

# The Humour of Homer

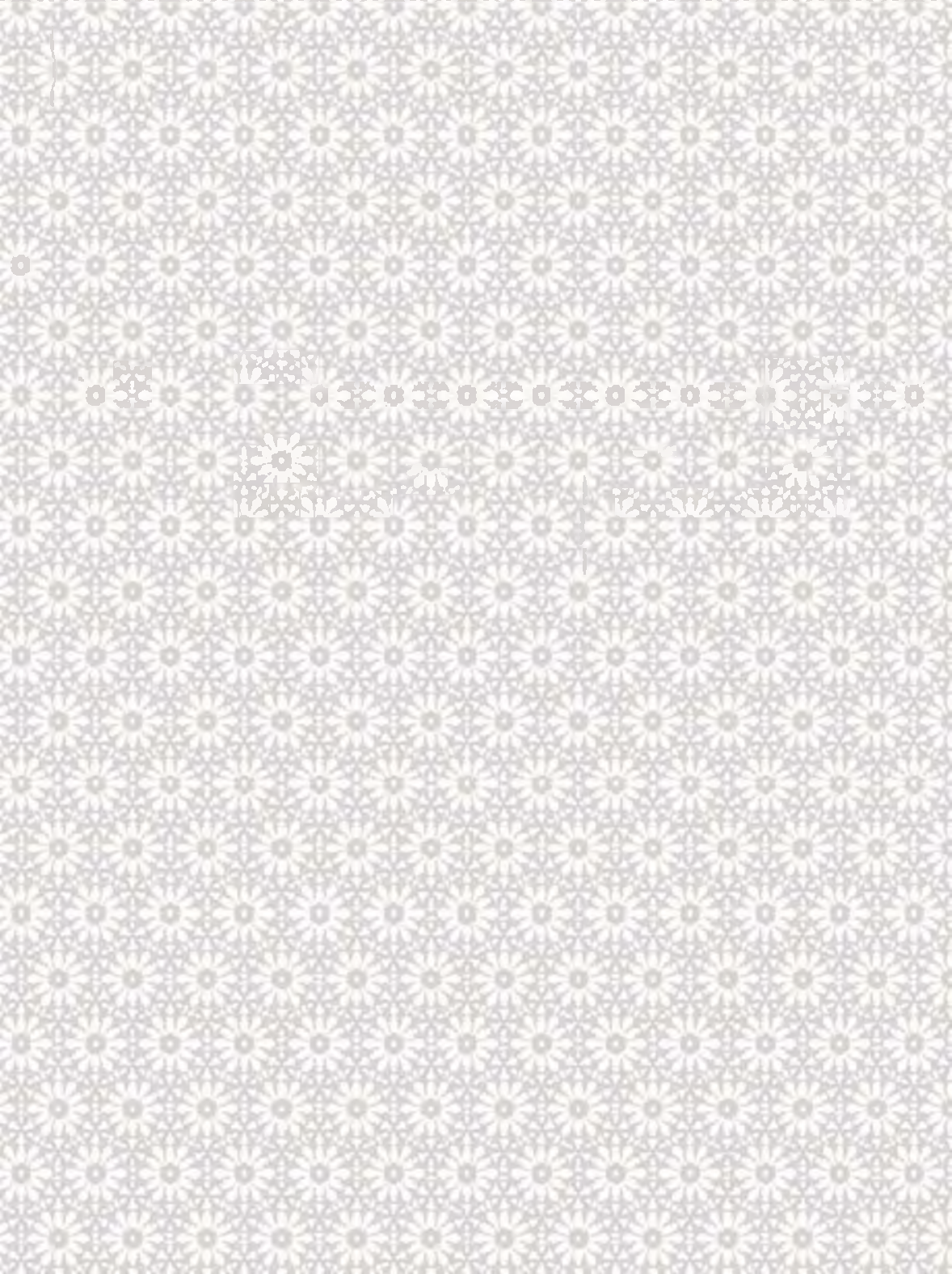
---

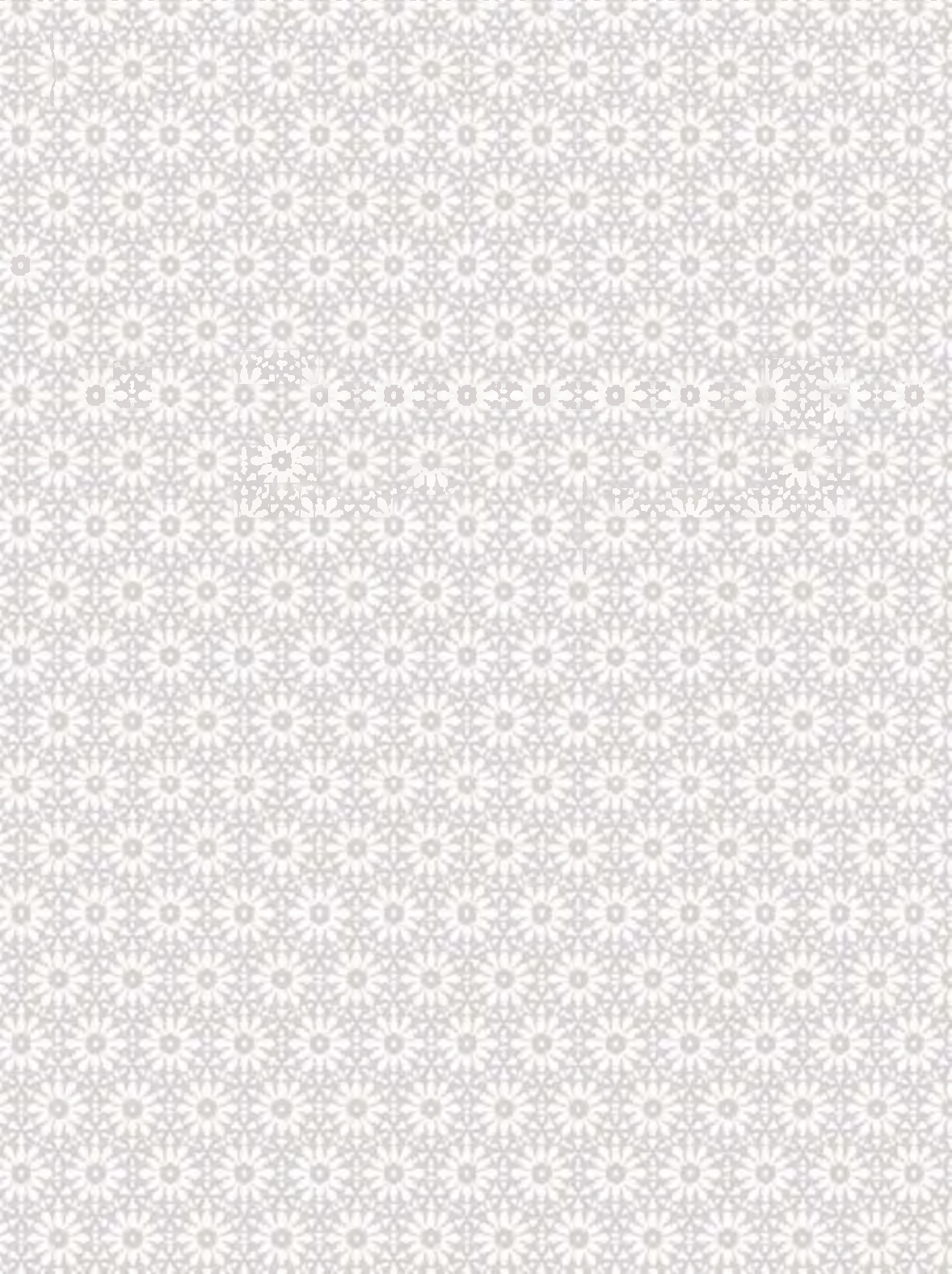
Samuel Butler

LIBROS DE BAUBO



Estudios sobre la risa











Samuel Butler

**THE HUMOUR OF HOMER**



**Libros de Baubo**

Esta obra forma parte de la colección de estudios sobre la risa de la **Asociación de Estudios Literarios y de Cultura, A. C.** (ADELyC), y puede descargarse gratuitamente en [www.librosdebaubo.net](http://www.librosdebaubo.net).

Contacto: [esteticasdelarisa@gmail.com](mailto:esteticasdelarisa@gmail.com) y [adelyc.ac@gmail.com](mailto:adelyc.ac@gmail.com)

Este libro digital está bajo una licencia Creative Commons: BY-NC-SA. Para saber más de la licencia *Reconocimiento-NoComercial-CompartirIgual*, por favor visite:



<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/>

Diseño del logo interior de **Libros de Baubo**:  
Adriana Ramírez de Alba

Título original de la obra digitalizada: *The Humour of Homer and Other Essays*.

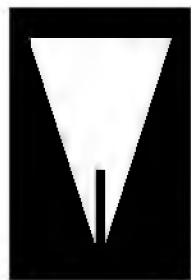
México: ADELyC, 2013.



