

WHY TROY?

INTERVIEW

Q. Why tell the story of the Trojan War at all? What possible application can this tale of long ago and far away – this piece of bronze age mythology – have for the complex socio-political sophistications of our modern world?

A. While it's perfectly possible to make Homer the backdrop for a piece of sword-and-sorcery romantic escapism (and contemporary popular fiction has often done it) – this really wasn't where the interest of the material lay for me.

For me, there were two causes of the war, neither of them in any way 'unreal' or 'escapist'. The first cause was anthropological. It belongs to the realms of archaeology and history, and describes a pattern in which societies rise, fall and are reborn.

The first great adventure of human history is the story of how the cave-dwelling hunter-gatherer uses his mind, his capacity for invention and organisation, to create agriculture and then the city.

He begins at subsistence level, in a primitive village, surrounded by desert and marsh. To get the most out of this inhospitable tribal terrain, he learns to organise beyond simple, village level: he irrigates the local desert, drains the local marshland, and, in order to accomplish these tasks more effectively, puts a host of small villages directly under his own larger, centralised authority.

Then, having created the conditions for prosperity, he builds a city, an embodiment of his own power. Swiftly, the city becomes the hub of an empire.

Q. This man is Priam and the city is Troy?

A. That's right. So far, of course, these developments occur in conditions of relative stability and peace. But, as the village and the tribe learns to transform itself into the city and the empire, so, for the first time, the jarring note of warfare and conquest erupts into human affairs.

One after another, these new 'city-based' civilisations are attacked and destroyed by their envious, less 'civilised' neighbours, who subsume into their own 'barbarian' culture the best of what they have learned from the nations they have destroyed. The invaders are less clever, less sophisticated, but they hit harder, they bear pain better. And so they win. Later, of course, they are themselves attacked, invaded, and defeated.

Q. Is this a genuine historical pattern, or have you bent the facts to fit a theory of your own?

A. It's historical. The pattern I describe is the pattern of what happened in the ancient world for thousands of years. It's how the cultures of Sumeria, Assyria, Egypt, Crete, Greece and Rome rose and fell. To name only a few. It's also, I would argue, the pattern of what is still happening today.

Q. What about Homer, and the original Troy poems, which surely aren't anthropological at all?

A. Not explicitly, no. But I see Troy, and the story of its rise and fall, as the embodiment of this pattern. I think that's why the story of what happened there inflamed the human imagination for centuries afterwards. The story of Troy was the story of what happened, in the end, to everyone – what *always* happened in human history – and Homer's earliest audiences knew it.

Q. This isn't a bit too fanciful?

A. No. If it seems so, we should remember the accounts in Polybius and Arrian of the Roman general Scipio Aemilianus, who razed the historical city of Carthage as brutally and as thoroughly as Agamemnon razed the legendary Troy, reciting from the Iliad as he watched the temple of Melcart go

up in flames. He did it not to gloat, but out of piety, as a terrible warning of what might one day befall Rome itself.

And, in this pattern, he perhaps saw something at work other than the timeless, impersonal forces of history. He knew (or believed) that the Olympian gods punished pride, and he recognised that human nature is innately bloody, pitiless and destructive. He understood that life on earth is an unceasing struggle for survival; and that for societies as well as for individuals the struggle ends inevitably in defeat.

Q. You said the war had two causes. What's the second?

A. The second cause isn't historical, or deterministic, but spiritual. Troy fell because human nature is as it is. We are restless and dissatisfied and we envy the prosperity of others and dream of conquering worlds of our own. Wars are terrible, we see that in retrospect; but they often start (as the First World War certainly did) because they seem like a good idea at the time.

Human beings, especially male human beings, use war as the instrument of their ambition. They wage aggressive war out of a kind of hideous misplaced optimism, seeking a triumph for their spirit, their will against other people's.

The three Trojan plays are as much as anything the story of what happens as a result: partly the historical story of what happens to the societies which these kings and princes control, and partly the spiritual story of what happens to them specifically as individuals, what happens to their souls.

Q. Where does this leave the famous 'legendary' elements, the intervening Olympian gods, the judgement of Paris, the fabulous beauty of Helen of Troy?

A. I've tried to psychologise (or Freudianise) these elements without banishing the miraculous or the magical, which I think would dangerously short-change the audience's expectations.

The judgement of Paris – where Paris effectively adjudicates at a divine beauty contest – is for me an adolescent sexual fantasy, an image in the young Paris's mind, which bothers him especially because he thinks at the time he's with the wrong woman, Oenone, a village girl who feels she loves him.

Because the most destructive things we do, don't begin as actions, they begin as dreams, as wishes, as obsessions.

This is why the first play – 'King Priam and His Sons' – is almost entirely about dreams, and the power of dreams to determine everything else.

We meet the Trojan king Priam at the zenith of his success. He's the greatest king on earth, creator of the city of Troy, master of a trading empire which reaches from the Aegean to the Caucasus. He is husband to a beautiful and intelligent wife, Hekabe, who is about to bear him a second son, Paris. Yet Priam has neglected his wife, and the marriage is troubled.

