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978-0-521-13421-7 - Homer's Original Genius: Eighteenth-Century Notions of the
Early Greek Epic (1688-1798)

Kirsti Simonsuuri

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

Ut jam Homeri nomen, non hominis, sed poeseos, sed doctrinae esse
videatur.

James Duport, *Homeri, poetarum omnium seculorum
facile principis, gnomologia, duplici parallelismo
illustrata* (Cambridge 1660)

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It is not difficult to imagine why Homer has fascinated men's minds to this day: the enigma has its attraction and the blatant commonplace its unknown side. Homer shows us perhaps that the definition of the good poet should be more concerned with the diversity of responses a poet can evoke than with the quality of the verse. Everyone can read his own myths in Homer. For the eighteenth century, Homer had an undoubtedly varied appeal: the aims and aspirations in the aesthetic and social fields were clearly mirrored in the responses to the Greek poet. Homeric criticism of the period is therefore a touchstone of the age which must not be belittled.

The eighteenth-century notions of Homer's originality and genius, which are the theme of this book, belong to the framework of a larger historical development. It is highly characteristic of the eighteenth century that even though Homer had survived in the awareness of educated people from the Athenian Enlightenment to the time of the late-seventeenth-century *querelle des anciens et des modernes* and had been used as a vehicle for the promulgation of educational reforms, literary doctrines and scientific learning – not to mention the imaginative repercussions in literature – it was not until this time that Homer was seen as a type and a representative of current ideas about poetry, history and society.

What made the eighteenth century a remarkable period in the history of Homeric studies was the fact that Homer became the focal point round which some of the major debates of the period revolved, and the way that the eighteenth century built upon the Homeric tradition was wholly characteristic. The issues that emerged in connection with the Homeric epics were varied. Three

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points must be kept in mind. There was the problem of poetic genius and the kindred problem of originality which were first debated during the *querelle*. There was the question of realism which preoccupied the Homeric translators and notably Robert Wood: how accurate did a poet need to be in depicting scenes and events. There was also the question, raised in another context by Jean Jacques Rousseau, of the relative merits of primitive and sophisticated society, which led Herder to describe naive folk poetry as expression of a nation's character. Finally there was the 'Homeric question' itself; whether the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were or were not compilations from a number of separate poems, and the results of deliberate editing and interpolation.

Towards the end of the eighteenth century men's eagerness to dispel old myths, to become aware of the historical roots of their culture, and, in connection with these aims, to seek the truth about Homer, had reached a point where nothing much remained to be done – except to elaborate, or to forget history for a while and especially Homer. Homer had become a myth, operating on the level of a high culture, which followed the same pattern as popular myths which exist as tales and have no author: the moment their real origin is clearly understood and they are perceived consciously as 'myths', they cease to exist as vital parts of culture and become the dead wood of the processes of learning and tradition.

The issues debated during the eighteenth century in connection with Homer overlapped, and it is not possible to discuss one without trespassing on some of the others. The work of every eighteenth-century writer on Homer has several facets; and this explains why this book deals separately with the major contributors to Homeric criticism and the themes which that criticism explored. And because the issues overlapped, the debates about them reinforced each other.

The problems presented by the existence of two obvious masterpieces in epic literature at the very beginning of recorded history came to a certain end in the eighteenth century. That is why the period deserves special attention from those interested in Homer's influence. This unmistakably rich period pursued its familiarity with the various levels of the Homeric myth to the point of making the poet a contemporary. Although there is evidence that at least the same amount of energy and motivation was spent

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during the fifth century B.C. and in the Italian Renaissance in order to discover Homer, and thus there is some justification in speculating that we are dealing with something like a changing fashion on a large scale, it is unlikely that, since the work of the eighteenth-century writers and scholars is done, a similar cultural meaning can again be given to Homer. Perhaps this is not a great loss, for other myths have emerged, Homer is not alone in the category of the greatest epic writers, and the nature of oral literature is well understood and is seen to belong to a particular type of society which cannot even be hoped to be artificially created. At the same time, if we are to appreciate the climactic character of the period in this context, it is necessary to realize that the issues which the eighteenth century came to discuss in detail had been raised in earlier times in some form or other. It is of some importance to look into the long and at times very quiet historical development that can perhaps be seen as culminating in the eighteenth century which learned to use its sources in an original way.

