It's All Greek to Me

Charlotte Higgins

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Introduction

ZEUS ONCE LET fly two eagles from the ends of the world: one from the east and one from the west. They soared high over oceans, mountains, forests and plains, until they met at the very centre of the earth, its *omphalos*, or navel. On this spot, a temple to Apollo was dedicated, the home of the Delphic oracle, where those who wished for insight into their past, present or future might come to consult the god. The questioner would, after making the appropriate payment and sacrifices, be led into the temple's dark heart. In the gloom, the visitor would more sense than see the Pythia – the laurel-crowned woman who acted as the sacred conduit for the god's communications. In a trance, amid the heady fumes of burning laurel and barley, she would begin her utterances: divinely inspired fragments that the priests would interpret and fashion. But as the enquirer passed under the temple colonnade, before he stepped into the inner sanctum itself, he would have seen some letters carved into the portico: *gnothi seauton* – "know thyself".

This extraordinary challenge to achieve self-knowledge still rings out commandingly. It captures one of the things that is most exciting about ancient Greece: from the writings of

its greatest thinkers and authors what stands out is an almost visceral need to question, to probe, to debate, to turn accepted opinion on its head – whether the subject of enquiry is the state of the human heart or the nature of justice.

The intellectual achievements of the ancient Greeks were quite simply extraordinary. They shaped the basic disciplines and genres in which we still organise thought: from poetry to drama, from philosophy to history, from natural history, medicine and ethnography to political science. We have been inexorably moulded by ancient Greece: the way we think about right and wrong, about the nature of beauty, goodness and knowledge; the way we conceive of what it is to be a mortal being amid the immensity of the universe; the way we talk about the past, and our ambiguous relationship with war; the way we discuss politics and citizenship. The tracks that lead back from our world to the Greeks' are narrow, meandering, sometimes virtually rubbed out or invisible – but they are there. What the Greeks did and said still casts light on what we say and do; by looking at the Greeks we can understand more about ourselves. The Greeks, in short, can help us answer their own challenge of "know thyself".

This book is about turning our minds back to ancient Greece, as a way better to grasp our own world, our own hearts. But it is not a love letter to ancient Greece, which, if one were to back-project modern standards upon it, would be revealed as in many ways an appalling place, lacking what we would call human rights, relying on a vast population of slaves regarded as a lower form of life, and rendering women, with very few exceptions, completely invisible. Percy Bysshe Shelley famously said, "We are all Greeks." I hope not.

It is, rather, a love letter to the act of thinking about ancient Greece. In one sense, it's a bluffer's guide, a primer that will

give you a helping hand around Greek democracy, or the Persian Wars, or the Parthenon. But it is also a book of enthusiasms and pleasures. If the mighty rollcall of Greek writers – Plato, Herodotus, Aeschylus, Sophocles – can seem daunting or inaccessible, I hope to help you to unlock some of their richness, and discover afresh what makes them so exciting, moving, hilarious and shocking. Reading the Greeks is a joy that is at risk of slipping quietly out of our grasp if classics continues its drift away from curricula and from the mainstream.

To take one example (the most important example): Homer. There is no more gripping, moving account of mortality, war and the human emotions than the *Iliad*; no better yarn spun than the *Odyssey*, surely the original novel. One of the many things that is so wonderful about reading Homer is that it is not like looking at stylised figures locked in eternal motionlessness on some classical vase. No: Homer is full of living, breathing characters whose dilemmas, griefs, joys and losses capture us with their intensity and immediacy. We identify with these vivid people – perhaps, because although nearly 3,000 years separate us from their creation, we in the 21st century share some of their individualistic, competitive spirit. Homer is the alpha and omega of this book: we shall begin and end with him, because to read Homer is to enter a world of unparalleled and wonderfully sustaining richness; and because Homer is the beginning of understanding so much else in Greek thought and writing.

