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## The *Iliad* and Its Contexts: Introduction

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The postmodern moment of academic life has been an anxious one for scholars of "Homer." The standard object of research in the humanities has become *intertextuality*, embracing the interaction and, especially, the conflict among all forms of symbolic discourse, but with special emphasis upon those varieties whose aims are anything but aesthetic. What used to be called "works" of "art" and "literature" now attract much more attention from scholars wishing to display the implication of these modes with the ordinary business of society than from anyone interested in the sensuous, emotional, and spiritual characteristics that once seemed to set them apart, both as a class from other symbolic modes and as "works" from one another. I confess to a sense of loss in this movement that mingles with gratitude for our gains in understanding the institutional dimensions of our lives together, and indeed how art exercises its power. But my purpose here is to indicate the difficulty that has faced Homerists who wish to contribute to these gains, rather than to lament a decline in the appreciation of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. For a scholarly agenda that calls for situating these texts amidst the public discourses of a precise historical moment confronts the fact that the evidence needed to do so scarcely exists. The sublime isolation of "Homer" from the power negotiations of a real cultural setting may be an illusion, but it is an illusion forced upon us by the scanty historical record and not by humanist criticism. Nobody is going to be writing a Homeric version of *Nothing to do with Dionysos?*, much less *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*; but they will try, albeit anxiously.

In this environment the search for a historical situation for the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* has sometimes taken on a desperate, even circular **[End Page 145]** character, as the hypothesis of a certain kind of intertextual dynamic leads to a redefinition of evidence that supports the original hypothesis. It may not be a coincidence that support for a late sixth-century date for the textual fixation of the epics has grown, contrary to all linguistic evidence, at the very time when a later date would conveniently furnish more material for a politicized reading of their significance. With conflict a desideratum, the diversity of heroes, mythologies, and poets is sometimes imagined as pitting rival traditions against one another in a polemical free-for-all fought for high ideological stakes; yet would it ever occur to anybody that in deploying the mythologies and registers of the satyr play, as well as a diversity of tragic myths, the poets of Athenian tragedy were conducting polemics against themselves? His preoccupation with the Athenian *demos* has never to my knowledge fostered suspicion that the "Old Oligarch" was a populist; yet one still meets the naive assertion that the *Iliad*'s preoccupation with princes and the absence of common folk from its cast of characters mirrors the solipsistic outlook of an aristocracy. From this standpoint the questions of *how* these princes are presented, and the implications of their presentation, may become conveniently but misleadingly simple to answer. Too frequently one finds speculations about the environment of Homeric epic accorded more attention than the poetic texts, whose significance can always be reduced to an effect of whatever institution is understood to have regulated their production and circulation.

Amidst these excesses, the intratextual deconstruction of Michael Lynn-George, the sensitive retrobelletrism of Jasper Griffin, and the imaginative narratology of Nancy Felson-Rubin bring welcome refinements in understanding. Yet the difficulty of reliably setting "Homer" in a social context cannot become an excuse for giving up the effort. Not that there is much risk of seeing "Homer," or any poet, imminently repedestalized. But the very power of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* compels us to seek the cultural matrix that elicited their composition and experienced their most immediate and deepest effects. No doubt about it, Homeric epic was diminished and obscured by the accident that preserved it whole but left its environment in pieces. In default of a persuasive alternative, the view that the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* reflect images of this environment remains a dangerous temptation. Yet what Greek environment could have actually been reflected in poems about a fantastic war (ten years overseas to avenge the abduction of a woman?), fantastic wanderings, and superhuman ancestors whose power is most memorable when it backfires on them and their communities? Is there any more reason to assume that

the *Iliad* reflects an eighth- (or sixth-) [End Page 146] century polis than that the *Seven Against Thebes* reflects an image of fifth-century Athens? The presumably traditional character of epic material and the frequent idealization of its heroes in other media diverts attention from the problem of why a culture would have envisioned its past as "Homer" did. Without at least a plausible model of the context of Homeric epic, including a model of the function of myth in that context, we will remain alienated from much of its beauty and power. The development of such a model, or rather the tentative consideration of the variables that could have affected the production and reception of a text such as the *Iliad*, is a task hardly yet begun.

