

I

ROBERT L. FOWLER

Introduction

The portrait of Homer that forms the frontispiece of this volume hangs in the Gallerie dell' Accademia, Venice. It is generally thought to be an early work of Mattia Preti (1613–1699), from a period when the influence of Caravaggio on him was strong. As a rendering of the bard, considered retrospectively from the twenty-first century, it offers much to ponder. The general appearance – closed, useless eyes upon a gaunt and bearded face – follows the ancient type.¹ The upward turn of the head, however, evokes ancient portraits of Alexander of Macedon, that great dreamer, and the painting's dark and brooding atmosphere, like many other portraits of the *seicento*, seems already to evoke the spirit of Romanticism. Proto-Romantic too is the stress on the inspiration of the lonely genius. The principal light in the picture streams from heaven, abode of the Muses, the source of this inspiration. It falls full on the unseeing eyes, underscoring the paradox that the blind poet sees more than the sighted. Yet the poet is no mere passive receptacle. Above his eyes, Homer's deep brows are obscured by Apollo's laurels; this is a learned poet, like the *docti poetae* of Hellenistic Alexandria or Catullan Rome. The doctor's robes reinforce the point: medieval, of course. The wreath too more probably springs from medieval conceptions of the poet's garb² or from the famous close of the third book of Horace's *Odes* – *sume superbiam | quaesitam meritis, et mihi Delphica | lauro cinge volens, Melpomene, comam*³ – than from close knowledge of Greek cultic practice. The most splendid anachronism of the picture, however, is obviously the violin. Certainly Preti would have known that Homer's instrument, if indeed he sang (rather than chanting, with the rhapsode's staff in

¹ Ancient portraits of Homer are discussed most recently by Graziosi (2002) 128–32.

² Blech (1982) 312–16.

³ 'Assume the pride you have earned, Melpomene, and be pleased to entwine the Delphic laurel in my locks.'

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-012461 - The Cambridge Companion to Homer

Edited by Robert Fowler

Excerpt

[More information](#)

ROBERT FOWLER

hand),⁴ was a lyre. Apparently he did not care about that kind of historical accuracy. Instead, like most of us, he sought to create a Homer who, though indescribably ancient, could plausibly sing forth in his own day.

Preti's Homer is at once both modern and primitive. This in itself represents a familiar dynamic of interpretation. From a twenty-first century point of view, it sits halfway between us and antiquity, not in terms of years, but in a middle position between ancient realities and the various critical approaches which, arising since the eighteenth century, have fundamentally shaped our understanding of Homer – enhancing, distorting, or neither according to one's convictions. As such, the painting is a fitting emblem for a volume devoted both to Homer in his original context, so far as it can be recovered, and to his reception.

This tension between primitive and modern, difference and sameness, has dogged Homer since antiquity, and is perhaps at its most acute in our own day. Preti's violin, for instance, immediately raises the issue of performance. No less thought-provoking to me is the photograph of Avdo Mededović cradling his *gusle* on the cover of the new edition of Albert Lord's *The Singer of Tales*.⁵ For the historicist, the context of the original performance lies right at the heart of the Homeric Question, unavoidable and unsettled even after two centuries of debate. There is no doubt that the discoveries of Lord's mentor Milman Parry, based on his observations of the South Slavic singers, have allowed us to reconstruct with some confidence the nature of poetic tradition and performance in Homer's day. But when I listen to recordings of the *guslars* I hear sounds from a culture so different from my own that I wonder how, if this really is the closest thing to Homer available to our experience, I can ever pretend to understand him. Perhaps I do deceive myself in this pretence. The gap between me and Homer must be ten times, a hundred times bigger than the gap between me and the *guslars*, already difficult to bridge except by patient, hard work. One could dismiss the South Slavic analogy – many people do – but that is too facile a solution to the present problem. The fear is that Homer belongs to an altogether different era of human history, the other side of some evolutionary and psychological divide. Scholars who write Greek literary history in terms of developments (not all yet extinct) have difficulty not thinking of Homer in this way. Other, more recent and cosmopolitan critics make the same claim from a quite different, postmodernist perspective.

⁴ Probably he did sing; see West (1997b) 218, (1992a) 42–3. For a discussion of the rhapsodes' art see most recently Graziosi (2002) 18–40; Powell (2002) 134–45; Pelliccia (2003), taking issue with Nagy (1996a), (1996b).

⁵ Lord (2000), with CD of recorded performances by various singers.