At this point, it is worth pausing for a moment to consider what this "ancient Greece" actually is. I have been using the phrase blithely, when at best it is a rough and inaccurate shorthand. The world of "ancient Greece" was certainly not confined geographically to the Greek mainland, nor was it a single entity. There were Greek settlements dotted all around

the Mediterranean, from Marseilles in the west, to the coast of Asia Minor in the east. In fact, many of the most glamorous intellectuals of ancient Greece came from the coastline of what is now western Turkey. Nor is "Greece" (in Greek "Hellas") a term that would necessarily have been understood by the subjects of this book. "Hellenes" in Homer (the poems were perhaps, though not certainly, written down in the eighth century BC) simply describe people from a particular region in Thessaly. By the fifth century BC, "Hellas" was understood as meaning roughly the geographical area of modern Greece; and "Hellene" was used by those claiming Greek ethnicity, living anywhere from Sicily to the Black Sea. But in any case, the Greek world was made up of hundreds of politically independent, often disputatious city-states, each with separate systems of government, locally distinct religious cults, even different calendars and names for the months of the year. By the time the historian Herodotus was writing, probably in the third quarter of the fifth century, he could describe Hellenes as united by shared customs, religion and language. But this notion of "Greekness" was a new idea, a sense of common identity engendered in the wake of the Persian Wars and fostered by the imperial ambitions of the Athenians, in whose interests it was to proclaim an (Athenian-flavoured) Greek unity. And in any case, there were plenty of divergences in custom, religion and language among the Hellenes (there were three main dialects of Greek spoken, with many local variations) even when Herodotus was writing.

It is useful to bear in mind that when we think of "ancient Greece" we tend to be drawn to just one of these hundreds of city-states, and at one particular time: Athens in the fifth century BC. This is perfectly understandable, as during its flowering of power between the routing of the Persians in 479

and its own crushing by Sparta in 404, it was a magnet for writers, artists and thinkers from all over the Greek world, and the scene of the most exciting intellectual revolution that the world has ever witnessed. The Athenians have always made the most noise; and they left us an abundance of literary masterpieces, not least the great dramas of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, written for performance at the Athenian festival called the City Dionysia. Still, it is worth remembering that the Athenians weren't the only Greeks, nor were they even "representative" Greeks. It's also worth pointing out that, because this book has to stop somewhere, I have confined its scope to the period spanned by the works of Homer and Hesiod at the earliest (eighth century BC), and Aristotle (fourth century BC) at the latest, though influential literature was still produced and great scientific discoveries still made by Greeks after Philip of Macedon and his son Alexander the Great had brought Greece, and most of the rest of the known world, into their empire in the late fourth century.

To resume, then: it is worth thinking about ancient Greece because it brings us a perspective on the way we live now, from our politics to our sense of history. And reading the Greeks is also a source of unbounded enrichment and pleasure. But even more important than all this, perhaps, is the idea of "ancient Greece" not simply as a specific place or a time, but a realm where the imagination, the emotions and the intellect can roam free. Thinking about the ancient Greeks is always provisional. We will never completely grasp ancient Greece. An enormous wealth of literature, art, architecture and other artefacts have survived but, for every survival, there are a thousand losses. We have 20 dramas by Euripides, but we know that his complete works numbered 90 plays. For Aeschylus, we have seven out of 90 extant. And for Sophocles, just seven out

of a staggering 123. Works that were seen as masterpieces in antiquity are nothing but dust, ashes, and the occasional quote in other texts: take, for example, Ephorus of Cyme's 30-volume history of the known world from the 11th century to 340 – famous in antiquity, now gone, and never to be recovered. (Unless the generous sands of Egypt, which have turned up many well-preserved papyri, produce another miracle.)

Virginia Woolf put our distance from the Greeks beautifully, in her essay "On Not Knowing Greek". She said that we are separated from them by "a chasm which the vast tides of European chatter can never succeed in crossing"; as opposed to our experience of, say, Chaucer: "We are floated up to him insensibly on the current of our ancestors' lives." But these gaps, these lacunae, that distance, allow each generation and each individual to create his or her own ancient Greece – a partial, fragmentary ancient Greece onto which our own desires and preoccupations can be released and our intellects let loose to play. "Back and back we are drawn to steep ourselves in what, perhaps, is only an image of the reality, not the reality itself, a summer's day imagined in the heart of a northern winter," wrote Woolf.

