Homer: The Resonance of Epic
Classical Literature and Society
Series Editor: Michael Gunningham

Homer: The Resonance of Epic
Barbara Graziosi & Johannes Haubold

Ovid and His Love Poetry
Rebecca Armstrong
Contents

Preface 7

Part I. Resonance 11
1. The Poet 15
2. The Poems 35

Part II. Resonant Patterns 63
3. Gods, Animals and Fate 65
4. Men, Women and Society 95
5. Death, Fame and Poetry 121

Notes 151
Bibliography 165
Index 173
This page intentionally left blank
This book is the result of many conversations about the Homeric poems, both among ourselves and with students, friends and colleagues. Students, in particular, relentlessly demanded that we face the question of how scholarly insights into Homeric poetry affect our appreciation of the Iliad and the Odyssey. The twentieth century was a very interesting period for the study of Homer: the sustained comparison between Homeric epic and a vast range of ancient and modern epic traditions, an ever more sophisticated understanding of oral poetry, the decipherment of Linear B, the sensational discovery of Akkadian epic – all have had a profound impact on Homeric scholarship. If one were to single out the most important contribution to the study of Homer in the last century, the work of Milman Parry would be a strong contender. Parry’s comparison between South Slavic epic and the Homeric poems has had a major impact on our understanding of composition, but has left us with many questions about the implications of his insights for the interpretation of Homeric epic. It is to these questions that this book is devoted.

Students, especially those who first approach the poems in translation and cannot be drawn into discussions of hexameter lines at close range, insist on asking how an awareness of compositional techniques affects the overall interpretation of the poems. Often, scholars tend to answer this question in rather negative terms: for example, countless publications warn readers that they should not expect traditional adjectives to fit the context in which they are found; epithets, as well as longer ‘formulas’, are simply there to help the bard fill the line with the right number of long and short syllables. This kind of approach does not bode well for an exciting interpretation of the poems, especially not in translation, since the beauty and precision of the formulaic system is largely lost in languages other than Homeric Greek. Scholars sometimes go on to emphasise that Homer rose above the tradition to which he belonged and offered us the first truly literary and literate works of western civilisation. This view can be summarised as follows. The tradition to which the Homeric poems belong is invoked in order to explain their less attractive aspects, such as their formulaic language, their repetitiveness, or the ill-fitting adjectives, while Homer’s ‘greatness’ emerges from comparisons with
other towering figures from later times: Virgil, Dante, Tasso, Milton, James Joyce.

One wonders, then, what the ancient Greeks, who did not have the benefit of hindsight, made of the Homeric poems. Our book begins with the question how the Greeks of the archaic period understood the poems. One reason why we focus on early audiences is that they suggest an approach to Homeric epic which is challenging and rewarding for the modern reader. They were not interested in the mechanics of oral composition: they did not invoke ‘formulas’, ‘type scenes’, ‘traditional narratives’ or any of the technical terms which have become the stock-in-trade of modern Homerists. Neither, however, did they seek to identify and elevate the precise contribution of ‘Homer’ above the wider tradition to which the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* belong. In fact, Homer was considered the author not just of those two epics, but also of many other early hexameter poems, some of which are extant (the *Homeric Hymns*), while others survive in fragments and summaries (the poems of the Epic Cycle, which tell the earlier and later stages of the Trojan War and the events of the Theban War, *The Sack of Oechalia*, and a comic poem called *Margites*).

We begin by asking what Homer and his poems meant in an archaic Greek context. We look at the way in which our earliest sources talk about Homer, how they depict him, what they say about his oeuvre, and how they characterise his relationship to Hesiod, the other major figure of the early Greek hexameter tradition. We argue that these two poets together represented the major authorities on the gods, the heroic past, and the overall history of the cosmos, from the time when Earth first emerged from Void, to the world as it is now. Homer and Hesiod do not just share the ‘tools’ of early hexameter epic, a common stock of epithets, formulas, type scenes, which are there to help them in the process of composition. They share a vision of the cosmos and how it developed through time. The traditional language of early hexameter reflects a precise understanding of the overall shape and history of the cosmos: Zeus is ‘the son of Cronus’, the heroes are ‘godlike’, two men ‘as they are now’ cannot lift stones that a single hero could throw with ease. Each early hexameter poem places itself very precisely within this overall history of the cosmos, a history which is embedded in the very language of epic. The Homeric poems, we argue, derive much of their meaning from the interaction between the particular story they tell and its resonance within the overall development of the cosmos.

