Lecture Preliminary to English 201, “The Epic of Troy”

On p. 617 of your Fagles’ translation of Homer, you will find a “Genealogy of the Royal House of Troy.” (This information is also available to you in Genealogical Chart #1, linked from your online course schedule.) In this genealogical chart, you will see that Zeus, after cohabiting with Electra, one of the daughters of the Titan named Atlas, fathered Dardanus. As a young man, Dardanus crossed the Hellespont and entered the country of the Teucrians. The Teucrians were the people who lived under the rule of king Teucer. Teucer, who had no sons of his own, welcomed Dardanus, treated him as a son, and gave him his own daughter, Batia, to marry. This is significant to us only in that the Trojans are sometimes referred to as Dardans, although the region called Dardania is actually between the cities of Troy and Abydos, along the section of the Hellespont called the Dardanelles (see the map inlay on p. 73 of your text or this linked map of the Troad). The son of Dardanus and Batia was Ericthonus. The son of Ericthonus was Tros, who renamed the country of Dardanus after himself, and thus the Dardans became known as Trojans.

Tros married Callirrhoe and fathered Ilus. When Ilus was grown, he journeyed south and participated in the Phrygian games. He was victorious in wrestling, and as a prize he received from the Phrygian king fifty young men and fifty maidens, along with a dappled cow. This was a rather astounding prize, but the Phrygian king had been informed by an oracle that Ilus was to be a great king. So, he told Ilus that, as he traveled northward back home, he was to follow the cow, and wherever the cow laid down, there he was to build a city. The cow climbed a hill in the country of Phrygia and laid down. This wasn’t any ordinary hill. It was a hill sacred to the Phrygian Atê, the goddess of reckless folly and delusion, who led people to their ruin. The hill was, thus, devoted to rites of repulsion and purgation. (In modern Turkey, this hill was called Hisarlik.) Naturally, Ilus thought that the cow had made a mistake. Surely it could not be Zeus’s will that he build a city on such an awful site as this hill. Ilus asked Zeus for a sign, and in reply Zeus cast down from heaven the stone or wooden Palladium—an image of Pallas, with spear in one hand and distaff in the other. (Pallas, by the way, was Athena’s closest friend. Together, they learned the arts of war. When Athena inadvertently killed Pallas, she made the Palladium in her honor and placed it in the halls of Olympus.) Ilus was told that, as long as the Palladium remained within the city that he built, that city could not fall. With this reassurance, Ilus built the city of Ilium, also known as the city of Troy.

As it was during the reign of Ilus that the Hittites first expanded their empire westward to the Aegean Sea, it was only natural that they would refer to the kingdom of Ilus not as the Troad, but as the land of Ilus ("Wilusa"). And since the Achaeans had diplomatic relations with the Hittites, they too referred to this territory as the region of Ilus ("Ilium"). So, even as Troy was originally a territory, not a city, so too was Ilium originally the name of a city, not a territory. But, ultimately, the city became widely known as Troy, and the territory became generally known as Ilium. There will always be some confusion regarding the use of these names; therefore, when reading classical literature, you have to rely on the context of the passage to determine whether the name "Troy" or "Ilium" refers to the city or the larger territory. (In my lectures, I will *always* refer to the city as "Troy," and the Trojan country as "Ilium.")

Ilus's first-born son was Ganymede, but—as you can see by referring to the Genealogical Chart—Ilus's successor was Laomedon. The reason for this is that Zeus was particularly pleased with Ganymede and decided that he would like this son of Ilus to become a cupbearer in the halls of Olympus. So, Zeus took Ganymede and made him his immortal steward. As compensation, Zeus gave Ilus a pair of immortal horses.

By the time that Laomedon, the son of Ilus, came to power, the city of Troy had expanded well beyond its original walls. Moreover, the old walls were no longer a durable defense against attack. Laomedon was in need of laborers. This gave the gods an opportunity to test the character of Laomedon. As we will see in the *Iliad*, the gods rarely reveal themselves to humans. Instead, they usually take upon themselves the form and voice of men or women familiar to the person being visited. Well, Apollo and Poseidon appeared to Laomedon as traveling foreigners, and they offered their services to Laomedon in exchange for wages. But, when the walls of Troy were fortified, Laomedon broke his oath and refused to pay. In retaliation, Apollo sent a pestilence upon Troy, and Poseidon sent a sea monster.