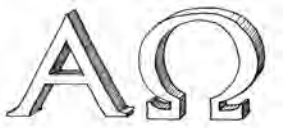
For me, the writing of Plato acts as a wonderful metaphor for our relationship with ancient Greece. Plato did not write in the form of treatises; he did not propound theories, even – or at least not in a straightforwardly doctrinaire way. Plato's philosophy is almost always written as dialogues between two or more speakers: its very form encapsulates disagreement, debate and provisional answers rather than unshakeable dogma. Incompleteness, as it were, is at its heart. In the same way, knowledge of ancient Greece is fugitive, fragile, difficult to grasp. When the mind travels to ancient Greece, it embarks on a quest: an idea C.P. Cavafy, the

great modern Greek poet, put beautifully in his poem, "Ithaca", which takes the idea of Odysseus' homecoming:

> When you set out for distant Ithaca,
> fervently wish your journey may be long, –
> full of adventures and with much to learn.
> Translation: J.C. Cavafy

And, as we set out on that long but rewarding journey towards Ithaca, we will come closer to answering that ancient challenge: *gnothi seauton*.

Note on names and dates: *names are rendered in their familiar Latinised versions rather than transliterated from Greek. Dates are all BC, except where stated.*



1. The alpha and the omega: Why a life without Homer is a life half-lived

"On First Looking Into Chapman's Homer"

Much have I travelled in the realms of gold
And many goodly states and kingdoms seen;
Round many western islands have I been
Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold.
Oft of one wide expanse had I been told
That deep-browed Homer ruled as his desmesne;
Yet did I never breathe its pure serene
Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold:
Then felt I like some watcher of the skies
When a new planet swims into his ken;
Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes
He stared at the Pacific – and all his men
Looked at each other with a wild surmise –
Silent, upon a peak in Darien.

John Keats

ONE NIGHT IN October 1816, Charles Cowden Clarke showed his old schoolfriend John Keats translations of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* by George Chapman – the first versions in English

of Homer's epic poems, published in 1611 and 1615 respectively. Keats, whose Greek was very patchy, knew Homer via translations by John Dryden and Alexander Pope, but Chapman's earthy, vigorous, yompingly pacey verse was a world away from Pope's neatly polished, rather mincing heroic couplets. The two friends plunged into the book, reading it together, unable to drag themselves away till dawn: it was an experience of "teeming wonderment", Cowden Clarke remembered. At 10 o'clock that morning, as he came downstairs after snatching a few hours' sleep, Cowden Clarke found an envelope on his breakfast table. Inside was a sheet of paper, and on it was scrawled Keats's famous sonnet, "On First Looking Into Chapman's Homer".

In the almost 3,000 years since the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were composed, readers have been responding to these poems just as Keats did: with the excitement, awe and sense of revelation "some watcher of the skies" might feel when "a new planet swims into his ken".

If you haven't read them, you have a wonderful, life-enhancing, enriching experience in store: you will be handed the key to a world of incredible storytelling, and profoundly beautiful poetry. The great writers of today, of course, are still learning from Homer: Philip Pullman, author of the "His Dark Materials" trilogy, and former schoolteacher, says this: "I was allowed to tell the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* to my classes simply because I thought it would be a good idea, and I told both those stories to three classes each year for 12 years. I learned more about storytelling from that than from anything else; I mean about how to time the cliffhangers, how to slow down and speed up, exactly how much detail you need to give in order to let them see the scene in their minds. And it was vital to tell them in my own words rather

than read out someone else's version."

Furthermore, the world of Homer is also a world in which the Big Questions are explored, with extraordinary humanity and compassion: the appalling tragedy of dying young; the effects of war; how one can experience pity and empathy in the teeth of hatred; what is heroism; what it means to grow up; what is the nature of true love and marriage; what is a home. Homer is a rip-roaring read, he makes you laugh and he makes you weep like a child. Homer's poems are (probably) the earliest surviving works of European literature: and they remain, to many people's minds, the greatest. You just can't do without them.

The poems are also the starting point for getting to grips with the Greeks. That's because the Greeks were, quite understandably, obsessed by the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey.* This is how the writer Heraclitus described the place of Homer in the first century AD:

> From the very earliest infancy young children are nursed in their learning by Homer, and swaddled in his verses we water our souls with them as though they were nourishing milk. He stands beside each one of us as we set out and gradually grow into men, he blossoms as we die, and until old age we never grow tired of him, for as soon as we set him aside we thirst for him again; it may be said that the same limit is set to both Homer and life.
>
> Translation: Richard Hunter

It's a wonderful image of the place Homer occupied in Greek life – "mother's milk", so to speak. But it's also a testament, which still absolutely holds true, to the richness of Homer, to the way that you can read him over and over again and still find something fresh.

