

Winter 2001

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Recommended Citation

Myrsiades, K. (2001). Homer, 1715-1996 - Homer; Critical Assessments by Irene J. F. DeJong (review). *College Literature*, 28(1), 171-177. Retrieved from http://digitalcommons.wcupa.edu/eng_facpub/24

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Homer, 1715-1996

Kostas Myrsiades

DeJong, Irene J. F., ed. 1999. *Homer; Critical Assessments*. 4 vols. New York: Routledge. \$704.00hc.

Volume 1: *The Creation of the Poems*. 406pp.

Volume 2: *The Homeric World*. 471pp.

Volume 3: *Literary Interpretation*. 511pp.

Volume 4: *Homer's Art*. 484pp.

Since the publication of F. A. Wolf's *Prolegomena to Homer* in 1795, generally considered the beginning of modern Homer scholarship, Homer studies have primarily focused on three general areas of study—authorship (the Homeric Question), oral poetry, and literary interpretations of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. The Homeric Question, which had been intensively pursued by scholars since the early part of the nineteenth century, at first emphasized a single authorship for Homer's two epics. Since little to no information on such a figure existed, scholars were free to speculate on a single Homer, somewhere from Asia Minor (Smyrna and the island of Chios led the list) who had to be

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responsible for the artistry identified in the epics. By the late nineteenth century, however, Unitarianism, as the single author theory was known, was all but a minority view. It was now generally held that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were the work of minstrels who sang the stories that make up these epics for centuries before they were finally committed to paper. Thus the analysts, as those espousing the multiple author theory are known, emphasized the differences that could be identified in Homer's epics. By the early twentieth century, these differences once again began to be argued away in favor of similarities and the Homeric Question was again fully engaged. What has finally emerged from this concern over authorship is that Homer's epics probably appeared in the form we know them today in the late eighth century BC. They might have even been committed to writing around this time since there is evidence of writing by the late eighth century. However, the epics, it is now generally believed, are the work of several hands rather than the hand of a single author, and the epics in the form we know them today were compiled and divided into books by Alexandrian scholars in the third century BC. Today both the unity and the differences of the epics are stressed, although the Homeric Question lingers in the minds of scholars who continue to take sides on the issue of authorship.

Since the Second World War, Homeric scholarship has shifted its attention from the Homeric Question to two other concerns. The first, the theory of oral poetry propounded by the American scholar Milman Parry and emphasized in England and the United States and the second, neoanalysis, primarily practiced in Germany. In a way, neoanalysis is a continuation of the Homeric Question, since the neoanalysts are concerned with the history and constitution of the thematic motifs that make up the epics. According to the neoanalysts, the Homeric epics are original, many of their motifs and elements of plot having nevertheless been borrowed from literature preceding the Homeric epics.

On the other hand, the field work of Parry and his collaborators in Yugoslavia, where they studied the oral heroic poetry of the Serbian *guslars*, concluded that the Homeric epics could be seen as the works of an oral tradition. As such the epics were composed of specific metrical phrases that could be culled from memory by the singer as he recited his poems. Thus, emphasis was placed on the repetition of epithets, those words and phrases used throughout the epics to identify specific characters. Attention was focused on doublets, phrases repeated verbatim throughout the two epics, and stock motifs or themes (eating, arrival, arming), which were identified as the building blocks of oral composition.

Today Homer scholarship shifts easily between Homer's relation to the oral tradition and a close reading of the texts themselves, identifying many

elements in the two epics that might contain remnants of both a sophisticated older oral tradition and the artistry of a young literary tradition. Much of what has been written on these epics since the 1960s focuses on textual issues and literary criticism emphasizing a number of areas that have become important to Homer studies. Chief among these is the study of the Homeric simile, paradigms or inset tales, specific scenes, and both major and minor characters in both epics, as well as the interpretation of some of these characters' major speeches. Attention has also been lavished on the style and structure of these epics and on their narrative techniques.

One can easily say that most if not all of the hundreds of Homeric similes, more of which appear in the *Iliad* than in the *Odyssey*, have been carefully dissected and commented upon by modern Homer scholarship. Articles have been written on every conceivable aspect of this key Homeric characteristic, which begins by elaborating on the object to be compared before returning to the object to which it is compared (the reverse of a is like b). In Homer, literary similes are shown to delineate character, supplement and comment on individual scenes, and digress from the main plots of the epics in order to contrast the heroic world with the everyday world and culture of Homeric society.

