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Stealing Hercules' Club

Around 29 BCE the Roman poet Vergil began his answer to the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*—the *Aeneid*. As pieces of the new work became public, he was accused not of alluding to Homer, but of plagiarizing him. He answered, “It is as easy to steal the club from Hercules as a line from Homer.”

Anyone who has tackled a creative adaptation set in Homer’s world knows what Vergil means. There is something about Homer: something monolithic and singular and whole unto himself. You could pry a chip off of the Parthenon, but when you got it home, it would be nothing more than a piece of stone, inert, anonymous and grey. So Homer. You might steal one of his similes, but it will never thrive in your verse; it cannot live without the messy, vital, inimitable soil in which it was born.

Perhaps this singularity has something to do with the poems’ unique origins. Scholars have traced the composition of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* to the 8th century BCE, but much remains debated and mysterious, including Homer himself. We do not reliably know if he was a single person, nor how much of his work is original, as opposed to a reworking of already well-known myths. We do not even know how he composed, whether with stylus and tablet, or entirely from memory. Recent scholarship has theorized that Homer may have been more entertainer than formal poet: a skilled improviser who carried in his mind a huge repertoire of phrases, lines and episodes which he wove together anew at each performance. What comes down to us then, is the morning after—drawn from the recollections of Homer and his audience. But this too is largely guesswork.

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The poems themselves raise even greater questions. Created nearly five hundred years after the events they describe, they are far from eyewitness history. Homer—whoever he was—freely intermingled his own time with an only-guessed-at mythical past. There is much in the poems that is anachronistic, and much that is unreliable. They are, more than anything, an invented world, a poet's world.

These theories certainly help to explain the poems' unusual patchwork nature. Stylistically they are often irregular, and it is hard to know how much we may presume of Homer's intent. When Achilles is described as "swift-footed" while he is seated, should we chalk it up to the constraints of oral poetry, which calls for stock repetitions, or the poet's keen sense of irony? Archaic vocabulary abounds, regularly mixed with regionalisms and more modern usages, often in the same line. Long lists of names mar the forward thrust of the action, and the main character vanishes for much of the middle of the *Iliad*. A king dies, only to reappear mourning his son several books later.

In short, no one today would dare to write like Homer. And if they did, no editor would publish it. So, what is it then, that makes Homer one of the most adapted, alluded to and reworked texts in the history of the Western world?

Over the years my students have asked me again and again: did Achilles really say that? Did Agamemnon really do that? The responsible, unromantic answer is: mostly likely not. Despite some tantalizing clues recently found in Hittite texts of a possible Agamemnon, there is no evidence that any of these ancient heroes were real, or behaved as Homer made them. Yet, Homer's poems have something in them that is as honest and real as history—the truth of great art. Hamlet surely did not live the life that

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Shakespeare gave him. But he is a creation of the deepest emotional resonance, even if not actual reality.

It is this same truth that has made Homer justly famous. His intimate understanding of human nature—in all its pride, folly and generosity—is the deep tensile steel that holds the poems together at their core. Homer’s insights are as true today as they were then: human nature has not changed since he first sang of Achilles and his rage. Every day on the front page of the newspaper is an *Iliad* of woes, from the self-serving Agamemnons to the manipulative, double-speaking Odysseuses, from the tragedies of war to the brutal treatment of the conquered. Through beautiful hexameters—as swift of foot as their hero Achilles—Homer conjures us as we are, in love, in battle, in hope, in despair. We may no longer fight our wars with spears and chariots, but we fight them with the same greed, grace, courage and cowardice as we ever did. Homer holds the mirror up to all our nature, if only we will look.

It is no surprise then, that so many have been inspired by his works. The paths through his world are well-traveled. Vergil has been there, striding like a colossus. And Ovid too, and Shakespeare, and Joyce, and Atwood, Logue, Malouf... hundreds upon hundreds of authors, greater and lesser. They intimidate with their numbers, with their eminent quality. How can one more voice be heard in that mighty chorus? Why travel a road where so many have gone before you?

I cannot speak for others who find themselves possessed by these ancient works, only myself. From the time I was a small child, I have been deeply moved by Homer’s exquisite attention to the human condition, the beauty and power of his tragic characters. I might say that I wish to bring him to a modern audience, but the truth is Homer doesn’t

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need my help. I wrote about Achilles and Patroclus and Odysseus because these stories lodged in me, and would not let go. I wanted to understand further: their past before the *Iliad* begins, and their future, beyond it. How do we come to the terrible moment that opens the *Iliad*, with Achilles and Agamemnon at each other's throats? I wrote because two poems weren't enough. I wanted more.

And this is Homer's final gift to us, of so many: his expansive, magnanimous ability to inspire. He cannot be used up, or worn out, he is ever-new, abundant, boundless. His infinite variety shines forth, bright enough to illuminate not just himself but the thousands of hopeful moons that crowd around him. His inconsistencies and anachronisms turn out to be blessings in disguise, encouraging invention and freedom. The grandeur of his subject grants a soul-stirring scope. Last, but not least, the flawed, realistic humanity of his subjects—wrathful Achilles, loyal Patroclus, proud Agamemnon—provides the perfect raw clay for drama.

No, you can't steal Hercules' club, but it turns out the generous man is always willing to let you borrow it. Hold the same mighty wood that fit so well in Vergil's hand. Give it a swing or two. Then give it back and make your own.