Homeric criticism begins in Graeco-Roman antiquity. If however this period is taken as a starting point of the ideas about Homer, the history of the poet is hardly a story of how an originally correct picture gradually became more and more out of focus and distorted. The Greeks were divided in their views about Homer.¹ The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were known to every schoolboy. They had a considerable influence on poetic diction, not only of the epic, but also of the lyric, the drama and the elegy, and the stories incorporated in the epics have found pictorial representations in the vases, wall-paintings and sculpture from archaic Greece to the Roman period. But Homer himself was a shadowy figure. Imaginary portraits of a poet believed to be Homer exist from the fifth century B.C., and indicate that the Greeks had no unanimously accepted idea of the Homeric face, even as regards age, hairstyle or apparel (which would suggest the region of his origin).² Lucian, the nimble-witted commentator on Greek literature and mythology, summed up the confusion of his countrymen about Homer by saying, in his *Panegyric of Demosthenes*, that there was no 'foundation of fact' on which 'to build the edifice of praise', and that nothing concerning Homer was certain but the poems which existed.³

Homeric criticism in antiquity sensibly enough concentrated on

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the poems, and we can distinguish a number of standard responses which recur in varying forms. Ancient Homeric criticism ought to be helpful to us because the Greek commentators had their language at least in common with the poet, and the Roman critics were nearly all bilingual. This leads us to expect, from the example of analogous situations, that the Homeric criticism produced in Greek and Roman antiquity would be subtle and profound; but this was not the case. The aim of ancient literary criticism was explication of obscure passages, moral commentary for educational purposes, and hagiography. Homer was the most famous of the poets whom the Greeks, especially in Athens, venerated, and whom they amply honoured in public life.

First of all, we find Homer praised for being the master of all knowledge: in philosophy and in rhetoric as well as in the practical arts. Pseudo-Plutarch's strong defence of Homer recapitulated ancient views on these heads. In order to demonstrate that Homer was the master 'in omni scientiarum et artium genere', pseudo-Plutarch's treatise, *De vita et poesi Homeri* defends the poet's knowledge of the position of the sun and the fixed stars, of minerals, earthquakes, winds, currents, in other words, of many aspects of astronomy, geology and meteorology. The fact that pseudo-Plutarch also presents Homer as a master of rhetoric who had set a standard for future writers in poetry and prose (*oratio ligata et soluta*) reflects the great importance that the Homeric epics had gained as the schoolbook from which new generations were taught to read and write.⁴ Even in earlier philosophy and criticism, represented by Democritus, Gorgias and Ion of Chios, Homer is cited as an authority on the issues of metaphorical expression, inspired writing and fluency of speech. With the progress of material civilization in the Greek world, the stress on Homer's authority in practical arts diminished, but the belief that the epics furnish examples of all rhetorical devices lingered on to the times of Dionysius of Halicarnassus and the pseudo-Longinus in the first century A.D.⁵

The Athenian praise of Homer's practical knowledge is very similar to some of the eighteenth-century views which will be discussed in this book. It is tied up with the realism and the accuracy about the physical environment that was Robert Wood's thesis in his study of Homer, and with the fact that the Homeric epics gave a picture of early civilization, which was maintained

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by Mme Dacier, and even by Perrault and Voltaire who for other reasons belittled the value of his poems. Indeed the humanist attacks on the poet's naivety and vulgarity concentrated on the question of Homer's authority in practical matters and on the society that had produced him, and these too can be seen in the framework of the issues raised for the first time in antiquity.

The ancient world also saw Homer as the source of a true and significant picture of the moral and human universe. The generally held view that Homer was *sophos* was contested for the first time (as far as we know) by Xenophanes, who attacked Homer's misrepresentation of the gods. But such accusations were largely directed against the mode of poetry as opposed to enlightened philosophy, and when Plato lets Socrates pour scorn on Homer, it is a condemnation of poets in general who can have no vital part in teaching men the way to wisdom and to true knowledge (*episteme*). All poets can do is help people cherish their false opinions (*doxa*) of the human and divine worlds, and Homer was the prime teacher in this art. Plato's attack on Homer was also connected with his opposition to those teachers of rhetoric, such as Gorgias and Protagoras, whose sophisticated devices of expression he equated with the art of lying.⁶

But Plato's condemnation of this school did not diminish the authority which was accorded to Homer by the majority of Greek educators. Pseudo-Plutarch vigorously supported Homer's conception of the moral universe, and on the controversial issue of the gods' liberal intercourse with men he took the stand that Homer had wanted to show how 'Dii homines adiuvant.'⁷ The main defence, however, came in the form of allegorical interpretations of the Homeric epic, and there are rudiments of this practice in pseudo-Plutarch's views. The Stoics, led by Zeno and Cleanthes in the third and second centuries B.C., had turned literary and historical exegesis into allegorizing. The allegorical school of interpretation wanted to see the Homeric epic as a picture of humanity where the gods represented certain moral forces, for good or bad. Porphyry, who wrote towards the end of the third century A.D., has left us testimony in his *Homeric problemata* and *The cave of the nymphs* of this method of extracting true wisdom from Homer by seeing his poetry as an allegorical representation of man's effort.