In a sense, it could be said that this book examines the place of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* within the wider epic tradition not by looking at the formal characteristics of traditional epic such as, for example,
metrical shape or formulaic economy, but by focusing on the meaning of traditional expressions. The formula ‘Zeus the son of Cronus’, for example, is not just a way of getting to the end of a line without taking too long over it: it tells us something important about this god, and hints at the significance of the succession myth in early Greek epic. The fact that Zeus succeeds his father Cronus yet should not in turn be replaced by his own son is crucial to the Theogony, and reverberates also through other poems, not least the Iliad itself. A shared ‘formula’, then, is also a shared insight into the epic cosmos. We hope that this book, with its overall focus on the meaning of traditional epic, will be of interest to the general reader who is familiar with the Iliad and the Odyssey in translation; but we also hope that it contains something that will appeal to professional scholars.

The first part of the book, ‘Resonance’ (Chapters 1 and 2), introduces the reader to ancient and modern approaches to Homer, and develops an approach to Homeric epic which focuses on its resonance, that is, its ability to evoke a web of associations and implications by referring to the wider epic tradition. We hope to show that the traditional character of Homeric epic, far from being an impediment to originality, makes the poems resonant with meaning. The second part of the book, ‘Resonant Patterns’ (Chapters 3 to 5), offers some examples of how the approach outlined in Part I can be used to interpret the poems. Because the book is conceived as an introduction, the examples chosen focus on central themes in the Iliad and the Odyssey: the gods, nature and fate (Chapter 3), Homeric society (Chapter 4), and the quest for fame on the part of individuals (Chapter 5). Taken together, Parts I and II provide the general reader with an up-to-date introduction to ancient and modern approaches to Homer and an overall interpretation of the poems. We hope that the more expert reader will find new insights concerning both the overall approach proposed and the light it sheds on particular aspects of the poems.

To cater for a diverse readership, all Greek texts are quoted in English. Where possible, we have printed Lattimore’s translations of the Iliad and the Odyssey, which seem to be the most widely used by students. In some places, however, we have produced our own, in order to ensure that the translations we offer highlight the aspects of the texts that are under discussion. We are grateful to HarperCollins Publishers and to the University of Chicago Press for permission to print Lattimore’s translations. We also wish to thank Faber & Faber Ltd for permission to quote the opening of Christopher Logue’s War Music on p. 39.

The Homeric poems have enjoyed an extraordinary and long-lasting success. Each generation of listeners and readers contribute their own
Preface

Perspective on the poems: it is not possible, in the course of a short book, to do justice to all, or even most, aspects of Homeric interpretation. We privilege the views of archaic audiences, who heard the poems when their reputation was still in the making, as well as discussing modern approaches to Homeric epic. Readers may miss discussions of many important topics: for example, the role of the Homeric poems in ancient, medieval and modern education, their use as moral instruction, their place in the history of literary criticism. Endnotes also tend to be brief: we mostly refer to recent publications, rather than trace the long and tortuous history of particular debates. We hope, however, that the references we provide are sufficient to direct the reader to fuller discussions.

In preparing this book, we have been greatly helped not only by our students, but also by colleagues at the University of Durham, who made it possible for us to take an early term of research leave which we used to write the bulk of the book. We are also very grateful to Andrea Capra who suggested we spend our period of leave in Pisa, and to the colleagues and students at the Scuola Normale Superiore, who contributed much to making our stay pleasant and interesting. For a month in summer we also benefited from the generous hospitality of the Center for Hellenic Studies in Washington; Gregory Nagy, in particular, made time to discuss ideas and perspectives. Several friends have read and commented on drafts of the whole book: Elton Barker, Felix Budelmann, Andrea Capra, Pat Easterling, Rachel Foxley, Simon Goldhill, Maria Serena Mirto, and Robin Osborne. We are very grateful for their perceptive, detailed and challenging comments, and for their support especially during the final stages of writing and revision. We would also like to thank the series editor, Michael Gunningham, who welcomed the volume in Duckworth’s new Classical Literature and Society series, and Deborah Blake for her unfailing support in the production of the book: we hope that our discussion, with its emphasis on the early audiences of Homeric epic, may be a fitting contribution to the overall themes of the series.

Our children, Laura and Roberto, kept us busy and happy while writing the book: it is dedicated to them.

Durham, 2004
Part I

Resonance

Brief introductions to the Iliad and the Odyssey usually start with a grand statement about the poems, their elusive author, and their place of honour in the history of literature. For example: ‘The two great epics which go under the name of Homer bring European literature into existence with a bang.’¹ There are problems, however, with this kind of statement: it tells us something about the history of literature and quite a lot about European identity, but remains uninformative about the place and meaning of Homeric epic in early Greece. To archaic audiences of Homer, our concept of ‘literature’ would have been quite alien, as indeed the tags ‘European’ or ‘western’ which are routinely attached to the Homeric epics.² Moreover, the idea that the Iliad and the Odyssey sprang into existence out of nothing, ‘with a bang’, would have made no sense to the early audiences of Homer: they were perfectly aware that the poems developed out of a long and distinguished tradition of epic poetry.³

