

Carpenter, Rhys, Folk Tale, Fiction and Saga in the Homeric Epics. U. of Calif., 1946

pp. 31,32

It is this direct borrowing from the poet's own experience and from his own surrounding material world that I am terming Fiction. It is this which makes his re-creation of the heroic past seem so immediately present and so vivid. Indeed, since it is fiction which imparts verisimilitude to his scenes, we may say without fear of paradox that the more real they seem the more fictional they are. We may even make of this a theorem to assert that the more an oral poet seems to know about a distant event the less he really knows about it and the more certainly he is inventing.

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Herein lies a most vital distinction between saga and fiction. The one derives from the past, while the other is mainly dependent on the present. The one is received from afar by relay from generation to generation and grows progressively vaguer, more confused, less accurate; the other is created directly out of immediate experience and visible environment, and if it is altered, may thereby become yet the more up-to-date and real.

To an Ionian poet living in the ninth or eighth or seventh century B.C. the appearance and behaviour of the Mycenaean culture was hearsay, oral tradition three or four or five hundred years old - what I am calling Saga. We may well be skeptical of the extent or accuracy of anything such Saga had to tell, particularly when we have once observed the use that oral literature generally makes of its saga material.

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Homer did not know what battle-chariots were for, since his own community did not use them. Hence he depicts them preposterously as mere means of local transportation to and from the actual fight. . . .

Again, Homer makes too much mention of iron, which was an extreme rarity in the Helladic culture. Oral tradition, in the form of stock poetic phrases and verses, had apparently tied the notion of bronze inextricably to sword blades, which the classical culture naturally wrought out of iron; hence the Homeric heroes fight with swords of bronze. But seemingly there was no such tradition for chains and getters, so that it may never have occurred to the poet that these could have been made out of any other material than iron (in which he was perhaps correct!); whereas his inherited poetic formulas, conflicting with his own everyday experience, left him hesitant from which of the two materials such things as axes, hatchets, pruning hooks, and knives should be made. The Higher Criticism has made sad havoc out of this purely literary dilemma.

p.52.

Homer . . . knew nothing of the preclassical feudal distinction between chieftain and commoners, which is reflected in the heavily protected castle surrounded by an undefended settlement at Mycenae and Tiryns. Hissarlik was a Helladic Herrenburg, or chieftain's castle, with room only for the ruling dynasty, whereas in Homer's conception (and therefore in the Iliad!) Troy was a Greek town with space enough for its entire population inside its own walls. By the time he had imagined for his poem a palace with . . . . he could not have put it all on Hissarlik if he had wanted to . . .