Now, you need to understand that the wealth of Troy was entirely due to its being a sea-port. It had a protected harbor, allowing for commerce throughout the Aegean, the Mediterranean, and the Black Sea. The chief export of Troy appears to have been textiles and horses. Homer constantly refers to "stallion-

breaking Troy," and in the mythic tradition Troy is frequently associated with remarkable horses. This being the case, a sea monster was bad for business in every way. It frightened the horses, kept them from mating, and—worse still,—it frightened away the merchants. Laomedon had to find some way of getting rid of this troublesome beast. He consulted oracles, which told him that Troy would be delivered from its calamities if he would expose his daughter to be devoured by the sea monster. So, Laomedon fastened his daughter Hesione to the rocks near the sea.

While all of this was happening, Heracles was at Themiscyra (on the southern coast of the Black Sea), fulfilling the ninth labor with which he had been tasked by Eurystheus. Now, having successfully acquired the belt of the Amazon queen Hippolyte, he was on his way home to deliver it to Eurystheus, when he passed through the Dardanelles and entered the harbor of Ilium. Seeing the plight of Hesione, Heracles promised Laomedon that he would kill the sea monster if, in return, Laomedon would give him the immortal horses that Ilus had received from Zeus. Laomedon gave his word, but when the sea monster had been killed, he refused to give the promised horses to Heracles. Thereupon, Heracles departed, threatening war against Troy.

Heracles had three more labors to perform for Eurystheus, and after these were accomplished, the hero got himself into some trouble and had to serve as a slave for three years. But, he never forgot the injustice he had suffered by Laomedon, and as soon as Heracles was free, he mustered an army of volunteers, including the sons of Aeacus—Peleus and Telamon—and, with an armada of six ships of 50 oars each, he disembarked on the shore of Ilium and repulsed the army of Laomedon. The Trojans retreated behind the walls that Heracles himself had earlier strengthened. Telamon was the first to breach the walls, and when the city of Troy had been taken and Laomedon killed, Heracles gave Hesione as a prize to Telamon and allowed her to ransom the life of one of Laomedon's sons. She removed the golden veil from her head and gave it to Heracles as a ransom for Podarces. Thus, of all the sons of Laomedon that then lived within the walls of Troy, Podarces alone was left alive to continue the dynasty of Dardanus and rebuild the city of Troy. Henceforth, Podarces would be known as "Priam" (from the verb *pramai*, "to buy"). (*Vide* Apollodorus, *Library* 2.5.9; 2.6.3-4; cf. Homer, *Iliad* 5.733-38.)

The Mycenaean war against Troy that is celebrated by Homer in the *Iliad* takes place in the following generation, in the early twelfth century B.C., roughly 1180. The warriors include Great Ajax and Teucer (sons of Telamon), Achilles (son of Peleus), and Tlepolemus (son of Heracles), and many, many others beside. It is no longer a minor expedition of six ships, but rather of 1,186 ships. And this time it involves the entire Mycenaean kingdom—a people that call themselves Achaeans, Argives, or Danaans. Once again, the war is instigated by treachery, the failure of Trojans to honor their oaths.

But this time the crime isn't the simple failure of a tradesman to honor his word. It's much more serious than that. In Greek mythology, Zeus avenges three crimes: (1) blasphemy against the gods; (2) the murder of parents; and (3) the breaking of the guest/host treaty. The commission of any one of these crimes unleashes the Furies, which ensure ultimate punishment. According to the epic of the *Cypria* (the first part of the Epic Cycle of Troy, and the immediate precursor to the *Iliad*), Troy is guilty of breaking the terms of the guest/host treaty. This treaty was an unwritten contract of the utmost importance in the ancient world. It was regarded throughout the civilized world as a sacred oath, for without it all travel and commerce would have been practically impossible. Briefly stated, the treaty dictated—on the one hand—that if a traveler knocks on your door, you have an obligation to treat the stranger as though he were family, and—on the other hand—if you knock on a stranger's door, you have an obligation to treat your host as though he were family. In essence, it was a form of the "golden rule." In the book of Genesis, when the men of Sodom attempted to molest the strangers who sought hospitality, Yahweh destroyed that city. Likewise, when king Priam refuses to return the wife of a man that had treated his son with hospitality, the doom of Troy is sealed. But, as the popular saying has it, "Zeus works in mysterious ways."