In a dream the god Hermes appears to Hekabe and tells her that she will die in childbirth, warning her that the son she is about to bear will be the instrument of Troy's own destruction.

But there should be a sense, as Hekabe's grief unfolds before us in these early scenes, that the catastrophe which will swallow Priam – the catastrophe which the god predicts – is not some arbitrary decree of fate but an expression of the unhappiness already present in the marriage – that it is Priam's arrogance and self-belief which destroys Hekabe and, in doing so, sets in train a process which will destroy everything he holds dear.

So the prophecies and predictions map out territory which already exists within the characters' minds. The gods don't change anything; they watch human beings, and want them to be better: they console sometimes, as dreams do; and they express things dramatically which normally exist only within the mind, the imagination.

Q. How does the war actually start?

A. It starts because Helen, the wife of Menelaos of Sparta, runs off with Paris to Troy. She's in no sense abducted. She's in love, she's leaving a more repressive, less sophisticated society, and she wants to go.

Q. *That's not the 'real' reason, though, is it?*

A. No. The world around Troy has been looking for an excuse for war for a long time. It starts because Agamemnon, the Greek tribal overlord, thinks with a bit of luck he can knock out Troy and take over Priam's empire himself.

Q. *What actually happens?*

A. In the short term, Troy loses. Which is what the second play is about. It ends just before the fall of Troy, with Paris, Hektor, Achilles dead, and Priam knowing he's failed completely and utterly. Yet he's beginning to understand why. All human endeavour will end in defeat until humanity itself learns to live better, to set a higher value on life itself.

So the second play is about the loss of idealism, of hope, on both sides. Achilles – quite un-Homerically – is destroyed psychologically once he understands where his own code of warfare has led him. He's a man who claimed to believe in 'honour', yet there can't be any meaningful 'honour' if you live the life he's chosen to live. I think this inner darkness – this pessimism or fatalism – is true not to Homer's character, but to the spirit which lies behind Homer, the sense of the violence and brutality of history's process.

Q. *How does the story end?*

A. There's no practical classical precedent for how. All we know from antiquity is that Helen and Menelaos both survive, that they end up together after many sorrows and trials. We catch echoes of this in the *Odyssey*, and in plays like Euripides satirical comedy *Helen*. But only echoes.

So the third play is partly an invented story about how Menelaos and Helen are sundered in a storm, and how they find each other again many years later, both having believed the other to be dead.

Q. *There's more to it than that, though?*

A. Yes. The first half of the third play covers the ground which was famously covered by Aeschylus in the *Agamemnon*. Except it's done from the point of view of Klytemnestra, who is Agamemnon's estranged wife. Estranged because Agamemnon sacrificed their daughter Iphigenia to the gods to get a fair wind for his fleet to sail to Troy.

Klytemnestra is obsessed with Agamemnon's brutality, and she kills him for it. Which means, by the old codes of revenge and honour, that her son Orestes and daughter Elektra, who won't hear a word against their murdered father, in turn kill her.

So at the end of the play, it's not just a question of bringing Menelaos and Helen back together.

And showing that something has been learned by them both. It's also a question of disentangling the guilt and horror which have enveloped Orestes and Elektra. And doing so in some emotionally plausible way.

Q. *Do the gods play a part?*

A. By implication. What does play a part is a sense on the part of Helen especially that there is some renunciation of willpower, some willingness to give up one's own ambitions. Willpower has sacked Troy. It's destroyed Klytemnestra, turned Orestes mad and Elektra vengeful. So human impulses alone have proved fickle and destructive.

Q. *Does it help or hinder to be walking in the footsteps of the great classical writers?*

A. It's terrifying. It feels at times like trying to rehandle something by Shakespeare. Part Two follows some of the events of Homer's *Iliad*. Part Three echoes parts of *The Oresteia*. Yet although it's foolhardy I can't see a way of avoiding this. These are situations which the story intrinsically demands. You can't refuse to treat them without ducking the challenge of the material itself.

One of the things which I now find disappointing about my earlier attempt to handle this material in a one-hour monologue play called *King Priam* is that so much was left out, so much was undeveloped or unexplored. When Priam went to Achilles' tent to get back the body of Hektor,

whom Achilles had killed, the moment went by in a piece of brief, lyrical description. Yet that moment is the crux of the whole drama. Those two characters have to clash, have to reach some sort of shattered understanding of each other. And they can't do that except in dialogue.

Q. What is the whole trilogy about? In a nutshell.

A. Long after I'd begun work, I found the following passage in an essay by Hermann Hesse. "The path of human development begins with innocence (paradise, childhood, the irresponsible first stage). From there it leads to guilt, to the knowledge of good and evil, to the demand for culture, for morality, for religions, for human ideals.

For everyone who passes through this stage seriously and as a differentiated individual it ends unflinching in disillusionment, that is, with the insight that no perfect virtue, no complete obedience, no adequate service exists, that righteousness is unreachable, that consistent goodness is unattainable.

Now this despair leads either to defeat or to a third realm of the spirit, to the experience of a condition beyond morality and law, an advance into grace and release to a new, higher irresponsibility, or to put it briefly: to faith."

That's what the trilogy is about, in a nutshell.

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