Several of the papers collected in the present volume adopt a critical stance toward the intertextualizing treatments of the *Iliad* produced in recent years, complicating their assumptions, demonstrating alternative possibilities, or confronting them with the poetry itself. Of these papers that of Peter Rose ("Ideology in the *Iliad*: Polis, *Basileus*, *Theoi*") ranges the most widely. It deals with three fundamental issues, showing each to be more complex than historicizing scholarship has typically recognized. The class conflicts of the developing polis are not, according to Rose, to be seen as pitting the aristocratic *oikoi* against the communitarian polis, for the polis was likely to have been created by the aristocracy itself, which sought through it to co-opt popular discontent while preserving aristocratic rule. (One wonders whether this move might, as in sixth- and fifth-century Athens, have involved a split between relatively "progressive" and "reactionary" elements *within* the aristocracy.) Rose complicates the notion of ideology in similar fashion. Opposing those whose use of ideology in interpreting the *Iliad* has led them to see the epic as a means by which one side in a two-sided struggle imposes its image of reality upon the other, Rose argues that in order for an ideology to be of service to a hegemonic group it must persuade subjected elements by comprehending their interests and representing them as satisfied by the status quo. Thus it may actually be more important for an effective ideological text to assume the perspective of the subjected elements than that of the hegemonic class. Rose derives from the work of Raymond Williams a view of the ideological text as a composite of residual, dominant, and emergent perspectives which he then applies to the *Iliad*. Here he continues the analysis begun in his previous work to suggest that the image of the *basileus* who bases his claim to leadership upon demonstrated prowess and generosity to dependents (Achilles) represents a residual element in the text, but one that engages the sympathies of Homer's peasant audience. The aristocratic claim to leadership [End Page 147] based upon kinship with divinity appears, according to Rose, to be dominant in Homer's society, but in his text it is subjected to ironic undercutting. The blatantly oppositional voice of Thersites appears to be an emergent perspective.

More modest in scope than Rose's paper, but no less trenchant, is that of Ruth Scodel ("Pseudo-Intimacy and the Prior Knowledge of the Homeric Audience"), who calls into question the widespread assumption that the intended audience of the Homeric poems was extremely well-versed in the mythological tradition that lay behind them and would have been uniformly sensitive to subtle allusions and minute variations from the norm. Scodel argues that comparative evidence of epic performance does not support this assumption, but rather suggests (as indeed would common sense) that the Greek epic composers must have had to expect audiences whose local traditions varied and who had varying degrees of familiarity with the traditions they did know. Scodel's study of the expository technique of the Homeric narrators concludes that very little prior knowledge of either epic is necessary in order to follow its story. She displays how tactfully the narrators present the stories of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* to audiences of varying prior knowledge, informing them of what they may not already know, while implying that they in fact already know it. This is the technique that Scodel calls "pseudo-intimacy." It has the effect of winning acceptance for novelties in the story from an audience that was aware that the tradition included much that lay beyond its immediate grasp. Scodel concludes her discussion by analyzing the problem of the duals in *Iliad* 9 as an example of this technique, whereby the narrator confuses the audience into accepting Phoenix as a traditional element of the Embassy.

