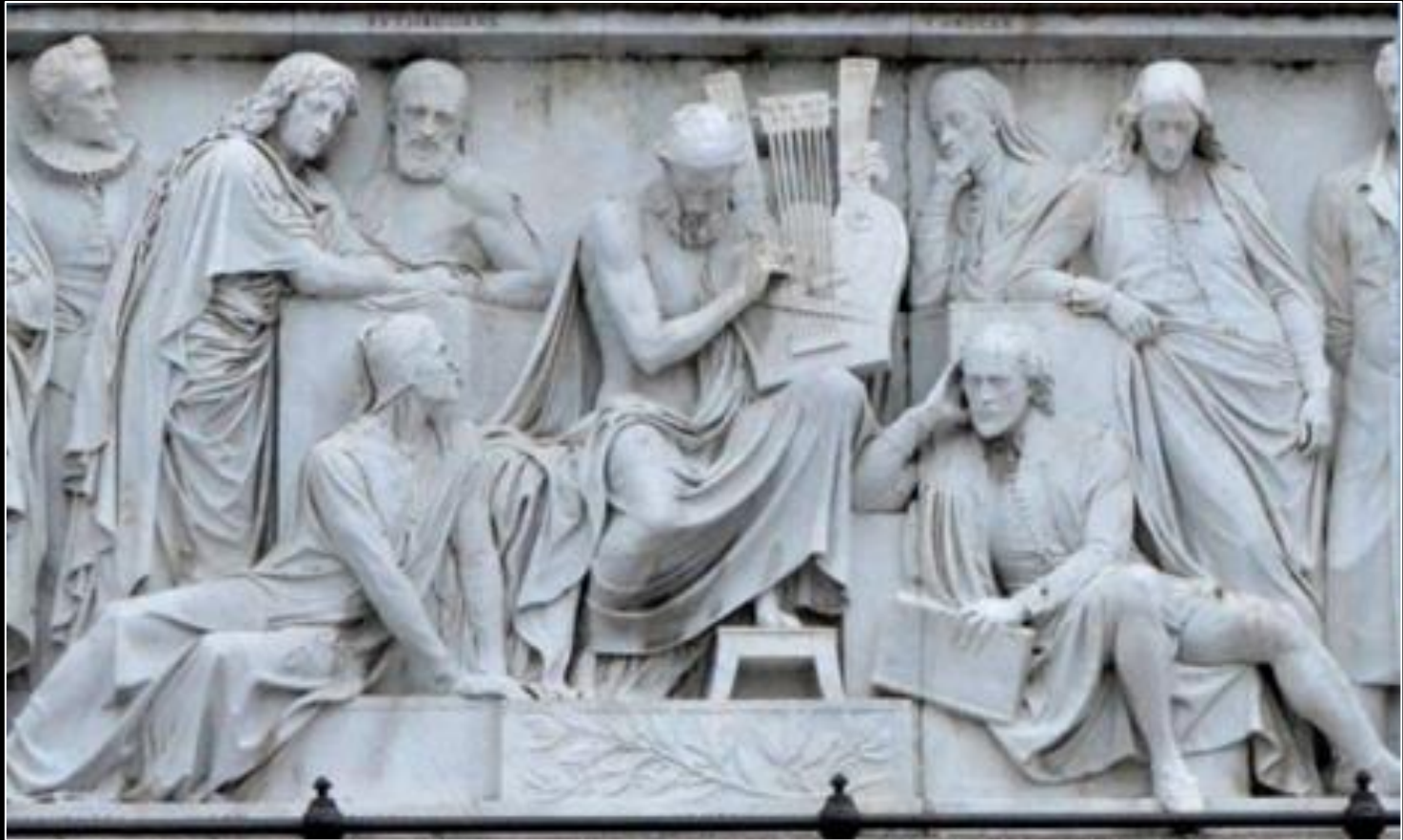


# HOMER



*The Great Poets Frieze, by H.H. Armstead, Albert Memorial, South Kensington, London*

# Homer. Homer! Homer?

a] “The poet Homer, as he surpasses most others in antiquity and all others in ability, we naturally read first, with immense benefit to our eloquence, intellect, and knowledge of affairs.” - Pseudo-Plutarch (2<sup>nd</sup> century CE), *Life of Homer* II.1, trans. West

b] “the godlike Homer ...” Aristophanes (5<sup>th</sup> cent. BCE), *Frogs* 1034

c] *Suda* (10<sup>th</sup> c CE) entry for *Homer*: “unknown among humans”



