

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
Frederic Will, Ph.D.

Themes in Homer

## MYTH

**OVERVIEW** The American classical scholar, Milman Parry (1902-1935), opened Homer to us in a series of papers on the oral formulaic prosody of Homer's text. (Homer's text was arguably in written version by the early eighth century B.C.E.) By examining the pattern of formulaic verses in Homer's dactylic hexameter, Parry was able to see inside the epic as a masterpiece of memory, 'the mother of the Muses.' Parry was able to control, shape, and imagine out the vast plan of Homer's two coherent epics. Ingenuity and control, powered by patterns carved out of the living texture of Greek, sufficed in Homer's genetic work to renew even the boilerplate challenges of extensive narrative.

**ILIAD** The artistic mystery opened in Homer's text, by the critical inventiveness of Milman Parry can be made equally transparent by thinking through the role of myth in the *Iliad*. Myth snapshots, like prosodic formulae, are in the finest sense filler. (One may find this line of reasoning useful to the whole evanescent study of what Greek myth is, as a working accompaniment to thought.) Apollo as the plague sender against the Greeks, or the fatal weakener of Patroclus; Zeus as the granter of Thetis' request that her son, Achilles, might be able to bring down calamity on the Greeks; Hera as the preventer of Achilles from killing Agamemnon; in each instance the figure of myth, with its accompanying tagline of narrative event, serves as a fast triggering developing of the larger Homeric tale, just as the prosodic octane identified by Parry drives its story forward.

Myth thus becomes the dramatic ally of the epic poet, as it complies with the traditional expectations of what the myth means, and where the tale is going. In a larger sense Homer's *Iliad* is itself a huge tapestry of mythic expectations, fulfilling themselves on the level of understanding and thought, just as the cunning structure of sound and semantics, in the dactylic hexameter, banishes everything but liveliness,

**ODYSSEY** *The Odyssey* is a myth—a prolonged story—containing any number of folklore elements --Odysseus and the Cyclops; the Old man of the Sea in dialogue with Odysseus; the tale of the tree trunk bed of Odysseus and Penelope—and celebrating the art of storytelling (Odysseus the bard, singing before his hosts in Phaeacia; Odysseus the fabulator, cross lying with Athena, as he and she attempt to identify one another, toward the end of the epic).

It is of particular interest to consider the relation of the narrator of the entire *Odyssey*, 'Homer,' to the work he 'composed,' *The Odyssey*. Does the composer of the epic 'stand outside it,' outside the entire work that follows the preamble, 'Sing to me, Muse, of that man...?' Is Odysseus as a creation a mythical figure created by the person who asked the muse to sing about Odysseus? What about the command to Odysseus, from Teiresias in the underworld, that he should continue on his journey, after killing the suitors, until he comes to a region so far inland that a man who meets him mistakes his oar for a winnowing rod? Does anything about this command seem to separate off the myth of the *Odyssey*, as a whole, from another world with its own rules and regulations?