

Finley, M. I., The World of Odysseys, The Viking Press, New York, 1954, rev. ed, 1965

Error in Homer

p. 76,77 Athena was prodding Telemachus hard because of the grave situation created by the suitors. She pointed to Orestes as a model. "Have you not heard what fame illustrious Orestes received among all men when he killed his father's murderer, wily Aegisthus?" \*

\* Odyssey 1.298-300. Whenever Orestes is mentioned in the Odyssey no reference is made to his having also killed his mother Clytaemnestra. Yet that is the central theme of the Orestes tragedy in Greek drama. However one explains Homer's silence, the contrast, and the obviously contemporary matter in the plays, notably the court scenes, indicate once again that information taken from post-Homeric treatment of the old myths is worse than useless in a study of the world of Odysseus. Later poets and playwrights reworked the materials freely, and with total unconcern for history.

Historical truth in Homer

p. 61 Forcible seizure, followed by distribution in this fashion, was one way to acquire metal or other goods from an outside source. Some scholars think that the kernel of historical truth in the tale of the Trojan War is precisely such a mass raid for iron supplies. Whether they are right or not, there were surely many smaller Trojan wars to such a purpose, against Greeks as well as against barbarians.

p. 88 It may be protested that all this is to read historical significance into what is no more than the story line of the poem. Had Odysseus not returned, we should have had no Odyssey; had he met the fate from which the goddess rescued him, we should have had an altogether different tale. True; but we must remember that Odysseus is our conventional name for King X. Stripped of the details of myth and narrative, the diversified homecomings are precisely what would have occurred in this world, with its delicate, easily upset balance of powers. Nestor and Menelaus smoothly picked up the threads as they had been before the expedition, . . . Agamemnon was murdered by Aegisthus; Odysseus contrived to avoid that fate, though faced with 108 potential Aegisthuses. Historically and sociologically these tales simply mean that some kings had established such personal power and authority that no challenge was possible, that others were challenged unsuccessfully, and that still others learned that "first among equals" was no position from which to look forward to a long life of blessings and comforts.

p. 158 A Companion to Homer, edited by Alan J. B. Wace and Frank H. Stubbings (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1962): "if our record of it [the Mycenaean age] is found more and more to correspond to Homer's picture we should feel no surprise, for we are talking about the same age." [no page given]