# Asociación de Estudios Literarios y de Cultura

---

Estudios sobre la risa



Biblioteca  
Digital  
Libros de  
**Baubo**

La colección digital **Libros de Baubo** es coordinada por:

Silvia Alicia Manzanilla Sosa

Karla Marrufo

El Comité Editorial de la **ADELyC, A. C.** está integrado por los siguientes miembros del Consejo Directivo:

Karla Marrufo

*Secretaria*

Martha Elena Munguía Zatarain

*Vicepresidenta*

Silvia Alicia Manzanilla Sosa

*Presidenta*

# THE HUMOUR OF HOMER

Edición preparada por  
Silvia Alicia Manzanilla Sosa y Karla Marrufo



# The Humour of Homer and Other Essays

By

Samuel Butler

Author of "Erewhon," "Erewhon Revisited,"  
"The Way of all Flesh," etc.

Edited by

R. A. Streatfeild

With a biographical sketch of the author by Henry  
Festing Jones, and a portrait in photogravure from  
a photograph taken in 1889

London

A. C. Fifield, 13 Clifford's Inn, E.C.

1913



## The Humour of Homer<sup>1</sup>

THE first of the two great poems commonly ascribed to Homer is called the *Iliad*—a title which we may be sure was not given it by the author. It professes to treat of a quarrel between Agamemnon and Achilles that broke out while the Greeks were besieging the city of Troy, and it does, indeed, deal largely with the consequences of this quarrel ; whether, however, the ostensible subject did not conceal another that was nearer the poet's heart—I mean the last days, death, and burial of Hector—is a point that I cannot determine. Nor yet can I determine how much of the *Iliad* as we now have it is by Homer, and how much by a later writer or writers. This is a very vexed question, but I myself believe the *Iliad* to be entirely by a single poet.

The second poem commonly ascribed to the same author is called the *Odyssey*. It deals with the adventures of Ulysses during his ten years of wandering after Troy had fallen. These two works have of late years been believed to be by different authors. The *Iliad* is now generally held to be the older work by some one or two hundred years.

The leading ideas of the *Iliad* are love, war, and plunder, though this last is less insisted on than the other two. The key-note is struck with a woman's

<sup>1</sup> A lecture delivered at the Working Men's College, Great Ormond Street, 30th January, 1892.

charms, and a quarrel among men for their possession. It is a woman who is at the bottom of the Trojan war itself. Woman throughout the *Iliad* is a being to be loved, teased, laughed at, and if necessary carried off. We are told in one place of a fine bronze cauldron for heating water which was worth twenty oxen, whereas a few lines lower down a good serviceable maid-of-all-work is valued at four oxen. I think there is a spice of malicious humour in this valuation, and am confirmed in this opinion by noting that though woman in the *Iliad* is on one occasion depicted as a wife so faithful and affectionate that nothing more perfect can be found either in real life or fiction, yet as a general rule she is drawn as teasing, scolding, thwarting, contradicting, and hoodwinking the sex that has the effrontery to deem itself her lord and master. Whether or no this view may have arisen from any domestic difficulties between Homer and his wife is a point which again I find it impossible to determine.

We cannot refrain from contemplating such possibilities. If we are to be at home with Homer there must be no sitting on the edge of one's chair dazzled by the splendour of his reputation. He was after all only a literary man, and those who occupy themselves with letters must approach him as a very honoured member of their own fraternity, but still as one who must have felt, thought, and acted much as themselves. He struck oil, while we for the most part succeed in boring only; still we are his literary brethren, and if we would read his lines intelligently we must also read between them. That one so shrewd, and yet a dreamer of such dreams as have been vouchsafed to few indeed besides himself—that one so genially sceptical, and so given to looking into the heart of a matter, should have



been in such perfect harmony with his surroundings as to think himself in the best of all possible worlds—this is not believable. The world is always more or less out of joint to the poet—generally more so ; and unfortunately he always thinks it more or less his business to set it right—generally more so. We are all of us more or less poets—generally, indeed, less so ; still we feel and think, and to think at all is to be out of harmony with much that we think about. We may be sure, then, that Homer had his full share of troubles, and also that traces of these abound up and down his work if we could only identify them, for everything that everyone does is in some measure a portrait of himself ; but here comes the difficulty—not to read between the lines, not to try and detect the hidden features of the writer—this is to be a dull, unsympathetic, incurious reader ; and on the other hand to try and read between them is to be in danger of running after every Will o' the Wisp that conceit may raise for our delusion.

I believe it will help you better to understand the broad humour of the *Iliad*, which we shall presently reach, if you will allow me to say a little more about the general characteristics of the poem. Over and above the love and war that are his main themes, there is another which the author never loses sight of—I mean distrust and dislike of the ideas of his time as regards the gods and omens. No poet ever made gods in his own image more defiantly than the author of the *Iliad*. In the likeness of man created he them, and the only excuse for him is that he obviously desired his readers not to take them seriously. This at least is the impression he leaves upon his reader, and when so great a man as Homer leaves an impression it must

be presumed that he does so intentionally. It may be almost said that he has made the gods take the worse, not the better, side of man's nature upon them, and to be in all respects as we ourselves—yet without virtue. It should be noted, however, that the gods on the Trojan side are treated far more leniently than those who help the Greeks.

The chief gods on the Grecian side are Juno, Minerva, and Neptune. Juno, as you will shortly see, is a scolding wife, who in spite of all Jove's bluster wears the breeches, or tries exceedingly hard to do so. Minerva is an angry termagant—mean, mischief-making, and vindictive. She begins by pulling Achilles' hair, and later on she knocks the helmet from off the head of Mars. She hates Venus, and tells the Grecian hero Diomedes that he had better not wound any of the other gods, but that he is to hit Venus if he can, which he presently does 'because he sees that she is feeble and not like Minerva or Bellona.' Neptune is a bitter hater.

Apollo, Mars, Venus, Diana, and Jove, so far as his wife will let him, are on the Trojan side. These, as I have said, meet with better, though still somewhat contemptuous, treatment at the poet's hand. Jove, however, is being mocked and laughed at from first to last, and if one moral can be drawn from the *Iliad* more clearly than another, it is that he is only to be trusted to a very limited extent. Homer's position, in fact, as regards divine interference is the very opposite of David's. David writes, "Put not your trust in princes nor in any child of man; there is no sure help but from the Lord." With Homer it is, "Put not your trust in Jove neither in any omen from heaven; there is but one good omen—to fight for one's

country. Fortune favours the brave ; heaven helps those who help themselves.”

The god who comes off best is Vulcan, the lame, hobbling, old blacksmith, who is the laughing-stock of all the others, and whose exquisitely graceful skilful workmanship forms such an effective contrast to the uncouth exterior of the workman. Him, as a man of genius and an artist, and furthermore as a somewhat despised artist, Homer treats, if with playfulness, still with respect, in spite of the fact that circumstances have thrown him more on the side of the Greeks than of the Trojans, with whom I understand Homer's sympathies mainly to lie.

The poet either dislikes music or is at best insensible to it. Great poets very commonly are so. Achilles, indeed, does on one occasion sing to his own accompaniment on the lyre, but we are not told that it was any pleasure to hear him, and Patroclus, who was in the tent at the time, was not enjoying it ; he was only waiting for Achilles to leave off. But though not fond of music, Homer has a very keen sense of the beauties of nature, and is constantly referring both in and out of season to all manner of homely incidents that are as familiar to us as to himself. Sparks in the train of a shooting-star ; a cloud of dust upon a high road ; foresters going out to cut wood in a forest ; the shrill cry of the cicale ; children making walls of sand on the sea-shore, or teasing wasps when they have found a wasps' nest ; a poor but very honest woman who gains a pittance for her children by selling wool, and weighs it very carefully ; a child clinging to its mother's dress and crying to be taken up and carried—none of these things escape him. Neither in the *Iliad* nor the *Odyssey* do we ever receive so much as a hint as to the

time of year at which any of the events described are happening ; but on one occasion the author of the *Iliad* really has told us that it was a very fine day, and this not from a business point of view, but out of pure regard to the weather for its own sake.

With one more observation I will conclude my preliminary remarks about the *Iliad*. I cannot find its author within the four corners of the work itself. I believe the writer of the *Odyssey* to appear in the poem as a prominent and very fascinating character whom we shall presently meet, but there is no one in the *Iliad* on whom I can put my finger with even a passing idea that he may be the author. Still, if under some severe penalty I were compelled to find him, I should say it was just possible that he might consider his own lot to have been more or less like that which he forecasts for Astyanax, the infant son of Hector. At any rate his intimate acquaintance with the topography of Troy, which is now well ascertained, and still more his obvious attempt to excuse the non-existence of a great wall which, according to his story, ought to be there and which he knew had never existed, so that no trace could remain, while there were abundant traces of all the other features he describes—these facts convince me that he was in all probability a native of the Troad, or country round Troy. His plausibly concealed Trojan sympathies, and more particularly the aggravated exaggeration with which the flight of Hector is described, suggest to me, coming as they do from an astute and humorous writer, that he may have been a Trojan, at any rate by the mother's side, made captive, enslaved, compelled to sing the glories of his captors, and determined so to overdo them that if his masters cannot see through the irony others

sooner or later shall. This, however, is highly speculative, and there are other views that are perhaps more true, but which I cannot now consider.