All these points emerge very clearly from an observation made by Herodotus, the fifth-century thinker, traveller and historian (a title some have denied him, because of his interest in, or propensity for, fiction and lies). About the river Oceanus, which is described in epic as the water that surrounds the earth,⁴ he made the following claim: ‘I do not know of the existence of a river Oceanus: I think that Homer, or one of the poets who lived before him, invented the name and introduced it into poetry.’⁵ For Herodotus, then, Homer is not necessarily the earliest poet: it is possible that he took over the name ‘Oceanus’ from a predecessor.⁶ So much, then, for the notion of Homer as the fountainhead of all literature. More challenging, perhaps, is Herodotus’ insistence that no river named ‘Oceanus’ actually exists. The implication of the passage is that Herodotus has checked the claims made in Homeric epic against what is really the case, and found them wanting. Many readers will find Herodotus’ approach to epic intolerably naïve: it seems strange to us that anyone could read Homeric epic as an account of how the world really is; surely, the Homeric poems are, and were always meant to be, literary fiction. Anyone who takes them as an authoritative account of the cosmos, or
Part I. Resonance

feels compelled to argue against their authority as cosmic history (as Herodotus does), is a fool.

We are confronted here with a familiar problem which plagues not only the study of Homer and classics more generally, but human interaction *tout court*: ‘either you think like me or you are a fool.’ Statements which reveal that the early Greeks had an attitude to the Homeric poems different to that which prevails among modern readers represent a challenge. One way to deal with the problem is to assume, against all evidence, that the Greeks understood the Homeric poems much as we do: Herodotus might have argued against some very silly people who took the poems as factual accounts, but intelligent Greeks surely took them as literary fiction rather than reliable accounts of how the world is, or was in the heroic age. This kind of attitude is anachronistic: many recent studies have emphasised the differences between ancient and modern concepts of truth, fiction, lies and poetry. It is also clear that ancient readers tended to treat Homeric poetry as a reliable account of how things are.

Another response is to posit a history of development and progress: in the work of Herodotus we see how the modern concept of fiction starts to emerge. He is just about able to conceive that poets make things up: before him the concept of fiction was hazier still, whereas in later Greek culture it was well understood; someone like Aristotle is a profound reader of Homer and an impressive literary critic whose insights approximate our own. This developmental approach has been very influential in the field of classics, but it has at least one serious drawback. It fails to acknowledge that we may have something to learn from the views of the early, supposedly more primitive Greeks: maybe they can in fact help us in the reading of Homer.

This book seeks to take seriously the challenge of understanding Homeric epic in its early Greek context. We suggest an approach which respects the experiences of the early audiences of the poems, but we also take full advantage of recent scholarship on traditional epic. We start by analysing some fundamental concepts currently used in the study of Homer. In Chapter 1, ‘The Poet’, we compare ancient and modern views about the poet Homer and his relationship to Hesiod. In the second chapter, ‘The Poems’, we investigate how epic was understood in the archaic period and explore the connections between ancient views of Homeric poetry and modern insights into oral, or more generally traditional, epic. In the course of this analysis, we develop an approach to Homeric poetry which focuses on its ‘resonance’, that is, its ability to evoke a wider epic tradition and place itself in relation to that tradition. This approach, we argue, makes good sense of modern
research into traditional poetry but above all respects ancient views about Homer and his art. A focus on resonance also helps to explain the extraordinary authority of the Homeric poems in early Greece: rather than being thought of as the first works of literature, they belonged to a vast and remarkably coherent tradition which encompassed the history of the cosmos from its origins to the present day.

Part I. Resonance
This page intentionally left blank
If there is one thing that people tend to know about the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* it is that there is a ‘question’ concerning their author. Quite what the problem might be often remains unclear: formulations of ‘The Homeric Question’ range from the sophisticated to the abstruse. According to a famous anecdote, a schoolboy once remarked: ‘Homer was not written by Homer, but by another man of his name.’\(^1\) This might seem like a hopeless muddle, but some up-to-date scholarship reaches alarmingly similar conclusions. For example, a recent editor of the Homeric poems believes that one thing we certainly know about the poet of the *Iliad* is that he was not called Homer.\(^2\) Paradox and contradiction are not limited to modern scholarship; quarrels and jokes about the identity of the poet and the composition of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were common in antiquity too. Lucian, in the second century AD, famously ridiculed his contemporaries’ obsession with the identity of Homer and the meaning of his work. In *A True Story* 2.20 (a text which is in fact a collection of lies), he claims that he has met Homer on the Island of the Blessed and has finally discovered the truth about him:

