

EPIC PROEMS BEFORE VERGIL

HOMER, *ILLIAD* (Greek, c. mid to late 8th century BCE)

Rage—Goddess, sing the rage of Peleus' son, Achilles,
Murderous, doomed, that cost the Achaeans countless losses,
Hurling down to the House of Death so many sturdy souls,
Great fighters' souls, but made their bodies carrion,
Feasts for the dogs and birds,
And the will of Zeus was moving toward its end.
Begin, Muse, when the two first broke and clashed,
Agamemnon lord of men and brilliant Achilles.

What god drove them to fight with such a fury?
Apollo the son of Zeus and Leto. Incensed at the king
He swept a fatal plague through the army—men were dying
And all because Agamemnon spurned Apollo's priest.
Yes, Chryses approached the Achaeans' fast ships
To win his daughter back, bringing a priceless ransom... (Fagles trans., 1990)

HOMER, *ODYSSEY*

Sing to me of the man, Muse, the man of twists and turns
Driven time and again off course, once he had plundered
The hallowed heights of Troy.
Many cities of men he saw and learned their minds,
Many pains he suffered, heartsick on the open sea,
Fighting to save his life and bring his comrades home.
But he could not save them from disaster, hard as he strove—
The recklessness of their own ways destroyed them all,
The blind fools, they devoured the cattle of the Sun
And the Sungod blotted out the day of their return.
Launch out on his story, Muse, daughter of Zeus,
Start from where you will—sing for our time too.

By now,
All the survivors, all who avoided headlong death
Were safe at home, escaped the wars and waves.
But one man alone . . .
His heart set on his wife and his return—Calypso,
The bewitching nymph, the lustrous goddess, held him back,
Deep in her arching caverns, craving him for a husband.
But then, when the wheeling seasons brought the year around,
That year spun out by the gods when he should reach his home,
Ithaca—though not even there would he be free of trials,
Even among his loved ones—then every god took pity,
All except Poseidon. He raged on, seething against
The great Odysseus till he reached his native land... (Fagles trans., 1996)

HESIOD, *THEOGONY* (Greek, c. mid to late 8th century BCE)

From the Muses of Helicon let us begin our singing, that haunt Helicon's great and holy mountain, and dance on their soft feet round the violet-dark spring and the altar of the mighty son of Kronos. And when they have bathed their gentle skin in Permessos, or the Horse's Fountain, or holy Olmeios, then on the highest slope of Helicon they make their dances, fair and lovely, stepping lively in time. From there they go forth, veiled in thick mist, and walk by night, uttering beautiful voice, singing of Zeus who bears the aegis,

And the lady Hera of Argos, who walks in sandals of gold,
And the daughter of Zeus the aegis-bearer, pale-eyed Athene,
And Phoebus Apollo, and Artemis the archer,
And Poseidon earth-charioted, shaker of the earth,
And holy Themis, and Aphrodite of curling lashes,
And Hebe of gold diadem, and fair Dione,
Leto, Iapetos, and crooked-schemer Kronos,
Dawn, mighty Sun, and shining Moon,
Earth, great Oceanus, and dark Night,

And the rest of the holy family of immortals who are for ever. And once they taught Hesiod fine singing, as he tended his lambs below holy Helicon. This is what the goddesses said to me first, the Olympian Muses, daughters of Zeus the aegis-bearer:

“Shepherds that camp in the wild, disgraces, merest bellies:
we know to tell many lies that sound like truth,
But we know to sing reality, when we will.”

So said mighty Zeus' daughter, the sure of utterance, and they gave me a branch of springing bay to pluck for a staff, a handsome one, and they breathed into me wondrous voice, so that I should celebrate things of the future and things that were aforetime. And they told me to sing of the family of blessed ones who are for ever, and first and last always to sing of themselves... (M.L. West trans., 1988)

HESIOD, *WORKS AND DAYS*

Muses from Pieria, who glorify by songs, come to me, tell of Zeus your father in your singing. Because of him mortal men are unmentioned and mentioned, spoken and unspoken of, according to great Zeus' will. For easily he makes strong, and easily he oppresses the strong, easily he diminishes the conspicuous one and magnifies the inconspicuous, and easily he makes the crooked straight and withers the proud—Zeus who thunders on high, who dwells in the highest mansions. O hearken as thou seest and hearest, and make judgment straight with righteousness, Lord: while I should like to tell Perses words of truth... (M.L. West trans., 1988)