Introduction

But then there are the texts themselves: however incomprehensible in this or that particular (can anyone really pretend to understand, for example, the scene in *Iliad* 1 where Athena yanks Achilles' hair?), for centuries these poems have stirred the emotions, enlightened the minds and ennobled the spirits of their readers who, however much their interpretations differ, all recognise their fellow human beings, hear and comprehend a sublime voice, and feel the redemptive power of civilisation. This cannot be an illusion. However easily contradicted any particular account of sameness is in its details, some quality as yet imperfectly understood – or less perfectly understood than it used to be – in the work of the *poeta sovrano* reaches across time, to achieve the same immediately arresting effect upon its listeners that Athena had on Achilles. The *Iliad's* profoundly sophisticated voice transcends the bounds of age. Like countless others, there are moments when I think that this stupendous masterpiece, produced the better part of 3,000 years ago, fountain-head of Western literature and in many people's view still its greatest work, is simply a miracle, a serious argument for divine intervention in human history.

Yet even as one feels the way towards a transhistorical perspective, one realises that both these views of Homer – unrecoverably primitive or miraculously present – are demonstrably modern views, or more precisely Romantic. After two hundred years this tremendous movement still shapes our consciousness and interpretation, despite the wrench of the twentieth century. Let anyone who doubts it consider this opinion from an earlier age:

To works, however, of which the excellence is not absolute and definite, but gradual and comparative; to works not raised upon principles demonstrative and scientific, but appealing wholly to observation and experience, no other test can be applied than length of duration and continuance of esteem. What mankind have long possessed they have often examined and compared, and if they persist to value the possession, it is because frequent comparisons have confirmed the opinion in its favour. As among the works of nature no man can properly call a river deep or a mountain high, without the knowledge of many mountains and many rivers; so in the productions of genius, nothing can be styled excellent till it has been compared with other works of the same kind. Demonstration immediately displays its power, and has nothing to hope or fear from the flux of years; but works tentative and experimental must be estimated by their proportion to the general and collective ability of man, as it is discovered in a long succession of endeavours. Of the first building that was raised, it might be with certainty determined that it was round or square, but whether it was spacious or lofty must have been referred to time. The Pythagorean scale of numbers was at once discovered to be perfect; but the poems of Homer we yet know not to transcend the common limits of

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-012461 - The Cambridge Companion to Homer

Edited by Robert Fowler

Excerpt

[More information](#)

ROBERT FOWLER

human intelligence, but by remarking, that nation after nation, and century after century, has been able to do little more than transpose his incidents, new name his characters, and paraphrase his sentiments.

The reverence due to writings that have long subsisted arises therefore not from any credulous confidence in the superior wisdom of past ages, or gloomy persuasion of the degeneracy of mankind, but is the consequence of acknowledged and indubitable positions, that what has been longest known has been most considered, and what is most considered is best understood.

Johnson here, in his *Preface to Shakespeare* (1765), argues that though Homer is a genius, he is a genius who in principle might be produced by any age. (Shakespeare was another.) He allows no veneration simply on grounds of antiquity. A Romantic, so far from resisting the tendency, would actively embrace the mystique of the very old and especially the wonder of being in its immediate presence – a cult of antiquity that has its uncritical side and sits quite well with Romantic melancholy, but is much more complicated than simple credulity or curmudgeonly gloom. Most remarkable, however, is Johnson's totally unthinking confidence that there is no essential difference in the world observed and experienced by Homer and that observed and experienced by the eighteenth century. It does not even cross his mind that mentalities might differ. In the wake of Herder such a view became problematic and increasingly rare. In the postmodern age it has disappeared altogether.

While Johnson could read Homer without mediation, Romanticism pretends to be able to read him without mediation, but knows that it cannot really do so without undermining its enterprise. Romantic feeling about the very old depends upon simultaneously keeping the sense of distance and difference – the *frisson* of getting close to Homer is not the same if you actually are one of his contemporaries – and nurturing the hope that, through an effort of imagination, one can bridge the gap. Romanticism is thus concerned to recreate original historical contexts. There have been, above all, the battles over the Homeric question itself. In its older form, analysis assigned different layers of the poems to precise dates, erroneously in most cases; with much greater probability, philology has laid bare the historical layers of the dialect. The modern study of oral poetry is an avatar of nineteenth-century study of folk tradition. Inspired particularly by Nietzsche, scholars have sought to see Greek gods through Greek rather than Roman or Christian eyes, a project which could not have started before artists and thinkers, in the wake of the Enlightenment, began to resurrect paganism as a serious way of looking at the world. By the end of the nineteenth century archaeology had added enormous impetus to the search for the original Homer