Paradigms or inset tales have also received a great deal of attention in modern Homer scholarship. These tales or myths, embedded within the larger myths of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, have been scrutinized for their value in commenting on and supplementing the major plots of the epics. The Meleager myth, for example, considered the paradigm of paradigms, is used in the *Iliad* to comment on that epic's main protagonist, describing a situation similar to Achilles' decision to absent himself from the war until his honor is restored by Agamemnon, whom he believes has sullied it. The Meleager myth tells the story of the hero Meleager, whose refusal to defend his city is the result of a quarrel he had with his mother. At the last moment at the entreaties of his wife Cleopatra he is motivated to enter the battle, just as Achilles in the *Iliad* had rejoined the fighting at the last moment at the request of his fallen comrade Patroclus. The Atreid myth, focusing on the Agamemnon-Clytemnestra-Orestes trinity is similarly used in the *Odyssey* to supplement and comment on the Odysseus-Penelope-Telemachus family.

Essays on individual characters, both major and minor, of both epics have been a staple of Homer criticism from the beginning of modern Homer scholarship. The treatment of Odysseus, for example, has gone from one extreme to the other in Homer scholarship, from regarding him as an admirable hero or a conniving politician to considering him, in a recent essay by Charles Boer, as a "whining sniveling little slop." Explications of individual scenes or soundings covering all twenty four books of each epic contin-

ue to proliferate. A scene like that in the *Odyssey* in which the disguised Odysseus visits his wife Penelope following an absence of twenty years, can be viewed both as one in which Penelope unknowingly addresses her husband or as one in which Penelope recognizes the beggar and together plot the bow contest against the suitors. Using the theories in vogue in each age, scholars have combed Homer's epics to discover existential, anarchic, Christian, or other readings in favor in any given time.

It is these readings and textual concerns that *Homer; Critical Assessments* addresses. This massive work on the Homeric epics (a combined 1,871 pages in four volumes) is the first in the Routledge Critical Assessments of Classical Authors series. Forthcoming volumes on Virgil and Greek Tragedy are already in the works. What most distinguishes this four volume work on Homer scholarship is its price tag of \$704, which renders it inaccessible to the average academic and/or student of Homer. Nevertheless, the boxed set does manage to include literary criticism and historical background that covers nearly every aspect of Homer scholarship. In the ninety nine essays that comprise the set, Homer is approached from fourteen different categories: the Homeric Question, Oral Poetry, Historical and Archaeological Background, Homeric Society, Ethics and Psychology, Religion, Individual Scenes, Speeches, Similes, Inset Tales, The Singer and his Muse, Style and Structure, Characters, and Narrative Technique. Covering a period ranging from 1715 to 1996, two-thirds of the essays are written after 1960, with only five from the eighteenth century, and only one from the nineteenth. The selected pieces, all previously published in journals or books, have been chosen to trace the development of Homer scholarship and appear in these volumes as they were originally printed. Although the selections that make up these volumes have a decidedly Anglo-Saxon slant, a sufficient number of pieces appear in the original German (fifteen) and French (four) to tax the reader unfamiliar with these language: sixty-three essays are English, twenty eight are originally German, and seven French; and one is a translation from the Dutch.

Original to this work are three introductions written specifically for this edition and select bibliographies included at the end of each of the four volumes. The first introduction, "Homer and Oral Poetry Research," by E. J. Bakker, synthesizes the Homeric Question, gives a clear and succinct account of Milman Parry and the discovery of orality, and concludes with an excellent section on recent trends in oral poetry research. The second, "Homer and Early Greece," by H. J. van Wees, provides a thorough background view of eighth century B.C. Greece, speculating on the authorship and composition of the epics. Van Wees also deals at great length with the Homeric world, providing relevant information on Homeric geography, on the Homeric

material and political world, and on Homer's society, economy, and culture. The third essay, "Homer and Literary Criticism," by Irene J. F. DeJong, the editor of this four volume work, provides a short but knowledgeable history of modern literary interpretation of the Homeric epics from the time of the Analysts and Unitarians through the Parry epoch to recent developments in narratology and anthropology.

Substantial select bibliographies appear at the end of each volume, in addition to those offered by the individual essays, and are divided into the sections covered by that volume, leading the reader to further material not covered by the reprinted essays. The importance of these bibliographies should not be minimized. A work that traces the development of Homer scholarship across two centuries is bound to omit many important texts, omissions minimized to some extent by the bibliographies which, in addition, expose the wealth of information on Homer. Special mention should also be made of the chronological table in Volume 1 of the ninety nine reprinted articles, which lists date of publication, author, title, journal reference, and chapter and volume location of each article.