And when people talk about Homer's being the fountainhead of European thought, that really is no exaggeration. To a quite startling degree, subsequent Greek writing was a development of, or a reaction to Homer, and thus – given the extent to which Greek thought is the progenitor of our own modern culture – he still leaves indelible marks on the way we see the world today.

For instance: the Greeks, as far as the Western world is concerned, invented drama (that means without the Greeks, no plays or films). And to a very large degree, the great Greek tragic playwrights – Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides – found their material in Homer. Aeschylus' great trilogy the *Oresteia*, is a kind of sequel to events related in Homer; it's a "what happened next" to Agamemnon, the leader of the Greek forces in the *Iliad*. Ditto Euripides' *Trojan Women*: it fleshes out what happens to the female members of the Trojan royal family, all of whom we have met in the *Iliad*, dramatising the dreadful humiliation of their fate as enslaved captives. Another example is Herodotus, the man who invented the concept of history. When Herodotus writes down the causes and events of a real conflict – in this case, the Persian Wars – he defines what he is doing directly in relation to the *Iliad*. He even records (though rejects) the theory that the causes of the Persian Wars go right back to semi-mythical, tit-for-tat abductions of women between Asia and Europe, including that of Helen of Troy.

If you were giving a compliment to an ancient Greek, the highest praise possible was to compare him or her to Homer. Herodotus was called the prose Homer; the poet Sappho was called the female Homer. "Homer was the epic Sophocles, and Sophocles a tragic Homer", ran an aphorism relating to the great playwright. (About half of the lines in the epics are in direct speech, so you could say that Homer was already

halfway to drama.) Even revolutionary thinkers who wanted to challenge the status quo and topple Homer couldn't help dealing with him: Plato couldn't ignore him; he had to at least engage with him as he banished the poet from his putative *Republic*.

So what are these epics all about? The stories of both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are rooted in the Trojan War, a mythical conflict between a band of Greek allies and the Trojans, inhabitants of a city on what is now the Mediterranean coast of Turkey. (I say mythical: the poems probably have their roots in long-ago memories of Greek raids on the Turkish coast, perhaps even a real war between Greeks and Trojans.) The poems are set in the hazy, distant past, when gods and men had free dealings with one another, and when men were stronger and better than they are now.

The war had started because Paris, prince of Troy, was asked to judge a beauty contest between three goddesses, Hera, Athena and Aphrodite. Each offered him bribes: that of Aphrodite, the winning goddess, was marriage with the most beautiful woman in the world. Unfortunately, to say the least, that woman – Helen – was already married, to Menelaus, king of Sparta. When Paris and Helen disappeared to Troy together, Menelaus and his brother, the powerful Agamemnon, king of Argos, assembled an army of allies from all over the mainland and the islands, from Achilles' force of Myrmidons from Phthia, to Nestor's troops from Pylos, to Odysseus' from Ithaca.

The Greeks (or rather, as they are called in Homer, the Achaeans, or Danaans, or Argives, but we'll stick with Greeks for simplicity here) then laid siege to Troy. It was a gruelling, 10-year-long business, the deadlock broken only when Odysseus, that expert tactician, hit on the notion of the Trojan

Horse. The trick was to pretend that the entire expeditionary force had packed up and sailed west – leaving only a vast wooden horse behind them. The Trojans, despite repeated warning from the unfortunate princess Cassandra (doomed to make accurate prophecies that no one believed), thought the horse was an offering to the god Poseidon, so they dragged it through the city gates. But it was hollow, and contained the Greeks' best warriors – who scrambled out of the horse while the Trojans were throwing their victory party, and torched, looted and massacred their way through the city.

So much for the backstory. The action of the poem actually takes place during a fraction of that 10-year stretch: it is set over the course of about 40 days in the ninth year of the conflict, before the Trojan Horse was ever thought of. The subject of the poem is announced right away, in its very first word:

> Rage – Goddess, sing the rage of Peleus' son Achilles,
> murderous, doomed… *

The rage here is not Greek rage against Trojan, but Greek against Greek. The conflict at the heart of the *Iliad* is between Agamemnon, king of Argos and commander-in-chief of the Greek forces, and his best warrior, Achilles. Agamemnon may be in charge – but he's no match for the brilliant and temperamental Achilles, by far the best fighter in the army. What has

* For a book-by-book summary of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, see pp 36–41. The translation used here is not George Chapman's – which begins with the lovely "Achilles' baneful wrath – resound, O goddess" – but Robert Fagles' for Penguin Classics, which was published in 1990 and followed six years later by his *Odyssey*. There are innumerable translations available, but for my money, Fagles' is the one: vivid, and with just the right kind of roughness. It is also brilliant to read out loud. So I am going to use it throughout, and line numbers will refer to his version.



