

Critical Remarks on Homer's Iliad: Introduction

By Eustathios of Thessaloniki

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If at first someone keeps his distance from the beauty of Homer's sirens, plugs up his ears with wax or turns in the opposite direction, he might avoid their spell. But if he draws close and approaches their song, I do not think that he would pass by easily, even if bound by many fetters, nor if he succeeded, would he do so happily. For if someone were to list the sights such as the seven commonly known in stories and the sounds worthy of a second hearing, Homeric poetry would certainly be among them. I do not think that any wise man of old failed to sample it, especially among those who drew on secular wisdom. For according to the old saying, all rivers, springs and wells are from the ocean. If not all, then at least much of literature's effect among the wise flowed from Homer. Indeed, there was no one among those who pondered the things above or studied nature, character or even secular reasoning who was not received as a guest at Homer's banquet. All were refreshed by him. Some stayed through to the end and lived off his common meals, and others found what they needed and took from him something useful for their own work. Among these even the priestess of Pythian Apollo uttered many of her oracles in Homeric style. Philosophers considered him, even if Hipparchos is jealous, as we will discuss shortly. Rhetoricians pondered him. Grammarians, like the others, read him but also used him to teach their subject. None of the poets who followed him disregarded his methods of composition. They imitated him, making slight alterations and doing everything possible to write like Homer. Even geographers emulate him with awe. Those who tend wounds and follow the Asclepian way of life also learn from him. His work attracts even kings as Alexander the Great demonstrates. He even carried the Homeric tome into battle as a treasure and support and rested his head on it when he slept, so that even in sleep he might not be separated from it and good dreams might appear to him. Homeric poetry is indeed a royal matter, especially the Iliad. A proverb says that it is an Iliad of evils, but it is, in fact, an Iliad of every kind of good. Composed dramatically by both simple and complex narration, it is full of myriad things that one would call good: philosophy, rhetoric, military skill, instruction on the ethical virtues, arts and sciences of every kind. From it someone can learn praiseworthy cleverness, the ploys of crafty liars, humorous wit and the methods of oratory. It is not possible to express how much one would learn if he devotes himself to it. For it would be unfortunate to rob Homer's art of those things that are revered in history: the breadth of experience, the pleasure of its listeners, the teaching of the soul, the motivation toward virtue and all of the other things by which the historian gains glory. However, since this

work is full of myths there is the risk of wondering whether he runs afoul. First of all, these Homeric myths are not intended to be humorous. They are instead the phantoms or veils of noble thoughts. Some are molded by him to fit his subject matter, while others naturally allegorize his themes. Finally, many of these myths that were composed by the ancients and drawn aptly into his poetry are not allegories specifically related to the Trojans at all, but rather are used as those who first composed them intended. But a man so prolific in wisdom did not delight in myths alone. For if wisdom is truthful observation, then the wise man observes truthfully. How can we say that Homer did not do the same? He performed his art by bringing together many elements and mingling them together in his work. Thus, he first entices and charms by surface appearance then captures in this net, so they say, those who shrink from the subtlety of philosophy. Then, having given them a taste of the sweetness in truth, he sends them off to proceed as wise men to hunt after truth in other places. Moreover, he becomes the model for creating credible myths in order that he might lead those eager to learn in this technique just as he does in all the others. But it is especially remarkable that, although his work is full of myths, he is not shunned but loved. Even those who allege to hate him do not in fact shrink from having contact with him. First dismissing him, they return later, just like the proverbial Scythian who upon seeing a Greek leaves behind his dead but well bred horse but when all is quiet returns to his customary behavior and enjoys what he wishes. Even if those who read it proclaim it is a useful thing, there is still no denying that Homer's poem is a very useful thing. But since this poet is easy to use, we have been faulted for failing to make it clear that we did not intend to speak for Homer. If someone were to take up this task he would not require many words. He would accomplish it simply by producing the books that are ready at hand, some written about him and others written by him.

Since it has been established that those who toil over Homer are not completely laughable, it remains for us to do what we originally intended. We will no longer praise the poet but do what we have been asked to do, not by some important patron, whom the literati serve, but by our dear friends who think well of us. It was their desire to go through the Iliad and draw out useful elements for the novice, in other words, not for the learned man, for in all likelihood none of these would escape his notice, but for the youth just beginning his studies and perhaps for those who have learned but are in need of reminding. So this was our goal. Therefore, the useful elements are arranged in a well-ordered sequence, not everything written by those who have worked on the poet (for this would be a foolish and odd task and not very easily accomplished), so that those who wish to learn find everything important in its proper place. These things include ideas that are useful for those who write prose and for those who wish to make appropriate rhetorical insertions. There are models that can be used by someone who wishes to mimic them that cause us to marvel at the poet's artistry. There are words more suited to prose that are also often austere, rough and poetic. Unless someone explicates them in an etymological fashion, the selected passage will not be clear. Then there are those characteristics that make Homeric poetry exalted. There are stories that the poet sometimes uses according to his own method, but more often he uses them as others have. And then there are myths. On the one hand, there are those that are pure, uninterpreted and only quoted. On the other hand, there are those that are treated

