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## HOMER

*fl.* 8th c. B.C.?

For many centuries, there have been disputes concerning the authorship of the Homeric poems. When, where, and how were the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* composed? To what extent were they based on previous compositions? Were the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* composed by the same person? Indeed, was either one composed by a single author? Perhaps there was no such individual as Homer, and the two poems developed by a process of slow accretion, or were assembled by editors from a group of poems of varying authorship. Scholars who have spent many years studying these questions do not agree with each other; how then can a person who is not a classical scholar know what the true answers are? Of course, I do not *know* the answers; nevertheless, in order to decide where (if anywhere) Homer belongs on this list, I have made the following assumptions:

The first assumption is that there was indeed a single principal author of the *Iliad*. (It is simply too good to have been written by a committee!) In the centuries preceding Homer, many shorter poems on the same subject matter had been composed by other Greek poets, and Homer drew heavily on their work. But Homer did far more than merely assemble the *Iliad* from pre-

existing shorter poems. He selected, arranged, reworded, and added—all the while infusing the final result with his own unique artistic genius. Homer, the man who created this masterpiece, most probably lived in the eighth century B.C., although many other dates, mostly earlier, have been suggested. I have also assumed that the same man was the principal author of the *Odyssey*. Although the argument (based in part on difference in style) that the two poems were composed by different authors has some force, on the whole the similarities between the two poems far outweigh their differences.

From the foregoing, it is obvious that very little is known about Homer himself; indeed, there is no certain biographical data concerning him. There is a very strong and ancient tradition, dating back to early Greek times, that Homer was blind. However, the striking visual imagery in the two poems suggests that if Homer was indeed a blind man, he was certainly not blind from birth. The language used in the poems strongly suggests that Homer came from Ionia, the region on the eastern side of the Aegean Sea.

Although it seems difficult to believe that such lengthy and carefully constructed poems could have been composed without any writing, most scholars seem to agree that they were at least primarily, and perhaps completely, oral compositions. It is not certain when the poems were first reduced to writing. Considering their length (in combination almost 28,000 verses), it seems rather unlikely that they could have been transmitted with reasonable accuracy unless they were written down not very long after their original composition. In any event, by the sixth century B.C., the two poems were already considered to be great classics, and the biographical information concerning Homer was already lost. Thereafter, the Greeks always considered the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* to be the nation's supreme literary masterpieces. Amazingly, through all the intervening centuries and all the changes of literary style that have occurred, Homer's reputation has never diminished.

In view of Homer's great fame and reputation, it is with

some trepidation that I have accorded him so low a ranking on this list. I have done so in part for the same reason I have assigned most other literary and artistic figures relatively low places. In the case of Homer, the discrepancy between reputation and influence seems to be particularly large. Though his works are frequently studied in school, in today's world relatively few people read Homer after they have left high school or college. The contrast with Shakespeare, whose plays and poems *are* read, and whose plays are frequently produced and well attended, is quite striking.

Nor is Homer widely quoted. Although Homeric quotations are to be found in Bartlett's, few are used in everyday conversation. Here again, there is a marked contrast with Shakespeare, and also with such authors as Benjamin Franklin and Omar Khayyam. A widely repeated phrase such as, "a penny saved is a penny earned," may actually influence personal behavior and even political attitudes and decisions. There are no comparable lines in Homer that are widely quoted today.

Why, then has Homer been included on this list at all? There are two reasons. The first reason is that the number of people—added up over the centuries—who have personally heard or read Homer's poems is extremely large. In the ancient world, Homer's poems were much more popular than they are now. In Greece, his works were familiar to the general population, and for a long time influenced religious and ethical attitudes. The *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* were well-known, not merely by literary intellectuals, but by military and political leaders as well. Many ancient Roman leaders quoted Homer, and Alexander the Great carried a copy of the *Iliad* with him in his campaigns. Even today, Homer is the favorite author of some people, and most of us have read his works (at least in part) in school.

Even more important, perhaps, has been Homer's influence on literature. All the classical Greek poets and playwrights were deeply influenced by Homer. Such figures as Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristotle—to name just a few—were steeped in the Homeric tradition, and all had derived their notions of literary excellence from him.

Homer's influence on ancient Roman authors was almost as great. All accepted his poetry as the standard of excellence. When Virgil—often considered the greatest of Roman authors—wrote his masterpiece, the *Aeneid*, he deliberately patterned it after the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

Even in modern times, virtually every writer of note has been affected either by Homer himself or by writers, such as Sophocles or Virgil, who were themselves powerfully influenced by Homer. No other author in history has had nearly such a widespread and long-continued influence.

That last point is perhaps the crucial one. Over the course of the last one hundred years, it is quite possible that Tolstoy has been more widely read and more influential than Homer. But Tolstoy had no influence whatsoever during the preceding twenty-six centuries, whereas Homer's influence has continued for 2,700 years or more. That is an awfully long time, and one not apt to be matched by many other literary figures, or, indeed, by figures in any field of human endeavor.

*An illustration by John Flaxman from Homer's Iliad, depicting the funeral of the great warrior Hector.*