I will now ask you to form your own opinions as to whether Homer is or is not a shrewd and humorous writer.

Achilles, whose quarrel with Agamemnon is the ostensible subject of the poem, is son to a marine goddess named Thetis, who had rendered Jove an important service at a time when he was in great difficulties. Achilles, therefore, begs his mother Thetis to go up to Jove and ask him to let the Trojans discomfit the Greeks for a time, so that Agamemnon may find he cannot get on without Achilles' help, and may thus be brought to reason.

Thetis tells her son that for the moment there is nothing to be done, inasmuch as the gods are all of them away from home. They are gone to pay a visit to Oceanus in Central Africa, and will not be back for another ten or twelve days ; she will see what can be done, however, as soon as ever they return. This in due course she does, going up to Olympus and laying hold of Jove by the knee and by the chin. I may say in passing that it is still a common Italian form of salutation to catch people by the chin. Twice during the last summer I have been so seized in token of affectionate greeting, once by a lady and once by a gentleman.

Thetis tells her tale to Jove, and concludes by saying that he is to say straight out ' yes ' or ' no ' whether he will do what she asks. Of course he can please himself, but she should like to know how she stands.

" It will be a plaguy business," answers Jove, " for me to offend Juno and put up with all the bitter tongue

she will give me. As it is, she is always nagging at me and saying I help the Trojans, still, go away now at once before she finds out that you have been here, and leave the rest to me. See, I nod my head to you, and this is the most solemn form of covenant into which I can enter. I never go back upon it, nor shilly-shally with anybody when I have once nodded my head." Which, by the way, amounts to an admission that he does shilly-shally sometimes.

Then he frowns and nods, shaking the hair on his immortal head till Olympus rocks again. Thetis goes off under the sea and Jove returns to his own palace. All the other gods stand up when they see him coming, for they do not dare to remain sitting while he passes, but Juno knows he has been hatching mischief against the Greeks with Thetis, so she attacks him in the following words :

" You traitorous scoundrel," she exclaims, " which of the gods have you been taking into your counsel now ? You are always trying to settle matters behind my back, and never tell me, if you can help it, a single word about your designs."

" ' Juno,' replied the father of gods and men, ' you must not expect to be told everything that I am thinking about : you are my wife, it is true, but you might not be able always to understand my meaning ; in so far as it is proper for you to know of my intentions you are the first person to whom I communicate them either among the gods or among mankind, but there are certain points which I reserve entirely for myself, and the less you try to pry into these, or meddle with them, the better for you.' "

" ' Dread son of Saturn,' answered Juno, ' what in the world are you talking about ? I meddle and pry ?

No one, I am sure, can have his own way in everything more absolutely than you have. Still I have a strong misgiving that the old merman's daughter Thetis has been talking you over. I saw her hugging your knees this very self-same morning, and I suspect you have been promising her to kill any number of people down at the Grecian ships, in order to gratify Achilles.' "

" 'Wife,' replied Jove, 'I can do nothing but you suspect me. You will not do yourself any good, for the more you go on like that the more I dislike you, and it may fare badly with you. If I mean to have it so, I mean to have it so, you had better therefore sit still and hold your tongue as I tell you, for if I once begin to lay my hands about you, there is not a god in heaven who will be of the smallest use to you.'

" When Juno heard this she thought it better to submit, so she sat down without a word, but all the gods throughout Jove's mansion were very much perturbed. Presently the cunning workman Vulcan tried to pacify his mother Juno, and said, 'It will never do for you two to go on quarrelling and setting heaven in an uproar about a pack of mortals. The thing will not bear talking about. If such counsels are to prevail a god will not be able to get his dinner in peace. Let me then advise my mother (and I am sure it is her own opinion) to make her peace with my dear father, lest he should scold her still further, and spoil our banquet ; for if he does wish to turn us all out there can be no question about his being perfectly able to do so. Say something civil to him, therefore, and then perhaps he will not hurt us.'

" As he spoke he took a large cup of nectar and put it into his mother's hands, saying, 'Bear it, my dear mother, and make the best of it. I love you dearly

and should be very sorry to see you get a thrashing. I should not be able to help you, for my father Jove is not a safe person to differ from. You know once before when I was trying to help you he caught me by the foot and chucked me from the heavenly threshold. I was all day long falling from morn to eve, but at sunset I came to ground on the island of Lemnos, and there was very little life left in me, till the Sintians came and tended me.'

"On this Juno smiled, and with a laugh took the cup from her son's hand. Then Vulcan went about among all other gods drawing nectar for them from his goblet, and they laughed immoderately as they saw him bustling about the heavenly mansion."

Then presently the gods go home to bed, each one in his own house that Vulcan had cunningly built for him or her. Finally Jove himself went to the bed which he generally occupied ; and Juno his wife went with him.

There is another quarrel between Jove and Juno at the beginning of the fourth book.

The gods are sitting on the golden floor of Jove's palace and drinking one another's health in the nectar with which Hebe from time to time supplies them. Jove begins to tease Juno, and to provoke her with some sarcastic remarks that are pointed at her though not addressed to her directly.

" 'Menelaus,' he exclaimed, ' has two good friends among the goddesses, Juno and Minerva, but they only sit still and look on, while Venus on the other hand takes much better care of Paris, and defends him when he is in danger. She has only just this moment been rescuing him when he made sure he was at death's door, for the victory really did lie with Menelaus.



We must think what we are to do about all this. Shall we renew strife between the combatants or shall we make them friends again? I think the best plan would be for the City of Priam to remain unpillaged, but for Menelaus to have his wife Helen sent back to him.'

"Minerva and Juno groaned in spirit when they heard this. They were sitting side by side, and thinking what mischief they could do to the Trojans. Minerva for her part said not one word, but sat scowling at her father, for she was in a furious passion with him, but Juno could not contain herself, so she said—

" 'What, pray, son of Saturn, is all this about? Is my trouble then to go for nothing, and all the pains that I have taken, to say nothing of my horses, and the way we have sweated and toiled to get the people together against Priam and his children? You can do as you please, but you must not expect all of us to agree with you.'

"And Jove answered, 'Wife, what harm have Priam and Priam's children done you that you rage so furiously against them, and want to sack their city? Will nothing do for you but you must eat Priam with his sons and all the Trojans into the bargain? Have it your own way then, for I will not quarrel with you—only remember what I tell you: if at any time I want to sack a city that belongs to any friend of yours, it will be no use your trying to hinder me, you will have to let me do it, for I only yield to you now with the greatest reluctance. If there was one city under the sun which I respected more than another it was Troy with its king and people. My altars there have never been without the savour of fat or of burnt sacrifice and all my dues were paid.'

“ ‘ My own favourite cities,’ answered Juno, ‘ are Argos, Sparta, and Mycenæ. Sack them whenever you may be displeased with them. I shall not make the smallest protest against your doing so. It would be no use if I did, for you are much stronger than I am, only I will not submit to seeing my own work wasted. I am a goddess of the same race as yourself. I am Saturn’s eldest daughter and am not only nearly related to you in blood, but I am wife to yourself, and you are king over the gods. Let it be a case, then, of give and take between us, and the other gods will follow our lead. Tell Minerva, therefore, to go down at once and set the Greeks and Trojans by the ears again, and let her so manage it that the Trojans shall break their oaths and be the aggressors.’ ”

This is the very thing to suit Minerva, so she goes at once and persuades the Trojans to break their oath.

In a later book we are told that Jove has positively forbidden the gods to interfere further in the struggle. Juno therefore determines to hoodwink him. First she bolted herself inside her own room on the top of Mount Ida and had a thorough good wash. Then she scented herself, brushed her golden hair, put on her very best dress and all her jewels. When she had done this, she went to Venus and besought her for the loan of her charms.

“ ‘ You must not be angry with me, Venus,’ she began, ‘ for being on the Grecian side while you are yourself on the Trojan ; but you know every one falls in love with you at once, and I want you to lend me some of your attractions. I have to pay a visit at the world’s end to Oceanus and Mother Tethys. They took me in and were very good to me when Jove turned Saturn out of heaven and shut him up under the sea.

They have been quarrelling this long time past and will not speak to one another. So I must go and see them, for if I can only make them friends again I am sure that they will be grateful to me for ever afterwards.' "

Venus thought this reasonable, so she took off her girdle and lent it to Juno, an act by the way which argues more good nature than prudence on her part. Then Juno goes down to Thrace, and in search of Sleep the brother of Death. She finds him and shakes hands with him. Then she tells him she is going up to Olympus to make love to Jove, and that while she is occupying his attention Sleep is to send him off into a deep slumber.

Sleep says he dares not do it. He would lull any of the other gods, but Juno must remember that she had got him into a great scrape once before in this way, and Jove hurled the gods about all over the palace, and would have made an end of him once for all, if he had not fled under the protection of Night, whom Jove did not venture to offend.

Juno bribes him, however, with a promise that if he will consent she will marry him to the youngest of the Graces, Pasithea. On this he yields; the pair then go up to the top of Mount Ida, and Sleep gets into a high pine tree just in front of Jove.