allegorically or spiritually. Finally, there are a thousand other good things that are useful for life. These things are presented concisely but in a varied manner, so that if someone reads through the entire work with an open mind, he could say justifiably and truthfully that the attempt is not without some value. Concentrating on Homer's Iliad would in itself be a good thing for the training of youths and the study of reading. This is true whether someone takes the present work and consults it alone or considers it alongside the Iliad, should our work prove useful for its reading. Moreover, the work here under consideration is not an unbroken text of the type that exhausts its reader by its relentless and intractable form. Instead, its useful points are set out individually – when one finishes, another begins. And so whoever is reading this work can often stop and put it aside. My works on Dionysius Periegetes and the Odyssey are arranged in the same way. For here too the works are divided into a well-ordered sequence for those who wish to excerpt the useful points, not for those who have made extensive studies. So no one should deprecate the work by claiming that we have accomplished nothing new. For it is obvious that a hostile reader could say such things and charge that he finds things here that clearly have been written by others. He could then say, according to the proverb, that the present work is nothing “holy”. But such a person should know that he judges poorly, which is all we will say lest we be judged to be like the proverbial Astydamos. Even if the person who says these things had judged correctly, we would still apply ourselves to this work. If we do not please him, we might at least please simple couriers, taking on our burden without complaining. As wise men have made clear in their introductions to the Iliad it is not our business to obscure what others have said, to hunt after vain glory or to become a laughing stock by transcribing completely the work of others. However, it is necessary to make the following points. Some have completely obscured Homeric poetry, almost as if they were ashamed that the poet spoke like a mere mortal. They transposed everything he said into an allegory, including not only the mythical, but even what is admittedly historical – Agamemnon, Achilles, Nestor, Odysseus and all the rest of the heroes – so that the poet seemed to be speaking to us in dreams. By contrast, others took the complete opposite position. When they came upon these passages, they plucked the Homeric wings and did not allow him to fly aloft at all. They clung only to surface appearance, dragging the poet down from his spiritual height and not allowing anything to be allegorized by him. They left the stories to be as they were, and this was well done, but they even regarded the myths as unsuited for allegory. Aristarchus was this type of interpreter, as subsequently will be made clear. Unfortunately, he made this method the norm. On the other hand, more discerning readers, letting the stories speak for themselves, at first took the myths at face value and pondered the invention and persuasiveness through which myths communicate a kind of truth. Then, because a myth is inherently false, they put aside the formal reading of it and proceeded toward its allegorical meaning, either regarding it literally, as others often do, or according to custom, or even historically. For many myths can be applied to history since myths often portray the truth of some event that actually occurred in our lives. Our present study will adhere to this latter method. It will not disregard the myths completely, but rather it will consider them as the ancients did. And although you can learn these things directly from the ancients, do not recoil upon hearing that we intend to imitate them. Just as cooks merit respect for blending into a whole things that by their nature are difficult to combine rather than for cutting up things that do not exist, so too

will we merit some respect. Our readers will find material brought together from many places. But, if our narrative seems somewhat high-minded and haughty, it is not my fault that there are dullards who are barely familiar with the works from which many of our materials have been collected. If something here has been misquoted, this, as they say, will be obvious.

Because we are working on a great poet, it is necessary to consider this word and to point out that just as ἔπος generally means λόγος (word) as in "winged words" (ἔπεα πτερόεντα), ἔπος also specifically means "metered language." Similarly, ποιεῖν (make or compose) simply means πράττειν (to do). This is how the poet frequently uses it. But the word is also applicable to those who recite poetry on special occasions on account of their apparently divine and learned status achieved through their performance. It is for this reason that certain people who identified metered language with rhapsodic poetry called those who practiced the latter epic poets rather than simply poets. This is especially true of those who write heroic poetry in hexameter. The first of these was said to be a certain Phemenoe, a prophetess of Apollo, who they say was the first to discover the ἔπος, so-called by the ancients not only because of its innate superiority through which the hexameter appropriated the common connotation of λόγος, but also because truthful predictions "follow" (ἔπονται) her prophesies. If such an etymology stretches the meaning of ἔπος, someone could still argue for it on account of the pronunciation of the word. But an examination of what epic poetry is and how it is a type of poetry like tragedy, comedy, choral poetry, lyric and other kinds should be sought in the works of others. So it is with ποιεῖν, from which we derive both poet and poetry. It is clear that according to the ancients ποιεῖν, as the Comic shows, meant to sing and to write poetically, that is, in meter, since they would say, "O Eurpides, who once composed (ἔποίησας)," instead of "who wrote in his poetry." Anyone who wrote like this was a poet, whether he was a comic or any other kind, but especially Homer. For if someone says "the rhetorician," Demosthenes immediately comes to mind, and whenever we hear "the lyricist," we go straight to Pindar, and so too, someone who hears "the poet" thinks of Homer on account of the definite article. Why? Because he displays every virtue of poetry and because he has become the font and guide to all "creators of reality" as poets are called. But let us stop with this so that we do not stray even further from our intention.