The world of the *Iliad*

happened is this. At the beginning of the poem, the Greeks are being afflicted by a plague that is cutting a terrible swathe through the troops. In order to stop it, they learn, Agamemnon must return one of his captive girls to her father, a Trojan priest of Apollo. To avoid losing face, Agamemnon demands that Achilles, in turn, hand over to him one of his captive women. Achilles is furious at the affront, and, though he complies, he exacts a grotesque revenge.

For Achilles is not like other men. His mother is a goddess, Thetis; he has unique access to divine power. Thetis persuades Zeus, king of the gods, to carry out Achilles' wishes and turn

the tide of war dramatically against the Greeks (though their eventual victory is foreordained). Achilles withdraws from the fighting and sulks in his tent. The bulk of the poem charts the Greeks' increasingly desperate fortunes.

It's not straightforward, however. The battling for Troy is mirrored by a conflict in heaven. The gods have taken sides – Athena, Hera and Poseidon favouring the Greeks; Apollo, Aphrodite and Ares, the Trojans. Scheming, clever and strong, Athena and Hera will do anything they can to subvert Zeus' commands and try to give their favourite Greek heroes an advantage – especially Diomedes, whom they build up so much that (in Book 5) he battles the gods, wounding Aphrodite and even Ares, god of war. But by Book 9 the Greeks are getting desperate. The Trojan champion Hector, son of King Priam, is slaughtering Greeks and sending terror into their ranks. An embassy of leaders is sent to Achilles' tent to try to get him to relent. Nothing doing.

Finally, however, Achilles softens to the extent that he allows his beloved friend Patroclus into the fray. Patroclus straps on Achilles' armour (this is Book 16) and goes off to fight… but he dies, downed by Hector.

Achilles' reaction, when he is told about this disaster in Book 18, is monumental, extreme:

> A black cloud of grief came shrouding over Achilles.
> Both hands clawing the ground for soot and filth,
> he poured it over his head, fouled his handsome face
> and black ashes settled onto his fresh clean war-shirt.
> Overpowered in all his power, sprawled in the dust,
> Achilles lay there, fallen…
>
> *Iliad* 18 24–29

When the grief-stricken Achilles finally enters the battle it

is a supernatural event. He is a berserker, unstoppable. Book 21 of the poem is a bloodbath: so completely does he choke the river Scamander with Trojan corpses that the river itself is outraged and rises up to fight him. But even the river can't match Achilles, and at last he runs across the plain to the gate of Troy, outside which Hector is waiting.

Shockingly, when he sees Achilles coming, Hector takes to his heels and flees. Achilles pursues him remorselessly, round and round the city. On the fourth lap, finally, they fight, and Hector dies. But Achilles' anger is still unquenched. He takes Hector's body and lashes it onto the back of his chariot, the hero's head dragging in the dust. Even having exacted this gruesome revenge for Patroclus' death, Achilles cannot sleep; he takes solitary walks up and down the beach, every once in a while taking out his chariot and dragging Hector's body around Patroclus' tomb again. Even by the standards of Homeric heroes (who don't exactly stint, emotionally) the feeling is he has gone too far. One night, Zeus allows Priam, the old king of Troy – Hector's father – to steal into the Greek encampment at night and ransom the body of his son. In one of the most moving scenes in all literature, Priam kneels at Achilles' feet and kisses his hands – the hands that killed his own son – and asks the younger man to remember his own father, old, frail and far away.

> Those words stirred within Achilles a deep desire
> to grieve for his own father. Taking the old man's hand
> he gently moved him back. And overpowered by memory
> both men gave way to grief. Priam wept freely
> for man-killing Hector, throbbing, crouching
> before Achilles' feet as Achilles wept himself,
> now for his father, now for Patroclus once again,
> and their sobbing rose and fell throughout the house.
>
> *Iliad* 24 592–599