I asked him, among other things, where he came from, pointing out that this was still being investigated among us to this day. He said: ‘I am aware that some think I am from Chios, others from Smyrna and many from Colophon, but in fact I am Babylonian, and among my fellow-citizens I am not called Homer, but Tigranes. Afterwards, when I became a hostage (\(\text{homéreuô}\)) to the Greeks, I changed my name.’ I also enquired about the lines that scholars consider spurious, and asked if he had written them. He said that they were all composed by himself. As a result, I rejected the work of Zenodotus, Aristarchus and their followers as utter nonsense. When he had given satisfactory answers to these questions, I asked why he started with the wrath of Achilles, and he said that it had occurred to him just like that, without any preparation. I also wanted to know whether he wrote the *Odyssey* before the *Iliad*, as most people claim, and he said he did not. That he was not blind – because they say that too about him – I found out at once: I could see it for myself, so I did not have to ask.
Lucian’s Homer jokingly proposes an entirely new identity for himself: contrary to common opinion, he is in fact a Babylonian man known as Tigranes by his fellow citizens. This less than serious attempt to discover the ‘real’ Homer behind the many legends and suppositions captures well a common assumption that still drives modern approaches to the author of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*: there must be a simple answer to the question of Homer’s identity, and, given the right methods, it can be discovered. A recent example of this view can be found in Latacz’s approach to Homer: he claims that the stories which circulated about the poet in the sixth century BC represent a ‘false track’ and that only modern scholarship has developed ‘the means and method’ to interpret the poems correctly, thereby enabling us to discover the real Homer behind the ancient legends.¹

Unlike Lucian, Latacz is not joking. According to him, there really is an answer to the question of Homer’s identity; and that answer, paradoxically, can be found only if we discount our earliest sources. His degree of optimism is astonishing, given the lack of consensus that has characterised debates over the last two or three millennia. That lack of consensus has a reason: there is no hard evidence on which to base theories about the identity of Homer. The Homeric epics are famously silent about their author: the name ‘Homer’ is not even mentioned in the poems, nor are we told much else about the bard who sings the epics. The ancient sources which do mention Homer represent him in ways that defy common notions of what is humanly possible: he is supposed to have been born in many different cities, to have been totally destitute and yet have performed for kings, to have composed an inordinately vast number of poems (poems which modern scholars tend to date to several different centuries), and to have died by slipping on dung after having failed to solve a children’s riddle. As many scholars have pointed out, we are confronted with legends rather than factual accounts.² We are going to argue later in this chapter that these legends are nevertheless important for the interpretation of Homeric epic, but for now we need to make a more basic point. The Homeric Question cannot simply ‘be solved’. We should rather aim to bear in mind a range of possibilities about how the Homeric poems might have been composed as well as an awareness of the parameters of the debate over the Homeric Question.

Perhaps the most striking feature of the debate, apart from its sheer extension through time, is the complex network of connections between arguments and positions across different centuries or even millennia. These connections range from the fundamental – we learn the name
‘Homer’ from our ancient sources, so there is at least one obvious continuity there – to the quirky and coincidental. Among the latter, we may count Lucian’s presentation of Homer as a Babylonian, in view of the modern interest in the connections between Greek and Babylonian epic.5 Now, it is easy to see that Lucian’s reasons for presenting Homer as a Babylonian are not the same as those that inspire modern research into Greek and Near Eastern epic.6 Yet in other cases, it is far less easy to disentangle ancient and modern speculations in order to construct a simple narrative of progress. An irreverent little couplet composed by Goethe neatly makes this point.

In the late eighteenth century, Friedrich August Wolf argued that the Homeric epics were a collection of orally composed poems. His arguments had a major impact on the history of classical scholarship: today, he is standardly presented as the first modern classicist in that he addressed the Homeric Question with philological rigour. However, Goethe was quick to undermine his claims to progress with a biting couplet:7

**Wolf’s Homer**

Seven cities squabbled over which one gave birth to him;
now that the Wolf tore him apart, let each of them have a piece.

Apart from the pun on Wolf’s name and the general irreverence of the poem, Goethe casts doubt on Wolf’s achievement by suggesting that there have always been arguments over the identity of Homer, and that a plurality of authors has always threatened to emerge from such arguments. Again, there are important differences between ancient quarrels over the birthplace of Homer and Wolf’s analysis of the process of composition and textual fixation which lies behind the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. But the point is that there are also undeniable continuities between ancient and modern speculations about Homer. We have learned from our earliest sources not only the name Homer, but also the habit of disagreeing about him. For this reason, it is always possible to use the name Homer in order to equivocate, make fun and thereby challenge any claim to progress.

The problem is that equivocations over the name ‘Homer’ are not always as deliberate as Goethe’s, and often cause genuine confusion. Students often ask what scholars mean by the name ‘Homer’, and whether there is any consensus beyond the many disagreements. These are important questions to which we now turn, also because they help us to place the argument of this book in the wider context of Homeric scholarship.