Basically the essays in these four volumes can be categorized into two groups: background material and literary criticism. For the contemporary reader, the first two volumes, *The Creation of the Poems* and *The Homeric World*, can be somewhat daunting. The first volume is perhaps the most specialized for the general reader who lacks knowledge of Greek. Full of oral formulas and Greek words, it can only appeal to the most ardent of Homerists. The introduction by E. J. Bakker mentioned above, however, helps to alleviate this volume's rather pedantic discussion of formulas and the oral tradition. Taken together, however, the essays of the first two volumes allow the reader to trace the progression of various issues concerning the epics and the Homeric world—issues addressing religion, morality, gods vs. men, and the meaning of the heroic. The value in having these essays available to the reader chronologically, in appropriate categories, and under one cover is the ability to study the development of Homer scholarship from one period to the next. Not only is one able to question the reasons why different periods seem to emphasize different approaches to and interests in studying Homer's epics, but one comes away from these essays questioning the whole idea of meaning and literary criticism in general. What a text means to a reader is not inherent in what is being read but is, rather, created by whoever is studying that text and by the community and period of which that text is a part. *Homer; Critical Assessments* makes this point clear: there are as many interpretations of the Homeric epics as there are scholars studying them. This in itself is not a bad thing, for it emphasizes that the meaning of any text is not absolute but created based on how one "sees" or "reads" as well as what one

“selects” for seeing and reading. A scholar is not always in control of what is “selected” for observation, for the period in which one operates can also impose limits on what one “sees.”

Whereas the first two volumes of *Homer Critical Assessments* provide a historical, social, and political background for the Homeric epics, and thus look beyond the texts to locate them in the language and cultural customs of some historical past, the last two volumes concern themselves primarily with the texts themselves. For this reason, the last two volumes are more accessible to the general reader than the earlier two. Volumes 3 and 4 emphasize the way we look at texts and how different historical periods force us to look at these texts in new ways. Throughout these two volumes we find discussions of individual scenes, and major speeches of the main characters, as well as individual similes and inset tales providing interpretations of Odysseus’s scar, Hektor and Andromache’s meeting in Book 6 of the *Iliad*, the meaning of the proems of both epics, Zeus’s important speech at the opening of the *Odyssey*, and Achilles’s shield. Throughout, these volumes focus on individual soundings, emphasizing how specific scenes express the artistry of the Homeric epics and their relevance to the late twentieth century.

The Homeric simile is covered in five essays ranging from 1921–1981 which stress the function, compositional use, juxtaposition, and the various interpretations that these similes have been given through the years. The Homeric epithet, studied in great detail since the beginning of modern Homer scholarship, is also given its due as are the characters Achilles, Agamemnon, Diomedes, and Glaukos from the *Iliad* and Odysseus and Elpenor from the *Odyssey*. A number of the essays touch on issues of psychology, aesthetics, art history, time, forecasting, audience participation, primitive narrative, and embedded focalization.

Although no single reader of Homer will be satisfied with all the essays included in this collection, and many will be disappointed that many favorites on Classicists’ lists have not been included in these four volumes, there is no question that this edition contains some of the best writing on Homer of the past 200 years, in particular S. Weil’s “The *Iliad* or the Poem of Force,” E. Auerbach’s “Odysseus’ Scar,” W. B. Stanford’s “The Untypical Hero,” M. Arnold’s “On Translating Homer,” and A. Pope’s “Preface to his Translation of the *Iliad*.”

There is no doubt that this work is a valuable source for Homer studies. One need look no further than the hundreds of articles and books published yearly on Homer to realize the staggering task of representing the best of Homer studies since the eighteenth century. The question, of course, remains as to what makes these ninety-nine articles the defining articles for Homer in modern times? The answer depends on who is doing the editing, and the

specific agenda an editor has in undertaking such a mammoth task. Such an undertaking will not please everyone, for some essays are bound to make the final cut for personal reasons, and tastes in all things differ; some essays that some might have considered indispensable will not be found in this edition. Nevertheless, there are a sufficient number of essays in this collection from a great variety of sources covering a broad area of concerns to please most students of Homer. Irene J. F. DeJong, the editor of this collection, has compiled for the student of Homer essays culled from both journals and books from three major languages (English, German, French) spanning a period of over 200 years; more importantly, she has selected in four volumes those essays that in the majority of cases would be on most Classicists' lists of the best of Homer. Furthermore, the arrangement of the essays in chronological order under each of the fourteen sections represented allows the reader to experience the development and the controversy of the issues in question. *Homer; Critical Assessments* is a valuable addition for any library collection. Unfortunately, its \$704 price tag excludes it from easily finding a home in personal collections.