APOLLONIOS RHODOS, *ARGONAUTICA* (Greek, early to mid 3rd century BCE)

*Starting from you, Phoibos, the deeds of those old-time mortals
I shall relate, who by way of the Black Sea's mouth and through the
Cobalt-dark rocks, at King Pelias's commandment,
In search of the Golden Fleece drove tight-thwarted Argo.*

For Pelias heard it voiced that in time thereafter
A grim fate would await him, death at the prompting
Of the man he saw come, one-sandaled, from folk in the country:
And not much later—in accordance with your word—Jason,
Fording on foot the Anauros's wintry waters,

Saved from the mud one sandal, but left the other
Stuck fast in the flooded estuary, pressed straight on
To have his share in the sacred feast that Pelias
Was preparing for Poseidon his father, and the rest of
The gods, though paying no heed to Pelasgian Hera.
The moment Pelias saw him, he *knew*, and devised him a trial
Of most perilous seamanship, that in deep waters
Or away among foreign folk he might lose his homecoming.

*Now singers before my time have recounted how the vessel
Was fashioned by Argos with the guidance of Athena.
What I plan to do now is tell the name and family
Of each hero, describe their long voyage, all they accomplished in their wandering: may the Muses inspire my
singing! ...*(Green trans., 1997)

ENNIUS, *ANNALES* (Roman, 239–169 BCE)

Muses, who with your feet beat weightily Olympus... For my subject and my poem shall have renown among the peoples of Italy... Fettered in soft calm sleep... Homer the poet appeared at my side... “O loving kindness of thy heart”... And earth who herself bestowed the body takes it back and wastes not a whit. I remember becoming a peacock. Take note, ye citizens, of Luna’s harbor—it is worth while... When aged Priam was laid low beneath the warring Pelasgian...

LUCRETIUS, *DE RERUM NATURA* (Roman, 98?–55 BCE)

Mother of Aeneas and his race, delight of men and gods, life-giving Venus, it is your doing that under the wheeling constellations of the sky all nature teems with life, both the sea that buoys up our ships and the earth that yields our food. Through you all living creatures are conceived and come forth to look upon the sunlight. Before you the winds flee, and at your coming the clouds forsake the sky. For you the inventive earth flings up sweet flowers. For you the ocean levels laugh, the sky is calmed and glows with diffused radiance. When first the day puts on the aspect of spring, when in all its force the fertilizing breath of Zephyr is unleashed, then, great goddess, the birds of air give the first intimation of your entry; for yours is the power that has pierced them to the heart. Next the cattle run wild, frisk through the lush pastures and swim the swift-flowing streams. Spell-bound by your charm, they follow your lead with fierce desire. So throughout seas and uplands, rushing torrents, verdurous meadows and the leafy shelters of the birds, into the breasts of one and all you instill alluring love, so that with passionate longing they reproduce their several breeds.

Since you alone are the guiding power of the universe and without you nothing emerges into the shining sunlit world to grow in joy and loveliness, yours is the partnership I seek in striving to compose these lines *On the Nature of the Universe* for my noble Memmius. For him, great goddess, you have willed outstanding excellence in every field and everlasting fame. For his sake, therefore, endow my verse with everlasting charm.

Meanwhile, grant that this brutal business of war by sea and land may everywhere be lulled to rest. For you alone have power to bestow on mortals the blessing of quiet peace. In your bosom Mars himself, supreme commander in this brutal business, flings himself down at times, laid low by the irremediable wound of love. Gazing upward, his neck a prostrate column, he fixes hunger eyes on you, great goddess, and gluts them with love. As he lies outstretched, his breath hangs upon your lips. Stoop, then, goddess most glorious, and enfold him at rest in your hallowed bosom and whisper with those lips sweet words of prayer, beseeching for the people of Rome untroubled peace. In this evil hour of my country’s history, I cannot pursue my task with a mind at ease, as an illustrious scion of the house of Memmius cannot at such a crisis withhold his service from the common weal