

MISADVENTURE

THE TRUE STORY OF THE TROJAN WAR
AS TOLD BY

ELPENOR

THE NOT-SO-STRONG OF BODY AND NOT-SO-SOUND OF MIND

A NOVEL BY

JAMISON DUFOUR

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Ἐλπήνωρ δέ τις ἔσκε νεώτατος, οὔτε τι λήην
ἄλκιμος ἐν πολέμῳ οὔτε φρεσὶν ἦσιν ἀρηρώς
—Homer (ca. 850BCE)

*Elpenor was the youngest of our band,
Not brave in war was he, nor wise in thought.*
—trans. Cullen William Bryant (1871)

*There was a certain Elpenor, the youngest of them all, a
man not very firm in fight nor sound of understanding*
— trans. George Herbert Palmer (1884)

*One of us, Elpenor, the youngest of all, one not very valiant
in war or steady in mind*
— trans. W.H.D. Rouse (1937)

*There was one called Elpenor, the youngest of the party, not
much of a fighting man and not very clever.*
— trans. Emile Victor Reiu (1945)

*There was one, Elpenor, the youngest man, not terribly
powerful in fighting nor sound in his thoughts.*
— trans. Richmond Lattimore (1951)

*Among them all
the youngest was Elpenor—
no mainstay in a fight nor very clever—*
— trans. Robert Fitzgerald (1961)

*There was a man, Elpenor, the youngest in our ranks,
none too brave in battle, none too sound in mind.*
— trans. Robert Fagles (1996)

*Elpenor, the youngest of our party, not good at weapons
and a bit slow in the noodle*
— trans. R.L. Eickhoff (2001)

PROLOGUE

WHINGER

My apologies to any classical studies majors out there, but the blind poet can kiss my ass. I mean it. He can pucker up and plant one on either cheek. I do appreciate his contributions—without him my name would’ve been lost to time like a hundred billion others—but he’s still a propagandizing, warmongering, character assassin.

Since the first day of the first term of the first university, people have worshiped and praised him. “The Father of Epic Poetry,” “The Father of Literature,” “The Father of *Western Culture*.” But I see him as a towering example of our species’ addiction to yesterday. A nostalgia surpassed only by the continued existence of vinyl records.

As with *Beowulf* and the Bible, we ascribe importance and an excess of merit to his stories simply because they’re ancient. It’s like when you meet someone in their nineties and you reflexively congratulate them. For what? *Not* being dead? That’s not an accomplishment, it’s the baseline. What did I do today? Nothing. And what did that nothing include? I slept, I ate, I emptied my bladder, *maybe* I voided my bowels, and I didn’t die. Jimi Hendrix and Kurt Cobain were dead at twenty-seven, but they did more than any ninety-year-old you know.

Surviving is as much accident as achievement. Why did I get through the war in Ilion when Achilles did not? The only thing I surpassed him at was tending goats. Everyone’s entitled to an opinion, but seeing how Homer was born four hundred years *after* my death, how could he have an opinion to form? He didn’t know me from Prometheus.

Elpenor the cowardly, infantile, and brainbroke. Poor Elpenor with no exploits worth recording, poor Elpenor who couldn’t hold his liquor, poor Elpenor who was never good with ladders. As Homer sees it, I am to be mocked and pitied. But if I was so frail, what was I doing pulling an oar with Kephallonia’s finest on the flagship of Odysseus? If I was so unskilled, how did I survive years of combat, disease, and the indifference of the gods? Was I the youngest warrior from my kingdom? Sure, I was sixteen when we set sail. But I wasn’t the only kid. And after two years in Ilion, after all the blood on my spear and at my feet, no one could mistake me for a child.

Yet to Homer, a child I was. Which is especially odd seeing that in his fantastical version of the timeline, I would have been in my mid to late twenties!

Then there’s my unsound mind. If he had just said I was a dumb kid, I’d have no room to argue. I was ignorant, optimistic, and naïve. As a teenaged boy, I couldn’t be any other way. But he implies a disability beyond my inexperience. I was so damaged I was bound to get myself killed, so useless my crewmates wouldn’t notice my absence.

By even the standards of his time, we were all ignorant clods, one step up from cavemen. Why then single me out as a special kind of stupid? Because Homer is the grand master of the false dichotomy. He is incapable of distinguishing between *not terribly smart* and *absolute moron*. Someone isn't pretty, then they're hideous and deformed. Not strong is the same as enfeebled. Unloved is universally despised. And since I wasn't the best of Odysseus' men, I must have been the worst. He may have been blind, but you'd think even Homer could understand the concept of black-and-white thinking.

Combine that with his thing for authority figures—kings, princes, noblemen, and especially the semi-divine—and you can see why Homer threw me under the chariot. He elevates his idols by knocking down anyone below them. Look at what he did to poor Thersites. Homer treated the Trojans, our *godsdamned enemies*, with more respect and sympathy.

Folks like me weren't his kind of people. Our parents weren't spawned by Zeus, Poseidon, or Aphrodite. Nor were they nymphs, muses, or any other spirits of nature. Our coming wasn't foretold by oracles. We weren't married to the most beautiful woman alive. We weren't cloaked in the armor of god. We weren't kings, brothers of kings, sons of kings, or friends of kings.