Homer doesn't show Zeus reacting in the immediate, direct, and unmistakable way that Yahweh (the Hebrew God) is said to have done in the case of Sodom and Gomorrah. Not that Zeus isn't capable of direct and harsh retribution. However, according to Homer, there are complicating factors: Zeus uses natural and supernatural agency conjoined to fulfill his plans; the carrying out of one plan may hinder the working out of another; and—to complicate things still further—Zeus has to deal diplomatically with many other gods, each with his or her own personal desires and feelings.

Sometimes, things in this world appear to go so awry that ancient Greeks would question whether Zeus was in charge, or whether He sometimes nodded off and forgot to unleash the Furies to avenge the horrible crimes that men committed against each other. Well, theoretically, the Trojan War should have been a sure thing for the Greeks. After all, the Trojans had violated the guest/host treaty, and thus, their doom was sealed. But, as the *Iliad* shows, the war did *not* progress as smoothly as the Achaeans had hoped; in fact, it often went rather badly. Ultimately, the will of Zeus was fulfilled, but the Mycenaean civilization never afterwards recovered its strength. A hundred or so years later, it was violently invaded from the north by the Dorians, its civilization was destroyed, and Greece was plunged into the Dark Ages. No doubt very many Greeks began to doubt whether Zeus had any power or justice at all.

Homer, like Milton, composed his great epic "to justify the ways of God to man." He shows us that Zeus is like a powerful emperor, with many tributary deities under him, and that in order to accomplish his purposes and, at the same time keep his empire from falling apart, he has to work with careful deliberation and manipulation. But, unlike Milton, Homer did not write a "theodicy." His concern is not the theological explanation of apparent evil. Instead, Homer is concerned with preserving history—the history of a war that came to define not just one generation, but rather an epoch in the history of civilization. The Trojan War was *the* epic event in the history of the Mycenaean civilization, and Homer composed a poem that preserves a fictionalized history of that event, while, at the same time, shows that event to be consistent with faith in divine justice.

It is astounding that, less than 150 years ago, the period of which we are concerned belonged to the *pre*-history of Greece. But not only was the era of which Homer sings considered *pre*-historical; the Trojan War itself was considered, by most educated persons, as *un*-historical. That is to say, during the first half of the nineteenth century, the *Iliad* was still generally regarded as entirely mythical. There are four main reasons for this:

1. *First*, there was no physical evidence to suggest that a flourishing center of trade once existed at the mouth of the Hellespont. The old walls of Troy had gradually disappeared under mounds of earth, and deposits of silt from the Scamander and Simois rivers gradually pushed the banks of the harbor back, until—by the time of Julius Caesar—hardly any harbor remained.

2. *Second*, with the spread of Christianity, the old Greek and Roman gods became targets of hostile opposition. Christians didn't argue that pagan deities were fictions; they said that they were devils masquerading as angels. The *Iliad* fell into disrepute. It was pagan through and through.

3. *Third*, as the authority of the Roman Church grew, so too did the prominence of Latin as the official language of the Church. Greek, as a language, became associated with a pre-Christian, pagan culture, and gradually became a dead language in the west. In fact, religious enthusiasm resulted in the destruction of a vast number of Greek manuscripts, which is why we are, today, so indebted to Apollodorus (in the second century A.D.) and Apollonius of Rhodes and Quintus of Smyrna (in the third century A.D.) for collecting and, to some extent, preserving ancient Greek stories.