# Some Facts (?)

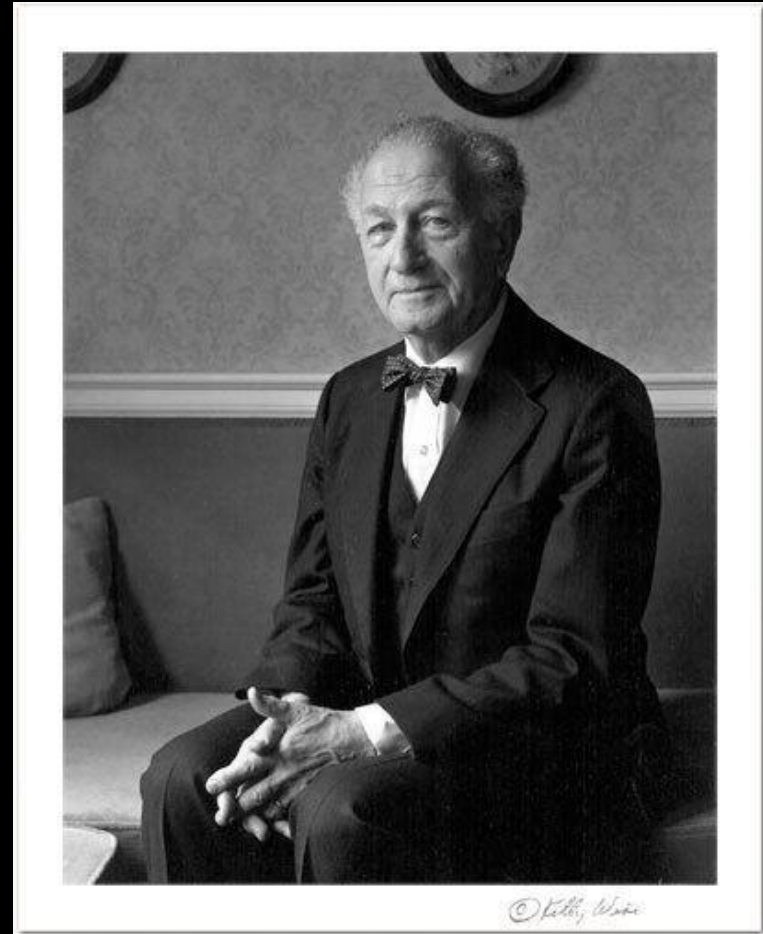
- The epic poems called the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are long narrative poems, sung in verse or chanted, often before an audience
- Oral poems: for *performance*, for recitation, more than reading
- Composition of the poems as we have them is \*usually\* dated to mid to late 8th cent. (so between 750 – 700 BCE) or early 7<sup>th</sup> C (699-675 BCE)
- Homer was likely the (a) poet; (b) the name of the “editor” who recorded the oral tradition and crafted two poems out of that tradition. Note that (a) and (b) are not mutually exclusive.



# Oral Composition and Authorship



Milman Parry  
(1902-1935)



Albert Lord (1912-1991)

# Homeric “Coding”

Poetic Meter:

Dactylic hexameter as “code”

Long short short – ^ ^ (dactyl)

long long – – (spondee)

– ^ ^ – ^ ^ – ^ ^ – ^ ^ – ^ ^ – x

“Down in a deep dark dell sat an old cow munching a beanstalk.”

# Epithets as Coding/Building Blocks

*“Resourceful Odysseus”*

*“Helen of the lovely hair”*

*“Wise-minded Penelope”*

*“Rosy-fingered Dawn”*

*“Wine-dark sea”*

1. “How could I forget **Odysseus the godlike** (*Odusseos ... theio*), he who ...” (*Od.* 1.65)
2. “If **Odysseus of the many designs** (*Odusea polyphrona*) shall return home ...” (*Od.* 1.82)

# “Coding” in Action

Then in answer to him spoke brilliant swift-footed Achilles  
(*Iliad* 1.121) [21 times in *Iliad*]

τὸν δ' ἡμείβετ' ἔπειτα || ποδάρκης δῖος Ἀχιλλεύς  
**ton d'êmeibet' epeita || podarkês dios Achilleus**

\*

Then in answer to her spoke tall Hector of the shining helm  
(*Iliad* 6.263) [12 times in *Iliad*]

τὴν δ' ἡμείβετ' ἔπειτα || μέγας κορυθαίολος Ἕκτωρ  
**tên d'êmeibet' epeita || megas koruthaiolos Hector**



# Rhythm and Meaning (Il. 22.66-71)

*And myself last of all*, my dogs in front of my  
doorway  
*will rip me raw*, after some man with stroke of  
sharp bronze  
spear, or with spearcast, has torn the life out of my  
body;  
those dogs I raised in my halls to be *at my table*, to  
guard my  
gates, who will lap my blood *in the savagery* of their  
anger  
and then lie down in my courts. (Priam speaking)

# “Song of Rage” (by Professor Keyne Cheshire)



# Epic Totality



# Two Glances into the Power of Homer's Poetry

- Achilles' "great speech" in *Iliad* bk. 9
- "Mortal moments" in the *Odyssey*

# Achilles' Great Speech (*Iliad* 9.308 ff.)

Fate is the same for the man who holds back, the same if he fights hard.