Nor have we concerned ourselves with Homer's genealogy. This point has been covered by so many others that we have nothing further to say. We should, however, make one brief point: since the poet concealed himself and was silent about who he was and where he was from, he became fought over and many-countried. According to the whim of those who claim him, he is an Ionian, a Smyrnian, an Athenian, an Egyptian and even an Italian. The Chians also fight for him, producing as evidence the so-called Homeridae, whom even Pindar recalled. Many others as well lay claim to Homer, making him their own and taking more pride in his citizenship than in any of their other virtues. Suffice it to say that there were other poets before him, whose cures of diseases Musaeus described, and that after Musaeus and Orpheus, Syagros became the first poet to sing about the Trojan War, as Aelian relates. And that Homer exhaled his inspired words and possessed an abundant and harmonious Muse when others could not even write

simple prose, as Herodotus tells us in his work on Homer. Still others have said that there were many Homers and that the one here in question was so called either because he could not see, as if he was μῆοπος (blind) and on account of this malady called Ὀμηπος, or because he was once one of those hostages whom we give as pledges of peace, a practice that is widespread among others as well. They say that these pledges of peace (ὄμηρα) are so-called by combining the word “together” (ὄμοῦ) with the word “to join” (ἄρω). For those who are in conflict with one another are joined together in harmony through these pledges. Many others used this word, including Euripides, for example, in his phrase, “Take this pledge.” Others have carefully examined whether or not there are other poems by Homer, such as the Margites and the Battle of the Mice and Frogs. If Homer contended with Hesiod of Ascra and was defeated, something the Homeridae are reluctant to say, that should be sought in those who have written about it, where the terms of the contest are laid out. Likewise, whether or not he lived during the Trojan War or after it. If someone made all of these distinctions carefully, he would have to compose a long historical book. This is not our intention, but rather what we have already set forth. Still, before we proceed to our stated goal, which requires the compiling of critical remarks, we should add that the Iliad is manly, noble and sublime since it is very heroic. But the Odyssey is moral since it has been written more clearly. We should also add that one can experience the Homeric force more in the Odyssey than in the Iliad. For the Iliad presents an abundance of oratory, but the Odyssey is sparing and its scope limited. Nevertheless, the poet was content to compose one book in this way, the other in that, showing that he could do anything and was equally ambitious in compositions that are multifaceted and those that are not. Thus, he gave one a title taken from a single person, Odysseus, making clear the limited scope of the book’s subject matter, since, I suppose, he intended to describe only the story of Odysseus (although when necessary he did intertwine many other stories into it). But he gave the other book, the Iliad, a more encompassing title, not named for one person, as if it were called the Achilleiad or some other name, nor for the Trojans, as if it contained the misfortunes of the Trojans alone, but because it contained the misfortunes that occurred at Troy (τὰ Τρωϊκά). If some attempt to show that this poem was also named for a single people, namely, for the people of Troy (just as the tragedians and others after Homer who borrowed this practice often titled their own dramas for suffering characters), they are immediately refuted. For in fact, the poet is not here simply talking about what the Trojans suffered, which he does include, but the intention of the book, which he himself lays out in the preface, is to describe the misfortunes that both the Trojans and the Greeks suffered during the time of Achilles wrath, but especially the misfortunes of the Greeks. Therefore, calling the wrath of Achilles “baneful,” he adds that it “brought countless woes upon the Achaeans,” all but saying that this wrath became destructive because the Achaeans suffered woes due to it according to some fate, as will be made clear in what follows. And, therefore, this book is called the Ἰλιάς (Iliad). This word seems to be in the genitive case and defective as well. For just as the tragedians qualify the words spear, land, Troy, battle and hill with the adjective Ἰλιάς instead of Ἰλιακή so too we have the Ἰλιάς book, poem or story. As if he included within the word Ἰλιάς the word Ἰός (Ionic) in order to make it clear that the dialect is Ionic. And it should be pointed out here as well that to say the “Ἰλιάς of Homer” is the same as saying the “Τρωϊκά of Homer,” and that when the tragedians say the “Battle of Ἰλιάς” this is the same as

saying the “Trojan War.” But we should now aim for our goal, lest we hear later that we speculated unnecessarily.