As soon as Jove sees Juno, armed as she for the moment was with all the attractions of Venus, he falls desperately in love with her, and says she is the only goddess he ever really loved. True, there had been the wife of Ixion and Danae, and Europa and Semele, and Alcmena, and Latona, not to mention herself in days gone by, but he never loved any of these as he now loved her, in spite of his having been married

to her for so many years. What then does she want ?

Juno tells him the same rigmarole about Oceanus and Mother Tethys that she had told Venus, and when she has done Jove tries to embrace her.

“ What,” exclaims Juno, “ kiss me in such a public place as the top of Mount Ida ! Impossible ! I could never show my face in Olympus again, but I have a private room of my own and ”—“ What nonsense, my love ! ” exclaims the sire of gods and men as he catches her in his arms. On this Sleep sends him into a deep slumber, and Juno then sends Sleep to bid Neptune go off to help the Greeks at once.

When Jove awakes and finds the trick that has been played upon him, he is very angry and blusters a good deal as usual, but somehow or another it turns out that he has got to stand it and make the best of it.

In an earlier book he has said that he is not surprised at anything Juno may do, for she always has crossed him and always will ; but he cannot put up with such disobedience from his own daughter Minerva. Somehow or another, however, here too as usual it turns out that he has got to stand it. “ And then,” Minerva exclaims in yet another place (VIII. 373), “ I suppose he will be calling me his grey-eyed darling again, presently.”

Towards the end of the poem the gods have a set-to among themselves. Minerva sends Mars sprawling, Venus comes to his assistance, but Minerva knocks her down and leaves her. Neptune challenges Apollo, but Apollo says it is not proper for a god to fight his own uncle, and declines the contest. His sister Diana taunts him with cowardice, so Juno grips her by the wrist and boxes her ears till she writhes again. Latona,

the mother of Apollo and Diana, then challenges Mercury, but Mercury says that he is not going to fight with any of Jove's wives, so if she chooses to say she has beaten him she is welcome to do so. Then Latona picks up poor Diana's bow and arrows that have fallen from her during her encounter with Juno, and Diana meanwhile flies up to the knees of her father Jove, sobbing and sighing till her ambrosial robe trembles all around her.

“ Jove drew her towards him, and smiling pleasantly exclaimed, ‘ My dear child, which of the heavenly beings has been wicked enough to behave in this way to you, as though you had been doing something naughty ? ’

“ ‘ Your wife, Juno,’ answered Diana, ‘ has been ill-treating me ; all our quarrels always begin with her.’ ”

The above extracts must suffice as examples of the kind of divine comedy in which Homer brings the gods and goddesses upon the scene. Among mortals the humour, what there is of it, is confined mainly to the grim taunts which the heroes fling at one another when they are fighting, and more especially to crowing over a fallen foe. The most subtle passage is the one in which Briseis, the captive woman about whom Achilles and Agamemnon have quarrelled, is restored by Agamemnon to Achilles. Briseis on her return to the tent of Achilles finds that while she has been with Agamemnon, Patroclus has been killed by Hector, and his dead body is now lying in state. She flings herself upon the corpse and exclaims—

“ How one misfortune does keep falling upon me after another ! I saw the man to whom my father and mother had married me killed before my eyes, and my

three own dear brothers perished along with him ; but you, Patroclus, even when Achilles was sacking our city and killing my husband, told me that I was not to cry ; for you said that Achilles himself should marry me, and take me back with him to Phthia, where we should have a wedding feast among the Myrmidons. You were always kind to me, and I should never cease to grieve for you.”

This may of course be seriously intended, but Homer was an acute writer, and if we had met with such a passage in Thackeray we should have taken him to mean that so long as a woman can get a new husband, she does not much care about losing the old one—a sentiment which I hope no one will imagine that I for one moment endorse or approve of, and which I can only explain as a piece of sarcasm aimed possibly at Mrs. Homer.

And now let us turn to the *Odyssey*, a work which I myself think of as the *Iliad's* better half or wife. Here we have a poem of more varied interest, instinct with not less genius, and on the whole I should say, if less robust, nevertheless of still greater fascination—one, moreover, the irony of which is pointed neither at gods nor woman, but with one single and perhaps intercalated exception, at man. Gods and women may sometimes do wrong things, but, except as regards the intrigue between Mars and Venus just referred to, they are never laughed at. The scepticism of the *Iliad* is that of Hume or Gibbon ; that of the *Odyssey* (if any) is like the occasional mild irreverence of the Vicar's daughter. When Jove says he will do a thing, there is no uncertainty about his doing it. Juno hardly appears at all, and when she does she never quarrels

with her husband. Minerva has more to do than any of the other gods or goddesses, but she has nothing in common with the Minerva whom we have already seen in the *Iliad*. In the *Odyssey* she is the fairy god-mother who seems to have no object in life but to protect Ulysses and Telemachus, and keep them straight at any touch and turn of difficulty. If she has any other function, it is to be patroness of the arts and of all intellectual development. The Minerva of the *Odyssey* may indeed sit on a rafter like a swallow and hold up her ægis to strike panic into the suitors while Ulysses kills them ; but she is a perfect lady, and would no more knock Mars and Venus down one after the other than she would stand on her head. She is, in fact, a distinct person in all respects from the Minerva of the *Iliad*. Of the remaining gods Neptune, as the persecutor of the hero, comes worst off ; but even he is treated as though he were a very important person.

In the *Odyssey* the gods no longer live in houses and sleep in four-post bedsteads, but the conception of their abode, like that of their existence altogether, is far more spiritual. Nobody knows exactly where they live, but they say it is in Olympus, where there is neither rain nor hail nor snow, and the wind never beats roughly ; but it abides in everlasting sunshine, and in great peacefulness of light wherein the blessed gods are illumined for ever and ever. It is hardly possible to conceive anything more different from the Olympus of the *Iliad*.

Another very material point of difference between the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* lies in the fact that the Homer of the *Iliad* always knows what he is talking about, while the supposed Homer of the *Odyssey* often makes mistakes that betray an almost incredible ignorance of

detail. Thus the giant Polyphemus drives in his ewes home from their pasture, and milks them. The lambs of course have not been running with them ; they have been left in the yards, so they have had nothing to eat. When he has milked the ewes, the giant lets each one of them have her lamb—to get, I suppose, what strippings it can, and beyond this what milk the ewe may yield during the night. In the morning, however, Polyphemus milks the ewes again. Hence it is plain either that he expected his lambs to thrive on one pull *per diem* at a milked ewe, and to be kind enough not to suck their mothers, though left with them all night through, or else that the writer of the *Odyssey* had very hazy notions about the relations between lambs and ewes, and of the ordinary methods of procedure on an upland dairy-farm.

In nautical matters the same inexperience is betrayed. The writer knows all about the corn and wine that must be put on board ; the store-room in which these are kept and the getting of them are described inimitably, but there the knowledge ends ; the other things put on board are “ the things that are generally taken on board ships.” So on a voyage we are told that the sailors do whatever is wanted doing, but we have no details. There is a shipwreck, which does duty more than once without the alteration of a word. I have seen such a shipwreck at Drury Lane. Anyone, moreover, who reads any authentic account of actual adventures will perceive at once that those of the *Odyssey* are the creation of one who has had no history. Ulysses has to make a raft ; he makes it about as broad as they generally make a good big ship, but we do not seem to have been at the pains to measure a good big ship.



I will add no more however on this head. The leading characteristics of the *Iliad*, as we saw, were love, war, and plunder. The leading idea of the *Odyssey* is the infatuation of man, and the key-note is struck in the opening paragraph, where we are told how the sailors of Ulysses must needs, in spite of every warning, kill and eat the cattle of the sun-god, and perished accordingly.