Introduction

(following on arch-Romantic Schliemann's discovery of Troy itself).⁶ Continuing efforts throughout the twentieth century have brought huge gains in knowledge. The picture of early Greece has become much more detailed, sharper in focus. We are getting closer even to the Bronze Age itself. The excavations at Hisarlik have begun anew. Recent work makes it all but certain that the *Abhiyawa* of Hittite texts is the land of Homer's Achaeans, and that *Wilus(s)a/Wilusiya* is Ilios, Troy. A seal found in 1995 shows that Priam's name is Luwian.⁷

Yet such advances cannot (thankfully) remove the mystery. Even if we could accumulate an infinity of facts, some of it would remain. Homer was already a mystery to the archaic Greeks. The ancient biographies, with their plenitude of specious detail, are entirely fictitious, depending on inferences from the poems themselves, plausible conjecture and outright invention (the bard Phemius plays a prominent role in the *Odyssey*: therefore such a bard must have been important in the poet's life: perhaps this was his stepfather?). This is the first stage of Homer's reception, in fact. The difficulty was, first, that he gave no real clue in his poems about his person (enabling seven different cities to claim him as their own), and second, that the individuality of an author was a concept only beginning to emerge (partly, one might think, through the efforts of this very singer). The unique symbiosis of tradition and individual talent operative in the context of oral poetry meant that, by the time tradition took the form of a finite number of fixed texts with authors' names attached, the Homer legend was already firmly entrenched.⁸ Should the sands of Egypt yield up all the epics of the Cycle, we would undoubtedly acquire a wealth of new information and insight, but Homer himself would still remain just beyond reach. Even if we could invent a time machine, and take Parry-like recordings of the bard – if he existed as an individual – this would remain the case. The sophistication of the traditional art instantiated in Homer implies a wealth of contemporary performance practically beyond imagination; we must think that Homer's songs represent a tiny fraction of what was on offer in his day, all over the Greek world (*ipso facto* a far more sophisticated civilisation than most students of oral poetry, besotted by Romantic notions of bards, actually realise). Because of the quality of the poems, Homer cannot be demythologised as just one singer among many – either because, on one view of the phenomenon, the individual is only a hypostasis of tradition: 'just one singer among many' *constitutes* the mythical

⁶ On Schliemann see in general Traill (1995), Allen (1999).

⁷ Latacz (2001), (2002); Janko in Montanari and Ascheri (2002) 664.

⁸ On the ancient lives of Homer see Lefkowitz (1981b) ch. 2; Latacz (1996) 24–30; Graziosi (2002).

ROBERT FOWLER

dimensions of the situation; or because, on another view, this individual has transcended the tradition through his genius. The approach to Homer remains tinged with a delicious longing for the inaccessible not found with any modern author, nor even with most ancient ones.

Johnson displays no such feeling, and reads Homer with the same aesthetic filters as he reads Shakespeare. But even before his time things were changing. The advance of science precipitated the Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, when Moderns turned their backs on Homer and other antique sages. Of course the illusion of superiority could never last; Homer could hardly be suppressed. The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, rediscovering their own true, sublime Homer, resolved the Quarrel by putting the inspiration of the ancients at the service of a progressive, forward-looking world. This rapprochement continued until the cataclysm of another Modernism, which, on a superficial reading, turned its back even more decisively on the past; yet it could not really do so without engaging in a dialogue with antiquity, as most practitioners were ready enough to admit.

Throughout the twentieth century classical antiquity seemed, again on a superficial assessment, ever farther to seek, finally left behind by a world changed beyond all recognition. Yet, just as in the eighteenth century, there were still legions of people reading Homer, and at the turn of the millennium his fortunes have never seemed better. Classics as a discipline flourishes. Numbers of pupils rise once more in the schools. Popular and highbrow culture alike cannot get enough of antiquity. The Quarrel, it seems, is reaching a new stage of rapprochement. Looking back on the story since about 1770, with its essential Romantic continuity in spite of much superficial change, and contemplating the 'aesthetic turn' said to lie on the horizon of the humanities after centuries of historicism and decades of increasingly homogenised cultural studies, one might prophesy a return to a style of criticism such as Milton or Pope might have recognised. Certainly many interesting readings would result from such a move. But somehow I doubt it will happen, at least not soon. Homer, like most Greek authors before Callimachus, is just alien enough to justify, even force, the historicising bent that has come naturally to every Homerist since Bentley discovered the digamma.⁹

The oscillating dialectic of past and present, immanence and distance, is as unstable for us as it was for Preti. We are more aware of it now, though one may wonder whether that is a gain. The myth of progress dies hard; believers in it have a vested interest in sharpening the lines of controversy.