Dion of Prusa, who wrote on Homer in his *Discourses* at the

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end of the first century A.D., had largely rejected allegorical interpretation, but the essay on Homeric epic is significant because he explicitly condemned Homer for having produced no true hero. Ulysses was a liar, Achilles was a coward, and the expedition to Troy was a shameless Greek enterprise. The lack of a hero especially in the *Iliad* was noted already by the Greek commentators, and when the legend of Alexander began to grow in the Graeco-Roman world, the contrast appeared startling. Cicero in his *Pro archia poeta*, and Plutarch in his *Life of Alexander*, stated a case which held the field till the eighteenth century.⁸

The high regard in which Homer was nevertheless held in antiquity is perhaps most clearly exemplified in Aristotle's theory of the epic. Plato's views on the function of poetry were criticized by Aristotle, who saw poetic creation as primarily *mimesis*, a presentation of reality in the chosen medium. In the *Poetics* Aristotle raised Homer above other poets, because they 'are engaged throughout, and only rarely use *mimesis*; but Homer after a brief preface at once brings on a man' (1460 A). To imitate the world of reality by means of art is an innate human characteristic (1448 B). Homer, according to Aristotle, was the teacher of all other poets in the technique of *mimesis* (1460 A). Aristotle saw no contradiction between poetic *mimesis* and that reality which is the object of *mimesis*, so he could fully appreciate the complexity of the Homeric poems without having to resort to allegorical interpretations (1460 B).

In the numerous literary imitations of the Homeric epic in antiquity the conventional predilection for the techniques of the master is evident, although the shorter form, the epyllion, is increasingly preferred by poets from the hellenistic period onwards. Callimachus employed Homeric diction but rejected a long epic. When Virgil chose to write in the Homeric tradition, after the moderately successful attempts in the long epic form by Naevius and Ennius, he decidedly rejected the Homeric morality and conception of the hero. He chose to write a long nationalistic epic with an imperial theme and to furnish his hero, *pious Aeneas*, with such a rigorous set of qualities as would fit the task and could not be misinterpreted. Thus the real objections to Homer come from the Latins with their preference for Virgil. In Macrobius we trace a new ideal for epic stressing *decorum* and *gravitas*, and Servius, a meticulous commentator on the *Aeneid*, condemns

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Achilles in favour of the Latin Aeneas. As the hellenistic poets had preferred more sophisticated forms of poetic expression, such as the epyllion, the elegy and the lyric, to the long Homeric narrative, and as it was this tradition rather than the Homeric that was transmitted to the Roman poets, so Virgil took only the outward epic form from the Homeric tradition for his essentially serious, redemptive and cosmopolitan message.

These two influential factors in the actual literary practice, supported by the Latin commentators on Virgil, survived right through the Middle Ages to the Renaissance and contributed to the decline of Homer's reputation, since Homer was increasingly considered to be provincial, ambiguous and unserious. The late Latin antiquity pushed Homer away to an obscure corner of literary learning to which geographically also he was seen to belong. The allegorical interpreters of Homer continued the efforts to understand the poet better than he himself had done, but their practice gradually moved further away from Homer, and became a general approach to literature and to mythology, exemplified in the writings of Fulgentius in the late fifth century A.D.⁹ The displeasure and belittlement shown by antiquity with regard to Homer had of course started with Plato and the philosophers of the Athenian Enlightenment, and we may remember Nietzsche's conviction that with Socrates a development had originated which was to make a conscious and enlightened man for ever incapable of understanding the popular mind of Homer.¹⁰

The early Christian writers felt obliged to comment on the nature of the Homeric poems in formulating the principles of Christian life and education. The Church fathers had a natural distrust of paganism while they esteemed the learning that pagan antiquity could show; Clement of Alexandria and Basil of Caesarea have left us testimony of this.¹¹ The early Christians were led to make the objections expressed in antiquity to Homer's gods particularly their own, and they fully endorsed the views of Dion of Prusa, for example, who thought that Homer had presented the divine beings as behaving in an immoral and vile manner. But they also had a predilection for allegorical interpretation, which in pagan antiquity was separated from the criticism of Homer's gods since pagan allegorizing was intended to justify the gods. The Stoics had been concerned to explain the meaning of the myths, and the neoplatonists had wanted to create for