A few lines lower down the same note is struck with even greater emphasis. The gods have met in council, and Jove happens at the moment to be thinking of Ægisthus, who had met his death at the hand of Agamemnon's son Orestes, in spite of the solemn warning that Jove had sent him through the mouth of Mercury. It does not seem necessary for Jove to turn his attention to Clytemnestra, the partner of Ægisthus's guilt. Of this lady we are presently told that she was naturally of an excellent disposition, and would never have gone wrong but for the loss of the protector in whose charge Agamemnon had left her. When she was left alone without an adviser—well, if a base designing man took to flattering and misleading her—what else could be expected? The infatuation of man, with its corollary, the superior excellence of woman, is the leading theme; next to this come art, religion, and, I am almost ashamed to add, money. There is no love-business in the *Odyssey* except the return of a bald elderly married man to his elderly wife and grown-up son after an absence of twenty years, and furious at having been robbed of so much money in the meantime. But this can hardly be called love-business; it is at the utmost domesticity. There is a charming young princess, Nausicaa, but though she affects a passing tenderness for the elderly hero of her creation

as soon as Minerva has curled his bald old hair for him and tittivated him up all over, she makes it abundantly plain that she will not look at a single one of her actual flesh and blood admirers. There is a leading young gentleman, Telemachus, who is nothing if he is not *πεπυμένος*, or canny, well-principled, and discreet; he has an amiable and most sensible young male friend who says that he does not like crying at meal times—he will cry in the forenoon on an empty stomach as much as anyone pleases, but he cannot attend properly to his dinner and cry at the same time. Well, there is no lady provided either for this nice young man or for Telemachus. They are left high and dry as bachelors. Two goddesses indeed, Circe and Calypso, do one after the other take possession of Ulysses, but the way in which he accepts a situation which after all was none of his seeking, and which it is plain he does not care two straws about, is, I believe, dictated solely by a desire to exhibit the easy infidelity of Ulysses himself in contrast with the unswerving constancy and fidelity of his wife Penelope. Throughout the *Odyssey* the men do not really care for women, nor the women for men; they have to pretend to do so now and again, but it is a got-up thing, and the general attitude of the sexes towards one another is very much that of Helen, who says that her husband Menelaus is really not deficient in person or understanding: or again of Penelope herself, who, on being asked by Ulysses on his return what she thought of him, said that she did not think very much of him nor very little of him; in fact, she did not think much about him one way or the other. True, later on she relents and becomes more effusive; in fact, when she and Ulysses sat up talking in bed and Ulysses told her the story of his

adventures, she never went to sleep once. Ulysses never had to nudge her with his elbow and say, "Come, wake up, Penelope, you are not listening"; but, in spite of the devotion exhibited here, the love-business in the *Odyssey* is artificial and described by one who had never felt it, whereas in the *Iliad* it is spontaneous and obviously genuine, as by one who knows all about it perfectly well. The love-business in fact of the *Odyssey* is turned on as we turn on the gas—when we cannot get on without it, but not otherwise.

A fascinating brilliant girl, who naturally adopts for her patroness the blue-stocking Minerva; a man-hatress, as clever girls so often are, and determined to pay the author of the *Iliad* out for his treatment of her sex by insisting on its superior moral, not to say intellectual, capacity, and on the self-sufficient imbecility of man unless he has a woman always at his elbow to keep him tolerably straight and in his proper place—this, and not the musty fusty old bust we see in libraries, is the kind of person who I believe wrote the *Odyssey*. Of course in reality the work must be written by a man, because they say so at Oxford and Cambridge, and they know everything down in Oxford and Cambridge; but I venture to say that if the *Odyssey* were to appear anonymously for the first time now, and to be sent round to the papers for review, there is not even a professional critic who would not see that it is a woman's writing and not a man's. But letting this pass, I can hardly doubt, for reasons which I gave in yesterday's *Athenæum*, and for others that I cannot now insist upon, that the poem was written by a native of Trapani on the coast of Sicily, near Marsala. Fancy what the position of a young, ardent, brilliant woman must have been in a small Sicilian sea-port, say some

eight or nine hundred years before the birth of Christ. It makes one shudder to think of it. Night after night she hears the dreary blind old bard Demodocus draw out his interminable recitals taken from our present *Iliad*, or from some other of the many poems now lost that dealt with the adventures of the Greeks before Troy or on their homeward journey. Man and his doings ! always the same old story, and woman always to be treated either as a toy or as a beast of burden, or at any rate as an incubus. Why not sing of woman also as she is when she is unattached and free from the trammels and persecutions of this tiresome tyrant, this insufferably self-conceited bore and booby, man ?

“ I wish, my dear,” exclaims her mother Arcte, after one of these little outbreaks, “ that you would do it yourself. I am sure you could do it beautifully if you would only give your mind to it.”

“ Very well, mother,” she replies, “ and I will bring in all about you and father, and how I go out for a washing-day with the maids,”—and she kept her word, as I will presently show you.

I should tell you that Ulysses, having got away from the goddess Calypso, with whom he had been living for some seven or eight years on a lonely and very distant island in mid-ocean, is shipwrecked on the coast of Phæacia, the chief town of which is Scheria. After swimming some forty-eight hours in the water he effects a landing at the mouth of a stream, and, not having a rag of clothes on his back, covers himself up under a heap of dried leaves and goes to sleep. I will now translate from the *Odyssey* itself.

“ So here Ulysses slept, worn out with labour and sorrow ; but Minerva went off to the chief town of the Phæacians, a people who used to live in Hypereia

near the wicked Cyclopes. Now the Cyclopes were stronger than they and plundered them, so Nausithous settled them in Scheria far from those who would loot them. He ran a wall round about the city, built houses and temples, and allotted the lands among his people ; but he was gathered to his fathers, and the good king Alcinous was now reigning. To his palace then Minerva hastened that she might help Ulysses to get home.

“ She went straight to the painted bedroom of Nausicaa, who was daughter to King Alcinous, and lovely as a goddess. Near her there slept two maids-in-waiting, both very pretty, one on either side of the doorway, which was closed with a beautifully made door. She took the form of the famous Captain Dumas’s daughter, who was a bosom friend of Nausicaa and just her own age ; then coming into the room like a breath of wind she stood near the head of the bed and said—

“ ‘ Nausicaa, what could your mother have been about to have such a lazy daughter ? Here are your clothes all lying in disorder, yet you are going to be married almost directly, and should not only be well-dressed yourself, but should see that those about you look clean and tidy also. This is the way to make people speak well of you, and it will please your father and mother, so suppose we make to-morrow a washing day, and begin the first thing in the morning. I will come and help you, for all the best young men among your own people are courting you, and you are not going to remain a maid much longer. Ask your father, then, to have a horse and cart ready for us at daybreak to take the linen and baskets, and you can ride too, which will be much pleasanter for you than walking, for the washing ground is a long way out of the town.’

“ When she had thus spoken Minerva went back to Olympus. By and by morning came, and as soon as Nausicaa woke she began thinking about her dream. She went to the other end of the house to tell her father and mother all about it, and found them in their own room. Her mother was sitting by the fireside spinning with her maids-in-waiting all around her, and she happened to catch her father just as he was going out to attend a meeting of the Town Council which the Phæacian aldermen had convened. So she stopped him and said, ‘ Papa, dear, could you manage to let me have a good big waggon ? I want to take all our dirty clothes to the river and wash them. You are the chief man here, so you ought to have a clean shirt on when you attend meetings of the Council. Moreover, you have five sons at home, two of them married and the other three are good-looking young bachelors ; you know they always like to have clean linen when they go out to a dance, and I have been thinking about all this.’ ”

You will observe that though Nausicaa dreams that she is going to be married shortly, and that all the best young men of Scheria are in love with her, she does not dream that she has fallen in love with any one of them in particular, and that thus every preparation is made for her getting married except the selection of the bridegroom.

You will also note that Nausicaa has to keep her father up to putting a clean shirt on when he ought to have one, whereas her young brothers appear to keep herself up to having a clean shirt ready for them when they want one. These little touches are so lifelike and so feminine that they suggest drawing from life by a female member of Alcinous’s own family who knew his character from behind the scenes.

I would also say before proceeding further that in some parts of France and Germany it is still the custom to have but one or at most two great washing days in the year. Each household is provided with an enormous quantity of linen, which when dirty is just soaked and rinsed, and then put aside till the great washing day of the year. This is why Nausicaa wants a waggon, and has to go so far afield. If it was only a few collars and a pocket-handkerchief or two she could no doubt have found water enough near at hand. The big spring or autumn wash, however, is evidently intended.

Returning now to the *Odyssey*, when he had heard what Nausicaa wanted Alcinous said :

“ ‘ You shall have the mules, my love, and whatever else you have a mind for, so be off with you.’ ”

“ Then he told the servants, and they got the waggon out and harnessed the mules, while the princess brought the clothes down from the linen room and placed them on the waggon. Her mother got ready a nice basket of provisions with all sorts of good things, and a goat-skin full of wine. The princess now got into the waggon, and her mother gave her a golden cruse of oil that she and her maids might anoint themselves.

“ Then Nausicaa took the whip and reins and gave the mules a touch which sent them off at a good pace. They pulled without flagging, and carried not only Nausicaa and her wash of clothes, but the women also who were with her.

“ When they got to the river they went to the washing pools, through which even in summer there ran enough pure water to wash any quantity of linen, no matter how dirty. Here they unharnessed the mules and turned them out to feed in the sweet juicy

grass that grew by the river-side. They got the clothes out of the waggon, brought them to the water, and vied with one another in treading upon them and banging them about to get the dirt out of them. When they had got them quite clean, they laid them out by the seaside where the waves had raised a high beach of shingle, and set about washing and anointing themselves with olive oil. Then they got their dinner by the side of the river, and waited for the sun to finish drying the clothes. By and by, after dinner, they took off their head-dresses and began to play at ball, and Nausicaa sang to them."

I think you will agree with me that there is no haziness—no milking of ewes that have had a lamb with them all night—here. The writer is at home and on her own ground.

"When they had done folding the clothes and were putting the mules to the waggon before starting home again, Minerva thought it was time Ulysses should wake up and see the handsome girl who was to take him to the city of the Phæacians. So the princess threw a ball at one of the maids, which missed the maid and fell into the water. On this they all shouted, and the noise they made woke up Ulysses, who sat up in his bed of leaves and wondered where in the world he could have got to.