4. *Fourth*—and what sealed Homer's fate for a thousand years—two eye-witness accounts of the Trojan War were discovered in the fourth century A.D. These were the accounts of Dictys of Crete, who fought on the side of the Greeks, and of Dares the Phrygian, who fought as a Trojan ally. These two manuscripts, translated into Latin, appeared to make the *Iliad* not only historically *obsolete* but also historically *false*. You may say, "Well, *of course*, they were forgeries." But, the fact is, they were elaborately produced forgeries. When, in 1702, it was finally demonstrated, on philological grounds, that the accounts of Dictys and Dares could not have been written at the time when the Trojan War was supposed to have taken place, the result was pervasive disbelief in the Trojan War itself.

Despite Dictys and Dares, interest in Homer had already revived. During the Renaissance, the *Iliad* became recognized and appreciated, once more, as not only great literature, but also as a record of ancient human beliefs and practices. As long as the accounts of Dictys and Dares were regarded as authentic, the *Iliad* was regarded as a fictional account of an historical event. But when Dictys and Dares were proven to be forgeries, the *Iliad* had to stand on its literary merits alone. The Trojan War no longer belonged to history. It may or may not have happened, people reasoned, but the *Iliad* was no more historical than the *Odyssey*.

In the late eighteenth century, travelers began to report that the geographical features of the Troad remarkably confirmed Homer's description of the land. Of course, that could easily be accounted for if Homer had ever been to the site. It didn't require one to believe that there had ever been a Troy in the twelfth century B.C. But this skepticism quickly eroded when, in the latter part of the nineteenth century, an archaeologist named Heinrich Schliemann, armed with the *Iliad* in one hand and a spade in the other, discovered the walls of ancient Troy, buried underneath as much as thirty feet of earth, and reaching as far back as the sixteenth century B.C.—that is, at least as far back as Dardanus. Not only were the ancient walls discovered, but also ornate jewelry that clearly indicated that Homeric Troy had been a city of wealth. Moreover, Schliemann found a few arrowheads and the skeletal remains of numerous horses.

Of course, scepticism remained. Schliemann's discoveries still didn't prove that the *Iliad* was historical. But what was really important about his archaeological excavations in the Troad was that they set fire to the imagination of a whole generation of archaeologists. If the city of Priam was real, then what of Mycenae, the city of Agamemnon, and what of the other towns that Homer mentions? Well, one-by-one, nearly every town that Homer mentions *has* been discovered, and —more important still—has been discovered to have flourished at the time of the Trojan War.

Other important discoveries followed. It had been supposed that the ancient Greeks had no way of keeping accurate records until they adopted the Phoenician alphabet in the eighth century B.C. But, in the ruins of Mycenae, Crete, and other places, clay tablets with a script designated as "Linear B" were found, which book-keepers used as early as the thirteenth century B.C. to keep minutely accurate records, records which described weapons and gear in such a way as to validate Homer's descriptions. Provocatively, there is even mention of "Trojan Women" in the inventory of one Linear B tablet found at Mycenae. More recently, mass graves containing Mycenaean artifacts have been discovered outside of the city of Troy, close to the ancient harbor.

Today, the scholarly consensus is that the Trojan War was, as Homer tells us, a war between the Achaeans and the inhabitants of Ilium. Whether the city of Troy was the focal point of the war is less than certain. Even Greek tradition records that the Achaeans attacked a number of other towns in and about the

Troad—but that the war involved Troy there is no reason to doubt. This war was fought in the twelfth century B.C., and some of the names of the Achaean warlords involved are probably those given by Homer. Genealogical information, after all, is the easiest information to preserve. However, Homer also gave Grecian names to the Trojans and their allies. Although we cannot fault ancient Greek tradition for inventing these names, at the same time we cannot believe that any of the Trojans were actually named as Homer tells us.

