery and cruelty.

**Book 22:** Achilles kills Hector.

**Book 23:** The body of Patroclus is buried in an elaborate funeral.

**Book 24:** Achilles returns the body of Hector to his father, Priam, and Hector is buried in an elaborate funeral.

## An outline of *Odyssey*

The story begins after Troy has been destroyed and the Greeks have returned to their homes. Only Odysseus, whose name gives the poem its title, fails to reach his destination. He has been punished by Athena for violating her temple and, worse, by Poseidon, the god of the sea who in retribution makes Odysseus's sea journey as difficult as possible. Having left Troy with a full complement of ships and men, Odysseus alone survives the various accidents and dangers that keep him from Ithaca for almost ten years. One of those years is spent on the island of the witch Circe; seven are spent with the goddess Kalypso. When he finally arrives after a twenty-year absence, Odysseus discovers that his palace has been virtually invaded by 108 men paying court to his faithful wife Penelope, who has steadfastly delayed the choice of a new husband.

### *Synopsis of the Action*

**Books 1 through 4:** These first four books are known as the Telemachy, named for Telemachus, the son of Odysseus and Penelope. As the narrative begins, the Olympian gods begin to act on Odysseus's behalf. In preparation for the return of Odysseus, Athena encourages Telemachus to set off on his own journey to seek news of his father.

**Books 5 through 8:** Odysseus moves closer to Ithaca. With considerable difficulty, after bidding Kalypso farewell, he reaches the island Skheria. Assisted by the princess Nausikaa, he enters the court of Alkinoos, king of the Phaiakians.

**Books 9 through 12:** At the palace of Alkinoos, Odysseus reveals his identity and becomes the narrator of the central portion of the poem, in which he describes the event-filled journey from Troy that has occupied the last nine years.

**Books 13 through 24:** Odysseus arrives home at last, gradually reveals himself to his family and friends and gains their support so that he can take revenge on the suitors who have defiled his home. Reunited with his wife and son at last, he has still not done with traveling. The audience learns that this great sailor will die a peaceful, seaborne death, but only after he has set sail once more, to reach and then return from a land where no one has ever seen the sea.

## ODYSSEY'S INTRODUCTION

*"Sing to me of the man, Muse, the man of twists and turns  
driven time and again off course, once he had plundered  
the hallowed heights of Troy.*

*"Many cities of men he saw and learned their minds,  
many pains he suffered, heartsick on the open sea,  
fighting to save his life and bring his comrades home.*

*But he could not save them from disaster, hard as he strove -  
the recklessness of their own ways destroyed them all,  
the blind fools, they devoured the cattle of the Sun  
and the Sun god blotted out the day of their return.*

*"Launch out on his story, Muse, daughter of Zeus,  
start from where you will - sing for our time too."*

## Achilles, the Hero

The story of Homer's Iliad actually centers around the "rage of Achilles, contrary to popular belief. At first thought or reading the epic poem seems like its main theme is ultimately the totality and gruesomeness of war. In reality it is an ancient "Saving Private Ryan" in that it tells us of the raw details of war without any lack of description and information. However this ultimate devastation and emotion of the actual fighting and Trojan War is not the main focal point of this heroic tale. The real story centers on one awesome fighter, man, and hero--that man is Achilles.

Achilles shows the greatest military prowess of any of the Achaean ranks and has the greatest fighting ability of all of the warriors, Trojan or Achaean. At the beginning of Homer's tale Achilles becomes disenfranchised from the rest of his fellow warriors and chooses to retreat back to his own ships of Myrmidons and refuses to fight for the Achaean cause against the Trojans. Not only is Achilles plagued and troubled by problems with his fellow soldiers, but he ultimately must face the fact that he has chosen to live a short and glorious life, as opposed to his other option of a long and blase life. Achilles knows that he must ultimately die in the heat of battle and gain great fame for doing so--if he actually existed and the story is true in this respect then he certainly has ascertained immortal fame in the pages of Homer's tale.

Achilles eventually returns to fight on the side of the Achaeans, but not because of anything Agamemnon offers to him in order to get him to return to the fighting. Achilles' best friend and essential "soul-mate", Patroclus, is slain at the hands of the mighty Hector of Troy.

Achilles is hence distraught at this happening and therefore goes to wreak his own havoc with the life of Hector to gain revenge. He manages to eventually kill many Trojans and then finally after chasing Hector several times around the city of Troy, slays him and desecrates his body by dragging him excessively as somewhat of an artifice to get his stored up hate, anger, and fear out.

King Priam of Troy, Hector's sorrowful father, eventually comes to Achilles' camp in peace after learning and weeping over his son's death. He comes to beg Achilles to let him have back the body of his son and in perhaps one of the most intimate and "human" aspects of the epic, Achilles agrees to the King's desire and seems himself saddened, sombered, and humbled by the ultimate devastation.





**Greece & Western Asia Minor**

- Cities in black
- Regions in red
- Islands in purple
- ▲ Mountains in green
- Waters in blue
- Promontories in brown

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