"Then he crept from under the bush beneath which he had slept, broke off a thick bough so as to cover his nakedness, and advanced towards Nausicaa and her maids; these last all ran away, but Nausicaa stood her ground, for Minerva had put courage into her heart, so she kept quite still, and Ulysses could not make up his mind whether it would be better to go up to her, throw himself at her feet, and embrace her knees as a



suppliant—[in which case, of course, he would have to drop the bough] or whether it would be better for him to make an apology to her at a reasonable distance, and ask her to be good enough to give him some clothes and show him the way to the town. On the whole he thought it would be better to keep at arm's length, in case the princess should take offence at his coming too near her."

Let me say in passing that this is one of many passages which have led me to conclude that the *Odyssey* is written by a woman. A girl, such as Nausicaa describes herself, young, unmarried, unattached, and hence, after all, knowing little of what men feel on these matters, having by a cruel freak of inspiration got her hero into such an awkward predicament, might conceivably imagine that he would argue as she represents him, but no man, except such a woman's tailor as could never have written such a masterpiece as the *Odyssey*, would ever get his hero into such an undignified scrape at all, much less represent him as arguing as Ulysses does. I suppose Minerva was so busy making Nausicaa brave that she had no time to put a little sense into Ulysses' head, and remind him that he was nothing if not full of sagacity and resource. To return—

Ulysses now begins with the most judicious apology that his unaided imagination can suggest. "I beg your ladyship's pardon," he exclaims, "but are you goddess or are you a mortal woman? If you are a goddess and live in heaven, there can be no doubt but you are Jove's daughter Diana, for your face and figure are exactly like hers," and so on in a long speech which I need not further quote from.

"Stranger," replied Nausicaa, as soon as the speech

was ended, "you seem to be a very sensible well-disposed person. There is no accounting for luck; Jove gives good or ill to every man, just as he chooses, so you must take your lot, and make the best of it." She then tells him she will give him clothes and everything else that a foreigner in distress can reasonably expect. She calls back her maids, scolds them for running away, and tells them to take Ulysses and wash him in the river after giving him something to eat and drink. So the maids give him the little gold cruse of oil and tell him to go and wash himself, and as they seem to have completely recovered from their alarm, Ulysses is compelled to say, "Young ladies, please stand a little on one side, that I may wash the brine from off my shoulders and anoint myself with oil; for it is long enough since my skin has had a drop of oil upon it. I cannot wash as long as you keep standing there. I have no clothes on, and it makes me very uncomfortable."

So they stood aside and went and told Nausicaa. Meanwhile (I am translating closely), "Minerva made him look taller and stronger than before; she gave him some more hair on the top of his head, and made it flow down in curls most beautifully; in fact she glorified him about the head and shoulders as a cunning workman who has studied under Vulcan or Minerva enriches a fine piece of plate by gilding it."

Again I argue that I am reading a description of as it were a prehistoric Mr. Knightley by a not less prehistoric Jane Austen—with this difference that I believe Nausicaa is quietly laughing at her hero and sees through him, whereas Jane Austen takes Mr. Knightley seriously.

"Hush, my pretty maids," exclaimed Nausicaa as

soon as she saw Ulysses coming back with his hair curled, "hush, for I want to say something. I believe the gods in heaven have sent this man here. There is something very remarkable about him. When I first saw him I thought him quite plain and commonplace, and now I consider him one of the handsomest men I ever saw in my life. I should like my future husband [who, it is plain, then, is not yet decided upon] to be just such another as he is, if he would only stay here, and not want to go away. However, give him something to eat and drink."

Nausicaa now says they must be starting homeward; so she tells Ulysses that she will drive on first herself, but that he is to follow after her with the maids. She does not want to be seen coming into the town with him; and then follows another passage which clearly shows that for all the talk she has made about getting married she has no present intention of changing her name.

" 'I am afraid,' she says, 'of the gossip and scandal which may be set on foot about me behind my back, for there are some very ill-natured people in the town, and some low fellow, if he met us, might say, 'Who is this fine-looking stranger who is going about with Nausicaa? Where did she pick him up? I suppose she is going to marry him, or perhaps he is some shipwrecked sailor from foreign parts; or has some god come down from heaven in answer to her prayers, and she is going to live with him? It would be a good thing if she would take herself off and find a husband somewhere else, for she will not look at one of the many excellent young Phæacians who are in love with her'; and I could not complain, for I should myself think ill of any girl whom I saw going about with men

unknown to her father and mother, and without having been married to him in the face of all the world.' "

This passage could never have been written by the local bard, who was in great measure dependent on Nausicaa's family ; he would never speak thus of his patron's daughter ; either the passage is Nausicaa's apology for herself, written by herself, or it is pure invention, and this last, considering the close adherence to the actual topography of Trapani on the Sicilian Coast, and a great deal else that I cannot lay before you here, appears to me improbable.

Nausicaa then gives Ulysses directions by which he can find her father's house. " When you have got past the courtyard," she says, " go straight through the main hall, till you come to my mother's room. You will find her sitting by the fire and spinning her purple wool by firelight. She will make a lovely picture as she leans back against a column with her maids ranged behind her. Facing her stands my father's seat in which he sits and topes like an immortal god. Never mind him, but go up to my mother and lay your hands upon her knees, if you would be forwarded on your homeward voyage." From which I conclude that Arete ruled Alcinous, and Nausicaa ruled Arete.

Ulysses follows his instructions aided by Minerva, who makes him invisible as he passes through the town and through the crowds of Phæacian guests who are feasting in the king's palace. When he has reached the queen, the cloak of thick darkness falls off, and he is revealed to all present, kneeling at the feet of Queen Arete, to whom he makes his appeal. It has already been made apparent in a passage extolling her virtue at some length, but which I have not been able to quote, that Queen Arete is, in the eyes of the writer,

a much more important person than her husband Alcinous.

Every one, of course, is very much surprised at seeing Ulysses, but after a little discussion, from which it appears that the writer considers Alcinous to be a person who requires a good deal of keeping straight in other matters besides clean linen, it is settled that Ulysses shall be fêted on the following day and then escorted home. Ulysses now has supper and remains with Alcinous and Arete after the other guests are gone away for the night. So the three sit by the fire while the servants take away the things, and Arete is the first to speak. She has been uneasy for some time about Ulysses' clothes, which she recognized as her own make, and at last she says, "Stranger, there is a question or two that I should like to put to you myself. Who in the world are you? And who gave you those clothes? Did you not say you had come here from beyond the seas?"

Ulysses explains matters, but still withholds his name, nevertheless Alcinous (who seems to have shared in the general opinion that it was high time his daughter got married, and that, provided she married somebody, it did not much matter who the bridegroom might be) exclaimed, "By Father Jove, Minerva, and Apollo, now that I see what kind of a person you are and how exactly our opinions coincide upon every subject, I should so like it if you would stay with us always, marry Nausicaa, and become my son-in-law."

Ulysses turns the conversation immediately, and meanwhile Queen Arete told her maids to put a bed in the corridor, and make it with red blankets, and it was to have at least one counterpane. They were also to put a woollen nightgown for Ulysses. "The maids

took a torch, and made the bed as fast as they could : when they had done so they came up to Ulysses and said, ‘ This way, sir, if you please, your room is quite ready ’ ; and Ulysses was very glad to hear them say so.”

On the following day Alcinous holds a meeting of the Phæacians and proposes that Ulysses should have a ship got ready to take him home at once : this being settled he invites all the leading people, and the fifty-two sailors who are to man Ulysses’ ship, to come up to his own house, and he will give them a banquet—for which he kills a dozen sheep, eight pigs, and two oxen. Immediately after gorging themselves at the banquet they have a series of athletic competitions, and from this I gather the poem to have been written by one who saw nothing very odd in letting people compete in sports requiring very violent exercise immediately after a heavy meal. Such a course may have been usual in those days, but certainly is not generally adopted in our own.

At the games Alcinous makes himself as ridiculous as he always does, and Ulysses behaves much as the hero of the preceding afternoon might be expected to do—but on his praising the Phæacians towards the close of the proceedings Alcinous says he is a person of such singular judgment that they really must all of them make him a very handsome present. “ Twelve of you,” he exclaims, “ are magistrates, and there is myself—that makes thirteen ; suppose we give him each one of us a clean cloak, a tunic, and a talent of gold,”—which in those days was worth about two hundred and fifty pounds.

This is unanimously agreed to, and in the evening, towards sundown, the presents began to make their

appearance at the palace of King Alcinous, and the king's sons, perhaps prudently as you will presently see, place them in the keeping of their mother Arete.

When the presents have all arrived, Alcinous says to Arete, "Wife, go and fetch the best chest we have, and put a clean cloak and a tunic in it. In the meantime Ulysses will take a bath."

Arete orders the maids to heat a bath, brings the chest, packs up the raiment and gold which the Phæacians have brought, and adds a cloak and a good tunic as King Alcinous's own contribution.

Yes, but where—and that is what we are never told—is the £250 which he ought to have contributed as well as the cloak and tunic? And where is the beautiful gold goblet which he had also promised?