Homer played favorites; great men descended from great men, men with the blood of gods in their veins. And each got their moments to shine, regardless of whose side they were on. The Classical Greeks called it an *aristeia*, a spotlighted example of a hero at his peak. It's usually a montage of killing, like when Diomedes, guided by Athena, cut through the Trojans; or when Hektor set our boats afire. Or John Rambo in the jungles of Vietnam, or John Wick against the entire city of New York.

And the rest of us? We fought, we risked everything, and had our own scenes worthy of immortality. But grunts and swabbies didn't rate better than random deaths or cruel and slanderous epithets. To him, I was nothing but an example of weakness, excess, and ends without honor. There was no mention of my deeds or where I came from. I am no more than a punchline.

There must be one of you out there wondering why I'm not attacking Jean Giraudoux instead of Homer. The Frenchman wrote far worse things about me. He called me dwarf-like, knock-kneed, tobacco-addled, cowardly, lecherous, deceitful, clumsy, and suicidal. I had bad breath, mismatched arms, a flattened nose, a pendulous chin, oversized feet, the brain of a cretin, and a bald head—with dandruff! Worst of all, he said I was a shit sailor.

But he had me getting laid—by one of Circe's nymphs, no less. That's more than Homer ever did for me. And he gave me an outstanding second death. One in which I withstood considerable torture and defied the gods to my very end. My moment, my *aristeia*. He wouldn't have written those things without having a soft spot for me. His treatment of me is like that of a lifelong friend. He used a lot of ink tearing me down, but he had my back at the end.

And his book is pretty funny. Absurdly wrong, but funny. I dare you to find a single joke from Homer. The closest he comes to humor is ridiculing the crippled. Twenty-eight thousand lines of poetry and not once does somebody get hit in the nuts.

But there's another reason for leaving Giraudoux out of it: aside from a scattering of French lit and theater nerds, no one today remembers him. What action of mine could punish him more than that?

The clever among you might be wondering how a man from the thirteenth century BCE could know Giraudoux or Stallone? It's against my nature, but I am compelled to answer the question with a question: did you also wonder how I knew about Homer? If not, why not? He too was not of my era. Why is knowing things from four centuries beyond my death acceptable when another three millennia is not? I can tell you time means little to the dead.

But why the modern references? Why go Ferris Bueller¹ on you? Trust me, it's for your benefit. *I want you to understand me.* If I tell you Noah's ark was three hundred cubits long, fifty cubits wide, and thirty cubits high, I'd be textually accurate, but what on earth is a cubit? Would you have any idea what I meant if I said someone was prowling around like Panergetos at the funeral feast of the King of Karpathos? I'd be a hundred percent period appropriate, and you'd be heading to the internet every five minutes. How would that help anyone?

Do you imagine I spoke English? Hades, I didn't speak Greek—ancient or otherwise. When I was alive, there was no such thing as Greece. The Greeks you picture as Greeks didn't become Greeks until after my Greeks had fallen into ruin. I'm only calling our collection of independent nations *Greek* for your sake. I could have chosen Aegean, Achaeon, Danaan, Argive, Helladic, Cycladic, or Minoan; but they would have been more confusing and just as inaccurate. In your time, Bronze Age Greece is commonly called *Mycenaean*, but that's exactly what Agamemnon would have wanted, so screw that.

You are reading a book written by a man who predates the invention of literature. If this doesn't bother you, nothing I say should.

So to the pedants, quibblers, sophists, trolls, and hair-splitters out there, I offer my sympathies and this advice: stop reading this book. It's my story, I lived it, and I'll tell it as I please. There's only room for one correctionist here. I don't give a fig for anyone's facts but my own. After twenty-eight hundred years of unopposed mistakes and confabulations, I'm going to defend myself and my friends.

In my day we didn't have libel laws or slander suits, or lawyers. We'd just challenge the offending asshole to a fight. Sometimes the threat was sufficient, and he'd apologize. Sometimes you had to kick his ass. Sometimes you got your ass kicked. Either way, the gods had spoken, and it was settled. Oh, what fun I would've had getting Homer to apologize.

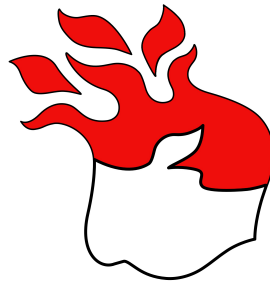
Sure, I know he wasn't an actual person. That instead of one man, generations of anonymous storytellers memorized and embellished and edited the tales of my age until they could be written down. But if you can amalgamate those poets into a single representative of authorship, then I can blame them in the same fashion.

Beating the shit out of a visually impaired senior citizen is a pleasant fantasy, one I indulge in when I feel I've earned it. But in reality I have no recourse. What are the options for a being like me? You're hardly a physical threat when you no longer exist on the material plane. No one has yet invented ghost court. And even before the Christians forced him into retirement, Zeus had zero interest in petitions of grievance.

¹ Or Fleabag or Brechtian, depending on your tastes, age, and/or education.

So all I can do is tell my version of the story. Not through the eyes of a three-thousand-year-old spirit, but as the teenaged boy who lived it. Besides, she told me to do it. She calls it written exposure therapy. I don't know what that means, but I am incapable of saying no to her.

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