⁹ On this relic of prehistoric Greek in the Homeric dialect see Dowden in this volume p. 192; on Bentley see Pfeiffer (1976) ch. 11 and Brink (1985).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-012461 - The Cambridge Companion to Homer

Edited by Robert Fowler

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

As a matter of fact, historicists have always recognised, if insufficiently, the ephemeral nature of their findings, and their entanglement in their own perspectives, long before postmodernism made the point with all force. Conversely, receptionists do not argue that all readings are equally valid. Any defensible reading of Homer must depend both upon the soundest contextualisation philology can offer, and an informed appreciation of the contingencies of interpretation both past and present.

Hence the general plan of this volume. In the case of Homer, however, the vastness of his scholarship exacerbates the usual problems facing the contributors to a Cambridge Companion, whose remit is both to provide essential advice for the novice and to suggest future directions for research. Editor and contributors alike are bound to be selective. This being a book primarily for English speakers, non-English receptions have hardly been touched on, important though they are; ideally, too, much more space would have been devoted to the interpretation of Homer by artists. Separate treatments of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance would have yielded valuable results. The periods I have chosen, however, arguably represent the most formative moments in the long story of Homeric reading. Certainly they raise issues of fundamental concern. Perusal of the studies in this volume suggests a provisional list: text and original context; the preference of the *Iliad* over the *Odyssey*, and vice-versa, at different times for different reasons; what to make of the violence in the poems, and the status of war; how to assess Homer's religion; Homer as modern or ancient, sophisticated or primitive; the status of myth; gender issues; stylistic issues (have we even now devised a new 'oral poetics?'); how to translate Homer (a translation, we ought not to forget, is everyone's first experience of reception); how to translate cultures; Homer as an authority and as a guide to life; Homer's place in the history of ideas; Hellenism.

Many of these issues have their roots in antiquity, of course, and therefore also find expression in those chapters which seek to communicate and extend the best insights of scholars working within the more familiar boundaries of Homeric scholarship. The list of topics is deliberately literary in bias, though obviously the prehistoric and historical background, or the perennial Homeric question, were not to be overlooked. One can quibble about the balance, and there will always be topics whose inclusion or exclusion this or that reader might query. For myself, I could not have conceived of the volume without chapters on the human and divine characters, without studies of the plots and their narration, or without treatments of the poet's stunning craft, from the minutiae of his formulas to the splendours of his similes – no mere ornaments – and his unsurpassed oratory. In confronting similar issues on the level of their several topics, contributors were asked to identify particular

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-012461 - The Cambridge Companion to Homer
Edited by Robert Fowler
Excerpt
[More information](#)

ROBERT FOWLER

ideas or passages for paradigmatic treatment and relegate others to brief mention, possibly only in footnotes. While this seemed the right policy to yield the best results for the greatest number of readers, it can leave gaps. Editor and contributors alike have looked out for these and attempted to fill them wherever possible; it is hoped that, in cases where extended discussion has not been possible, the needs of readers will have been met by references to appropriate bibliography.

It will not surprise readers to find different perspectives and styles of scholarship throughout the volume, not to say outright disagreements. The plan was always to bring in as many kinds of voice as possible. Homer is too good to be left to any one person or group. He is also too good to think that he needs us to rescue him; whatever we might do or not do with him, he will continue to speak forcefully for himself. In talking about Homer, however, we do well to remember how very heterogeneous and numerous are those who wish to claim him as part of their heritage, and to bring as many of these heirs into the conversation as we can. The demolition of intellectual boundaries in recent decades, while entailing many risks and terrors, brings also exhilaration, liberation and reward. Whatever new understanding of humanity might emerge from this tumult, Homer is certain to be part of it.¹⁰

¹⁰ My thanks to Michael Liversidge and John Foley for comments on this Introduction.

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-012461 - The Cambridge Companion to Homer
Edited by Robert Fowler
Excerpt
[More information](#)

I
THE POEMS AND THEIR
NARRATOR

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-012461 - The Cambridge Companion to Homer

Edited by Robert Fowler

Excerpt

[More information](#)