The traditions of the Trojan War were passed down from generation to generation and, as might be expected, differed from place to place. Homer was recognized by the early Greeks not just as a poet, but as a historian. He was a collector and integrator of traditions, and to the ancients, *tradition was history*. Homer memorized and passed down these traditions in the form of *lyric poetry*—that is, as "lyrics," lines to be spoken with musical inflection, in accompaniment to the strumming of a lyre. The *Iliad* was probably composed in the seventh century B.C.—at least, the earliest references to Homer or the *Iliad* point to a period just before or concurrent with the work of the poet Hesiod. However, there is disagreement in regard to when the *Iliad* took its final form. It may not have been committed to writing until the fifth century B.C., in which case there was about two hundred years during which it may have been enlarged and improved by a school of lyric poets called the Homeridae—that is, the disciples of Homer.

The Homeridae did not take personal credit for their work. Every poem and hymn that they produced was attributed to Homer. No classical scholar that I am aware of believes that *any* of the "Homeric Hymns" were composed by the author of the *Iliad*, and most classical scholars no longer believe that the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* were composed by the same person. Today, we speak of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* as the books of Homer in the same way that we speak of the Pentateuch or Torah (the first five books of the Bible) as the books of Moses. In other words, our language is conventional, and does not imply any particular theory about authorship.

The numerous historical traditions that became what is called the Epic Cycle of Troy developed, for the most part, independently of any larger work. Ultimately, however, they were consolidated and reshaped into a connected narrative. This connected narrative consisted of seven separate works:

1. *The Cypria*. This provides the background information necessary to understand how the Trojan War came about; moreover, it tells of the events that took place up until the beginning of the *Iliad*. Homer sometimes refers to the events of the *Cypria*. He expected his audience to be familiar with it, and so I have provided a summary online (linked from the Course Schedule) for your reference. I expect you to become familiar with this material. (If the Cypria is, at all, interesting to you, I recommend that you consider the Extra-Credit assignment for this course.)
2. *The Iliad*. The story of the wrath of Achilles, leading to the death of Hector.
3. *The Aethiopis*. This tells of the arrival of Trojan allies, the Amazons—a band of female warriors led by Penthesileia—and of Memnon and his Ethiopian warriors, and of the battles that took place between them and the Achaeans. This part also tells of the death of Achilles, the funeral games held in his honor, and the contest between Great Ajax and Odysseus for the armor of Achilles.
4. *The Little Iliad*. This work tells of the madness of Great Ajax, and the arrival of Philoctetes and of Achilles's son, Neoptolemus. It also tells of the death of Paris, the apparent departure of the Greeks, and the decision of the Trojans to bring the wooden horse into the walls of Troy.
5. *The Sack of Ilium*. This brief work tells the story of the chaos and destruction resulting from the reception of the wooden horse.
6. *The Returns.* The oldest narrative of the *Returns* was called *The Return of the Atridae*, since it focused primarily on the return of the brothers Agamemnon and Menelaus to their homes in Mycenae and Sparta. Homer later added *The Odyssey*, which is the story of the return of Odysseus to his home in Ithaca.
7. *The Telegony*. This last part of the Epic Cycle told of Odysseus's journey to and from Thesprotia, his inadvertent death at the hands of an illegitimate son, Telegonus, and of his deification.

This course will be focusing on the first six parts of the Epic Cycle. Unfortunately, the only parts of the Epic Cycle that were preserved entire are the two works of Homer, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. The stories from the other parts of the Cycle were preserved by ancient historians, who summarized what

they read. From these summaries, Quintus of Smyrna, in the third century A.D., reconstructed parts 3 through 6 of the Epic Cycle in his *Posthomerica.* Quintus, who was attempting to follow in the footsteps of Homer, thus picks up the story from where Homer left off and takes the story all the way to the *Returns*. However, he treats the *Returns* with great brevity and omits much that must have been available to him.

Our Mid-Term Exam will cover the *Iliad* and *The Trojan Epic*—that is, Homer and Quintus.

After Quintus of Smyrna, our attention will turn to the Greek dramatists—Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. Our readings in the dramatists will focus on how the Epic Cycle was made use of as a treasury of narratives from which to draw, and from which the creative imagination can construct additional narratives. This course will end by jumping ahead 2,000 years, to the sixteenth century, in order to see what Shakespeare could do with the Epic of Troy.

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