In recent years the flourishing of interest in hero cult has brought fresh vigor to the anthropocentric readings of Homer long dominant on the critical scene. (Aristotle's summary of the plot of the *Odyssey* [Poetics 1455b] contains only one reference to a god!) Even the religious dimension of Homeric epic, it would appear, accords more honor to mortals than to gods. And since the mortals honored are those of special lineage, power, beauty, and fame, it often follows that the epics, and the *Iliad* in particular, are said to flatter the nobles of the early Greek polis and enhance their prestige. My own contribution to this volume ("The Ordeals of Homeric Song") argues that the anthropocentric reading of the *Iliad* and its ideological corollary alike rest upon misunderstandings of both the epic and Greek cult. The presentation of the gods in the *Iliad* aims to produce a deep sense of religious awe. This is shown first of all by the fact that all the [End Page 148] significant events of the epic emanate from Olympus. Although mortal characters make decisions, it is the gods, and pre-eminently Zeus, who determine their consequences. Moreover, the power of the Homeric Olympians not only dwarfs that of the heroes, it exceeds the boundaries of nature in an amazing display of miracles that intensifies as the *Iliad* approaches its climax, implying a trajectory in mythical chronology. Since these miracles include supernatural preservation of the dead, which in Hector's case explicitly rewards his piety rather than his power or lineage, extending the trajectory might lead in the audience's time to a blessed afterlife for pious mortals of any social

class. (Cf. Rose's suggestion that an ideological text of the early Greek polis, even one aristocratically sponsored, would have had to address the perspective of the peasantry.) The centrality of the gods in the narrative of the *Iliad* accords with their role in actual cult, where they always had precedence over the heroes. Homeric poetry was frequently performed at festivals in which the performances were regarded as dedications to the gods. The emotional and physical expenditures attested to in Plato's *Ion* suggest that performances of Homer were experienced as moments of sacrificial communion with the divine.

Striking a less polemical note than the preceding three papers, Donald Lateiner's investigation of "Homeric Prayer" aims at a comprehensive description of prayer in the *Iliad* that illuminates its form and function through comparison with practical prayers in Hellenic and other cultures. Lateiner emphasizes the closeness of Homer's heroes to the gods and the corresponding egotism of their prayers. The prayers of the heroes seek specific tangible benefits from the gods and lack a moral dimension. They often fault the gods and complain of mistreatment, and they base their appeal for help upon worthiness rather than humility. Homer uses prayer as a narrative strategy, to structure his plot. Crises in the action often pivot upon mortal prayers and the divine response to them. Prayers also aid the characterization of the protagonists. Prayers in the *Odyssey* are more often answered to the appellant's satisfaction than those in the *Iliad*.

James Morrison's paper ("*Kerostasia*, the Dictates of Fate, and the Will of Zeus in the *Iliad*") takes for its subject the contradictory movement observed in the *Iliad* between the impression that all of the events of the poem are predetermined by fate and the epic tradition, and the irreconcilable impression, equally rendered by the narrative, that heroes, gods, and poet can make decisions that affect the course of the poem without constraint. Morrison concludes that the alternation between these impressions is a deliberate effect of the poet's storytelling technique. In the tension **[End Page 149]** thus produced, the force of inevitability is undermined by the possibility of the unexpected. All of this is crystallized in the scene of *kerostasia*, as Zeus contemplates disrupting the course of the narrative, only to return it to what had been promised previously. The shifting of Zeus' scales is an apt metaphor for the poet's choice between alternative outcomes.

Finally, in Robert J. Rabel's contribution to this volume ("Sophocles' *Philoctetes* and the Interpretation of *Iliad* 9"), the heroic tradition subsequent to the *Iliad* is called into play to assist interpretation of the Embassy in *Iliad* book 9. Observing the similarities between the mission of the Embassy and that of Odysseus and Neoptolemus in Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, Rabel asks why Heracles was able to persuade Philoctetes to rejoin the Achaeans while the Embassy could not persuade Achilles. He argues that Heracles succeeds because in speaking to Philoctetes he uses details from his own life to provide a paradigm for heroic emulation, displaying mastery of *mythos*, the most powerful rhetorical weapon in the heroic armory. Nestor's persuasive speech before the monomachy in book 7 and his successful appeal to Patroclus in book 11 both deploy this technique. Yet the speeches of Odysseus, Phoenix, and Ajax do not. Rabel concludes that this omission in the rhetoric of the Embassy explains its failure and leads the epic to its tragic outcome.

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