We are all held in a single honor, the brave with the weaklings.

A man dies still if he has nothing, as one who has done much.

Nothing is won for me, now that my heart has gone through its afflictions  
in forever setting my life on the hazard of battle.

# Achilles' Great Speech (*continued*)

For as to her unwinged young ones the mother bird  
brings back  
morsels, wherever she can find them, but as for  
herself it is suffering,  
such was I, as I lay there through all the many  
nights unsleeping,  
such as I wore through the bloody days of the  
fighting,  
striving with warriors for the sake of these men and  
their women.



# Achilles' Great Speech (cont.)

not if he [Agamemnon] gave me gifts as many as the sand  
or the dust is,  
not even so would Agamemnon have his way with my  
spirit  
until he made good to me all this heartrending insolence

...

For not  
worth the value of my life are all the possessions they fable  
Were won at Ilium ...  
A man's life cannot come back again, it cannot be lifted  
nor captured again by force, once it has crossed the  
teeth's barrier.

# Achilles' Great Speech (cont.)

I carry two sorts of destiny toward the day of my death.

Either,

if I stay here and fight beside the city of the Trojans,  
my return home is gone, but my **glory shall be everlasting (*kleos aphthiton*)**;

but if I return home to the beloved land of my fathers,  
the excellence of my glory is gone, but there will be a  
long life

left for me, and my end in death will not come to me  
quickly.”

# The Gods



# *Xenia*: or, how to treat a guest-friend

Glaucus (a warrior for the Trojans), addressing Diomedes:

“High-hearted son of Tydeus, why ask of my generation?  
As is the generation of leaves, so is that of humans.

The wind scatters the leaves on the ground, but the live  
timber

burgeons with leaves again in the season of spring  
returning.

So one generation of men will grow while another  
dies.” (*Iliad* 6.145-50)

# The Human Cost



*Andromache's  
Lament*

Martha Graham  
Dance  
Company, 1982

# Odyssey

- Tells the story of Odysseus's ten-year homecoming (*nostos*) after ten years of war
- Focus on the household (*oikos*), with special attention to Odysseus's son Telemachus and wife Penelope
- But also on Odysseus's suffering adventures in different places and his narration of them
- Eventual homecoming, slaughter of the suitors, and reconciliation with Penelope



# Odysseus's Mortal Choice (*Od.* 5.215ff.)

“Goddess and queen, do not be angry with me. I myself  
know

that all you say is true and that circumspect Penelope  
can never match the impression you make for beauty and  
stature.

She is mortal after all, and you are immortal and ageless.  
But even so, what I want and all my days I pine for  
is to go back to my house and see my day of homecoming.  
And if some god batters me far out on the wine-blue water,  
I will endure it, keeping a stubborn spirit inside me.”

# Odysseus Weeps Hearing the Song of Troy

“So the famous singer sang his tale, but Odysseus melted, and from under his eyes the tears ran down, drenching his cheeks. As a woman weeps, lying over the body of her dear husband, who fell fighting for her city and people as he tried to beat off the pitiless day from city and children; she sees him dying and gasping for breath, and winding her body about him she cries high and shrill, while the men behind her, hitting her with their spear butts on the back and the shoulders, force her up and lead her away into slavery, to have hard work and sorrow, and her cheeks are wracked with pitiful weeping. Such were the pitiful tears Odysseus shed from under his brows ...” (8.521ff.)

## Penelope's Subjectivity (*Od.* 22.85ff, 107ff..)

“She spoke, and came down from the chamber,

her heart pondering

much, whether to keep away and question her dear husband, or to go up to him and kiss his head, taking his hands.” [...]

“But if he is truly Odysseus,

And he has come home, then we shall find other ways, and better,

To recognize each other, for we have signs that we know of between the two of us only, but they are secret from others.”

# Homer's Hold on Us

- Emotional vividness
- Grandeur (in language ["teeth's barrier," "wine-blue water"] and in plotting (think of the *many books* of delay in Odysseus's arrival))
- But also the tiny details: "her heart pondering much," or Andromache's thoughts for her orphaned son
- Sheer *vitality*, across many centuries