"See to the fastening yourself," says Queen Arete to Ulysses, "for fear anyone should rob you while you are asleep in the ship."

Ulysses, we may be sure, was well aware that Alcinous's £250 was not in the box, nor yet the goblet, but he took the hint at once and made the chest fast without the delay of a moment, with a bond which the cunning goddess Circe had taught him.

He does not seem to have thought his chance of getting the £250 and the goblet, and having to unpack his box again, was so great as his chance of having his box tampered with before he got it away, if he neglected to double-lock it at once and put the key in his pocket. He has always a keen eye to money; indeed the whole *Odyssey* turns on what is substantially a money quarrel, so this time without the prompting of Minerva he does one of the very few sensible things which he does, on his own account, throughout the whole poem.

Supper is now served, and when it is over, Ulysses, pressed by Alcinous, announces his name and begins the story of his adventures.

It is with profound regret that I find myself unable to quote any of the fascinating episodes with which his narrative abounds, but I have said I was going to lecture on the humour of Homer—that is to say of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*—and must not be diverted from my subject. I cannot, however, resist the account which Ulysses gives of his meeting with his mother in Hades, the place of departed spirits, which he has visited by the advice of Circe. His mother comes up to him and asks him how he managed to get into Hades, being still alive. I will translate freely, but quite closely, from Ulysses' own words, as spoken to the Phæacians.

“ And I said, ‘ Mother, I had to come here to consult the ghost of the old Theban prophet Teiresias, I have never yet been near Greece, nor set foot on my native land, and have had nothing but one long run of ill luck from the day I set out with Agamemnon to fight at Troy. But tell me how you came here yourself? Did you have a long and painful illness or did heaven vouchsafe you a gentle easy passage to eternity? Tell me also about my father and my son? Is my property still in their hands, or has someone else got hold of it who thinks that I shall not return to claim it? How, again, is my wife conducting herself? Does she live with her son and make a home for him, or has she married again?’

“ My mother answered, ‘ Your wife is still mistress of your house, but she is in very great straits and spends the greater part of her time in tears. No one has actually taken possession of your property, and



Telemachus still holds it. He has to accept a great many invitations, and gives much the sort of entertainments in return that may be expected from one in his position. Your father remains in the old place, and never goes near the town ; he is very badly off, and has neither bed nor bedding, nor a stick of furniture of any kind. In winter he sleeps on the floor in front of the fire with the men, and his clothes are in a shocking state, but in summer, when the warm weather comes on again, he sleeps out in the vineyard on a bed of vine leaves. He takes on very much about your not having returned, and suffers more and more as he grows older : as for me I died of nothing whatever in the world but grief about yourself. There was not a thing the matter with me, but my prolonged anxiety on your account was too much for me, and in the end it just wore me out.' "

In the course of time Ulysses comes to a pause in his narrative and Queen Arete makes a little speech.

" ' What do you think,' she said to the Phæacians, ' of such a guest as this ? Did you ever see anyone at once so good-looking and so clever ? It is true, indeed, that his visit is paid more particularly to myself, but you all participate in the honour conferred upon us by a visitor of such distinction. Do not be in a hurry to send him off, nor stingy in the presents you make to one in so great need ; for you are all of you very well off.' "

You will note that the queen does not say " *we* are all of *us* very well off."

" Then the hero Echeneus, who was the oldest man among them, added a few words of his own. ' My friends,' he said, ' there cannot be two opinions about

the graciousness and sagacity of the remarks that have just fallen from Her Majesty ; nevertheless it is with His Majesty King Alcinous that the decision must ultimately rest.'

“ ‘The thing shall be done,’ exclaimed Alcinous, ‘if I am still king over the Phæacians. As for our guest, I know he is anxious to resume his journey, still we must persuade him if we can to stay with us until to-morrow, by which time I shall be able to get together the balance of the sum which I mean to press on his acceptance.’ ”

So here we have it straight out that the monarch knew he had only contributed the coat and waistcoat, and did not know exactly how he was to lay his hands on the £250. What with piracy—for we have been told of at least one case in which Alcinous had looted a town and stolen his housemaid Eurymedusa—what with insufficient changes of linen, toping like an immortal god, swaggering at large, and open-handed hospitality, it is plain and by no means surprising that Alcinous is out at elbows ; nor can there be a better example of the difference between the occasional broad comedy of the *Iliad* and the delicate but very bitter satire of the *Odyssey* than the way in which the fact that Alcinous is in money difficulties is allowed to steal upon us, as contrasted with the obvious humour of the quarrels between Jove and Juno. At any rate we can hardly wonder at Ulysses having felt that to a monarch of such mixed character the unfastened box might prove a temptation greater than he could resist. To return, however, to the story—

“If it please your Majesty,” said he, in answer to King Alcinous, “I should be delighted to stay here for another twelve months, and to accept from your

hands the vast treasures and the escort which you are so generous as to promise me. I should obviously gain by doing so, for I should return fuller-handed to my own people and should thus be both more respected and more loved by my acquaintance. Still to receive such presents——”

The king perceived his embarrassment, and at once relieved him. “No one,” he exclaimed, “who looks at you can for one moment take you for a charlatan or a swindler. I know there are many of these unscrupulous persons going about just now with such plausible stories that it is very hard to disbelieve them ; there is, however, a finish about your style which convinces me of your good disposition,” and so on for more than I have space to quote ; after which Ulysses again proceeds with his adventures.

When he had finished them Alcinous insists that the leading Phæacians should each one of them give Ulysses a still further present of a large kitchen copper and a three-legged stand to set it on, “but,” he continues, “as the expense of all these presents is really too heavy for the purse of any private individual, I shall charge the whole of them on the rates ” : literally, “We will repay ourselves by getting it in from among the people, for this is too heavy a present for the purse of a private individual.” And what this can mean except charging it on the rates I do not know.

Of course everyone else sends up his tripod and his cauldron, but we hear nothing about any, either tripod or cauldron, from King Alcinous. He is very fussy next morning stowing them under the ship’s benches, but his time and trouble seem to be the extent of his contribution. It is hardly necessary to say that Ulysses had to go away without the £250, and that we

never hear of the promised goblet being presented. Still he had done pretty well.

I have not quoted anything like all the absurd remarks made by Alcinous, nor shown you nearly as completely as I could do if I had more time how obviously the writer is quietly laughing at him in her sleeve. She understands his little ways as she understands those of Menelaus, who tells Telemachus and Pisistratus that if they like he will take them a personally conducted tour round the Peloponnese, and that they can make a good thing out of it, for everyone will give them something—fancy Helen or Queen Arete making such a proposal as this. They are never laughed at, but then they are women, whereas Alcinous and Menelaus are men, and this makes all the difference.

And now in conclusion let me point out the irony of literature in connection with this astonishing work. Here is a poem in which the hero and heroine have already been married many years before it begins : it is marked by a total absence of love-business in such sense as we understand it : its interest centres mainly in the fact of a bald elderly gentleman, whose little remaining hair is red, being eaten out of house and home during his absence by a number of young men who are courting the supposed widow—a widow who, if she be fair and fat, can hardly also be less than forty. Can any subject seem more hopeless? Moreover, this subject so initially faulty is treated with a carelessness in respect of consistency, ignorance of commonly known details, and disregard of ordinary canons, that can hardly be surpassed, and yet I cannot think that in the whole range of literature there is a work which can be decisively placed above it. I am afraid you will hardly accept this ; I do not see how you can

be expected to do so, for in the first place there is no even tolerable prose translation, and in the second, the *Odyssey*, like the *Iliad*, has been a school book for over two thousand five hundred years, and what more cruel revenge than this can dullness take on genius? The *Iliad* and *Odyssey* have been used as text-books for education during at least two thousand five hundred years, and yet it is only during the last forty or fifty that people have begun to see that they are by different authors. There was, indeed, so I learn from Colonel Mure's valuable work, a band of scholars some few hundreds of years before the birth of Christ, who refused to see the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* as by the same author, but they were snubbed and snuffed out, and for more than two thousand years were considered to have been finally refuted. Can there be any more scathing satire upon the value of literary criticism? It would seem as though Minerva had shed the same thick darkness over both the poems as she shed over Ulysses, so that they might go in and out among the dons of Oxford and Cambridge from generation to generation, and none should see them. If I am right, as I believe I am, in holding the *Odyssey* to have been written by a young woman, was ever sleeping beauty more effectually concealed behind a more impenetrable hedge of dulness?—and she will have to sleep a good many years yet before anyone wakes her effectually. But what else can one expect from people, not one of whom has been at the very slight exertion of noting a few of the writer's main topographical indications, and then looking for them in an Admiralty chart or two? Can any step be more obvious and easy—indeed, it is so simple that I am ashamed of myself for not having taken it forty years ago. Students of the *Odyssey* for the most part

are so engrossed with the force of the zeugma, and of the enclitic particle γε; they take so much more interest in the digamma and in the Æolic dialect, than they do in the living spirit that sits behind all these things and alone gives them their importance, that, naturally enough, not caring about the personality, it remains and always must remain invisible to them.