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pagan philosophy the equivalent of the Christian myth. But this pagan tradition of allegorizing again plays a prominent part in the Byzantine Christian commentators on Homer, the twelfth-century Eustathius and Tzetzes who were devoted to the poet and regarded him as the source of esoteric wisdom.¹²

The practice of allegorizing lived through the Middle Ages, when the literature of classical antiquity was freely treated to suit contemporary pedagogical aims: excerpts from famous works were bound together and retitled, poems that closely followed the subject matter, style and metre of the ancient author were added, moral and allegorical commentaries were attached as advice to the reader, and the works themselves were christianized so that Ovid, for example, was turned into a Christian writer.¹³ But the occidental Middle Ages, departing from the early Christian writers as well as from the Byzantine scholars, knew the Homeric story only in Latin through Dictys Cretensis and Dares Phrygius; and knowledge of the Greek language existed only in the remote asylums of Irish monasteries and of Southern Italy.¹⁴

Homer re-enters the European tradition in the fourteenth century as the man behind Virgil, possibly a greater Virgil; and his champions from Petrarch to Cuperus and Kuester in the seventeenth century tend to accept him as great without specifying why, except that the allegorical tradition is brought in again to present him as a mine of esoteric wisdom.

The Renaissance, conventionally so termed, covers a series of 'renascences' which happened independently over a long period of time, and it would be outside the purpose of this introduction even to attempt an exhaustive survey of those new beginnings which gradually broke away from the latinized composure of the Middle Ages by seeking new roots in Greek antiquity. What interests us here is to establish how the Renaissance scholars attempted to rehabilitate Homer and how they were disappointed with what they were able to find in the poet.

It would be very helpful to discover exactly how well the Renaissance scholars knew their Homer, apart from the fact that they had access to manuscripts of the Greek text, thanks to the Byzantine contacts of Nicolaus Sigeros, Manuel Chrysoloras, Francesco Filelfo and Giovanni Aurispa at the end of the fourteenth century and the beginning of the fifteenth.¹⁵ But it is difficult to settle this problem. Some evidence is provided by the

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fact that improvements to the Homeric text were slow in coming, and that the line-by-line version thrown together by Leonzio Pilato in 1369 survived without much change until the Cambridge edition of 1689.¹⁶ The epics were read with the help of the more or less word-for-word interlinear Latin translations of Pilato and P. C. Decembrio (1439–44) and the Latin prose translation of Lorenzo Valla (1440–4),¹⁷ and this provides an interesting indication of the ‘popular’ knowledge of Homer, for students and most non-experts read Homer in versions with these interlinear translations. But none of them were much good either as Latin or in giving the sense of the Greek. On the other hand we have Angelo Poliziano making his translation in Latin hexameters of the second book of the *Iliad* in 1470; and we know that he and Andronicus Callistus lectured on Homer in the 1470s and 1480s; and this provides some evidence of a genuine interest in Homer in the academic circles of Florence.¹⁸

But the fact remains that there was a note of definite disappointment with Homer. This is evident even in Petrarch’s enthusiasm for Greek poetry in his *Africa* and *Bucolicum Carmen*. The fifteenth-century Italians were disappointed because Homer did not emerge obviously as a greater Virgil. To some extent they put down their unfavourable impressions to the poverty of the translations, and that is why they call persistently for a good verse translation. But the verse translations that were made had a Virgilian character. The superiority of Virgil, implied in the work of Macrobius, was implicitly recognized by translators, such as Poliziano (1470) and Eobanus Hessus (1540), who used Virgilian phraseology, and was explicitly stated by Angelo Decembrio in *Politia literaria* (1462).¹⁹

The disappointment is mirrored in the relative neglect of Homer by the scholars of the period: the poet did not attract a major scholarly effort. The Homeric text was not improved to any marked extent. When Demetrius Chalcondyles printed his edition of Homer (1488) he merely used the Byzantine vulgate as the basis of his text. The scholia minora were very gradually brought into use after their publication by J. Lascaris in Rome (1517);²⁰ they did not influence the Aldine printings of Homer (1504, 1517, 1524). The major step forward was taken by A. Turnebus, who utilized the recently published commentary by Eustathius (1544–50) for his Paris edition of Homer (1554). But