If I have helped to make it any less invisible to yourselves, let me ask you to pardon the somewhat querulous tone of my concluding remarks.

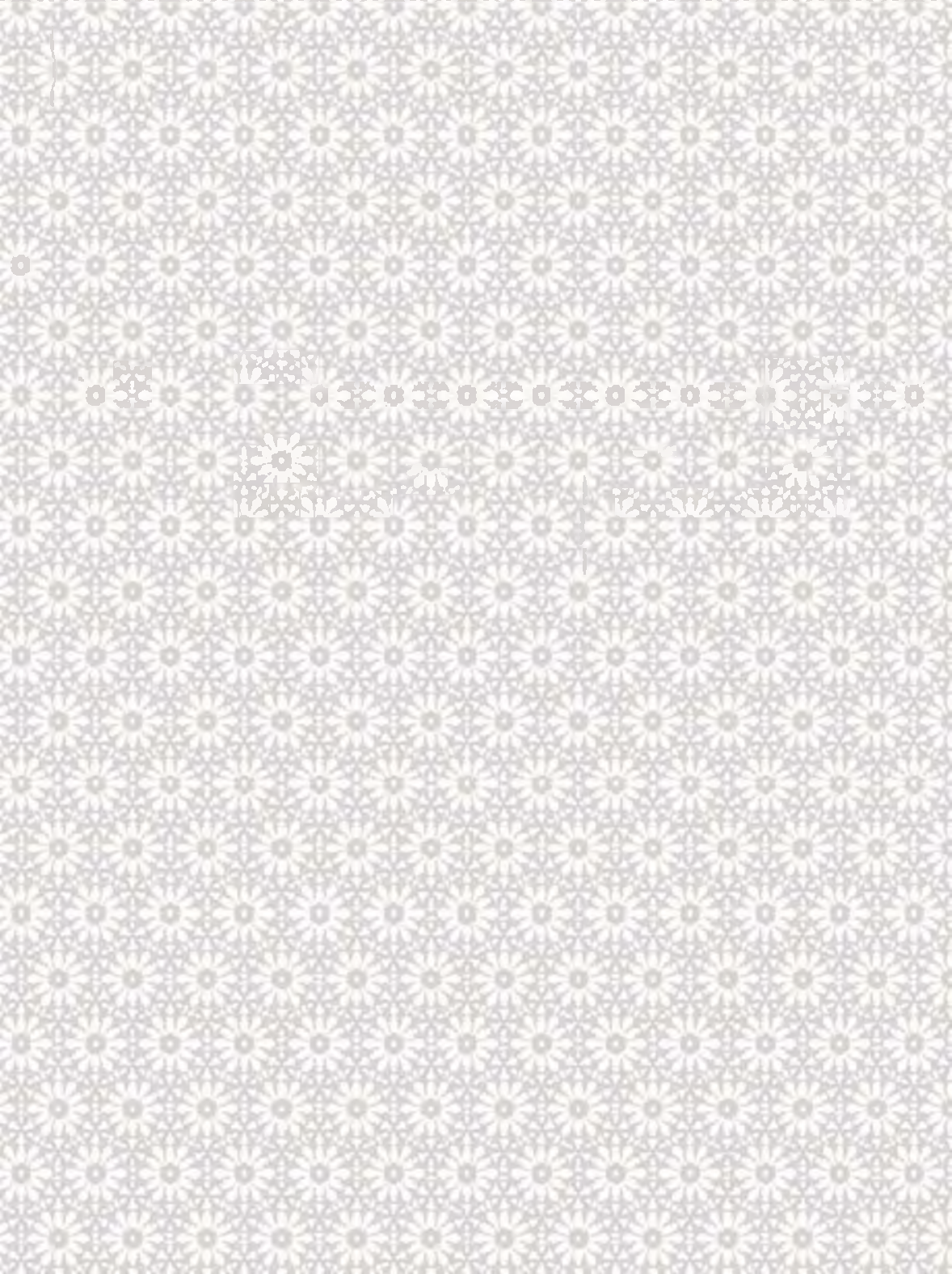
## ÍNDICE

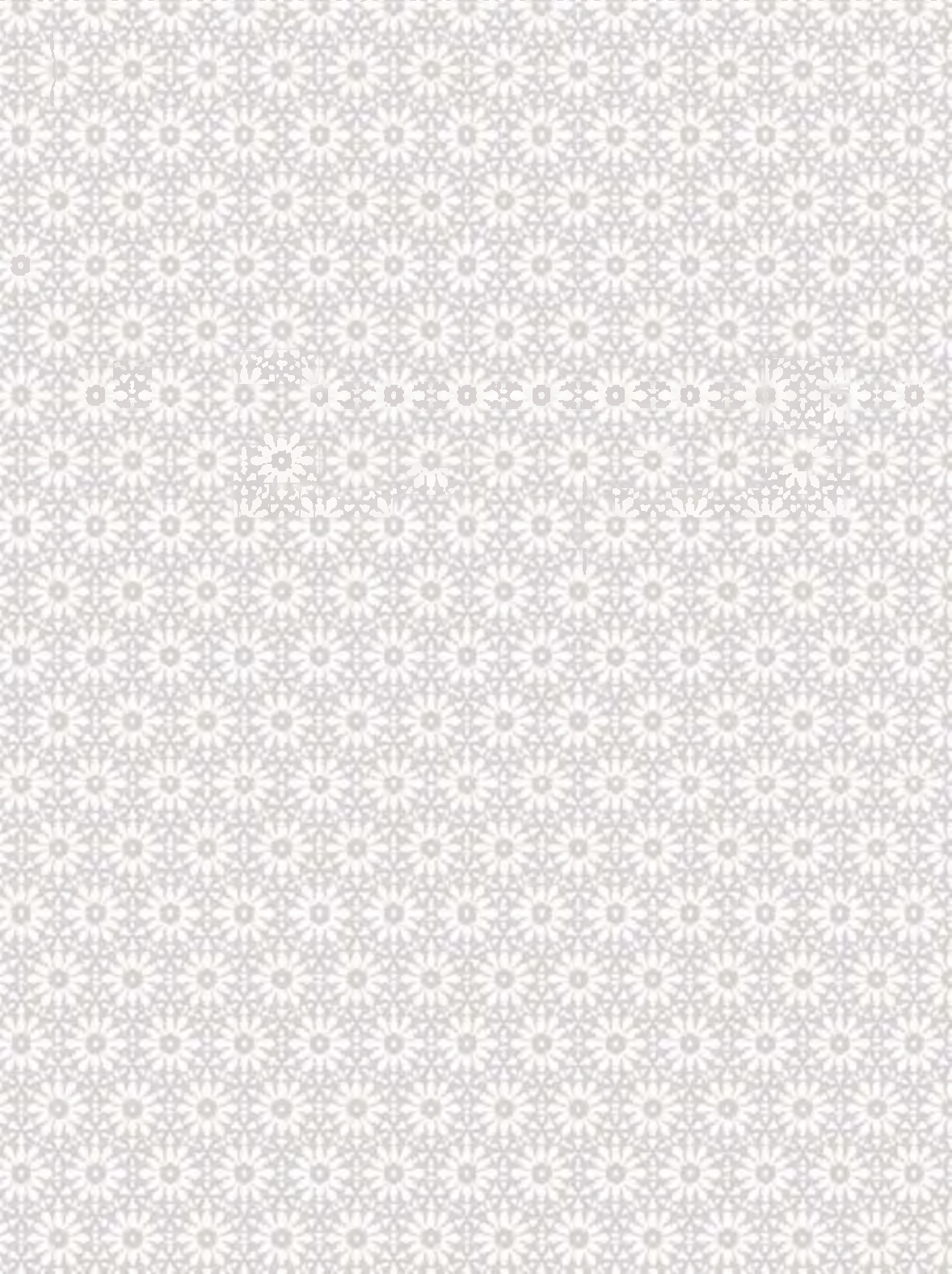
Portada original .....	9
The Humour of Homer .....	11











**T**he *Humour of Homer* de Samuel Butler (1835-1902) consiste en un extraordinario y provocador ensayo en el que, a partir de una revisión detallada de los dos textos más famosos atribuidos a Homero, la *Ilíada* y la *Odisea*, se abona en el debate acerca de la autoría de dichas obras.

Además del amor y la guerra, los dioses y sus augurios constituyen el eje temático más importante de ambos poemas épicos. Sin embargo, apunta Butler, la presencia de estas deidades resulta por demás risible, como si el autor no quisiera que fueran tomados en serio. Para Butler, el carácter cómico de las disputas entre los dioses es innegable, y es también la base para analizar las diferencias entre una y otra obra y sustentar la teoría de que, en realidad, la *Odisea* fue escrita por una mujer.

La caracterización del amor, el desapego de las mujeres, las descripciones de los personajes femeninos y la falta de conocimiento acerca de oficios como la navegación y el pastoreo de ovejas, son algunos de los ejemplos a los que Butler apela para argumentar su teoría, pues esos “ciertos detalles femeninos” sólo pudieron haber sido escritos así por una mujer.