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978-0-521-80966-5 - Inventing Homer: The Early Reception of Epic

Barbara Graziosi

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## INTRODUCTION

If it had been about opening a ketchup factory or the spa that people have been going on about for ages, there might have been something to say for the fuss, but that Homeric business was just nonsense.

Ismail Kadare, *The File on H*<sup>1</sup>

In Ismail Kadare's novel *The File on H*, two American classicists arrive in Albania in the early 1930s and set out to record the ancient Albanian traditions still performed by illiterate bards. In their journey, they are confronted with two different Albanias: on the one hand, the dignified and hospitable world of the highland bards; on the other, the petty provincial elite who are convinced that the Americans are spies. The latter group proceed to use all their subtle and suspicious intelligence to try and catch the supposed spies *in flagrante*, consistently misunderstanding their notes on Homer as encoded reports on their subversive activities. As well as a metaphor for Albania, Kadare's novel is an education for the modern classicist.<sup>2</sup> While the highland Albanians may well remind us of their beautiful and neglected epic tradition, back in the provincial capital the petty bureaucrats with European aspirations have their own lesson to teach. For them, an interest in Homer is not just peculiar, but altogether incomprehensible. Their failure to understand the aims of the two Americans highlights a phenomenon that is usually taken for granted in the field of classics: the enormous and lasting authority of Homer in the Western world.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Kadare (1997) 163. Unfortunately, I was unable to trace the original *Dosja H*.

<sup>2</sup> The canon of western literature and Homer in particular are important themes in Kadare's work as a writer and critic. See especially Kadare (1991).

<sup>3</sup> Burkert (1987) 43 is a rare example of a classicist who manifests surprise at the authority of Homer: 'Hardly less surprising is the success of Homer among the Greeks, a dashing and lasting success that is not a necessary or natural consequence of either age or quality; age is liable to go out of fashion, and quality is always debatable.'

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## THE INVENTION OF HOMER

This authority is in some ways harder to understand than that of the Bible, because it is not transcendentally guaranteed: already in the sixth century, Xenophanes calls epic poetry ‘fictions’, ‘creations of his predecessors’, πλάσματα τῶν προτέρων, not ‘word of God’.<sup>4</sup> We may thus ask ourselves how the Homeric poems acquired and maintained their authority and influence. A related question is how their author, Homer, is linked to that authority. Again, a comparison with other influential texts may alert us to the fact that an author is not necessary in order to establish the authority of a text: many influential epics were handed down anonymously.<sup>5</sup> This book stems from a sense of surprise and wonder at the lasting influence of the Homeric poems and at the resonance of their author’s name: Homer.

While I hope that this sense of wonder is never entirely lost in the course of the detailed discussions presented here, it is also true that it does not in itself constitute a viable starting point for these discussions. As Said rightly, and somewhat reassuringly, points out, ‘there is no such thing as a merely given, or simply available, starting point: beginnings have to be made for each project in such a way as to *enable* what follows from them’.<sup>6</sup> Three issues need to be addressed at the outset of this project: the assumptions which underlie my approach, the scope of the book, and the organisation of the material discussed.

## The overall approach

The basic idea underlying this book is simple, no matter how difficult its application in specific cases. I maintain that ancient (and, indeed, modern) discussions of the figure of Homer can be seen as

<sup>4</sup> Xenophanes fr. 1.22 DK.

<sup>5</sup> With characteristic perceptiveness, Burkert draws attention to this detail in (1972) 75. I translate: ‘The Gilgamesh epic was a great literary success for hundreds of years. It was copied and translated again and again – perhaps it even influenced the Homeric epics. Yet during all that time and among all those peoples, nobody seems to have asked who the author of this work was, although it was carefully crafted and, in its own way, a great literary achievement. Likewise, there are no individual authors of Hittite and Ugaritic epics, or in the Old Testament.’

<sup>6</sup> Said (1995) 16, summarising Said (1975), where he analyses, among other things, the relationship between beginnings and the institutions of knowledge.

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Barbara Graziosi

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## INTRODUCTION

testimonies to the significance and meaning of the Homeric poems for specific audiences. In recent years, the ancient biographical traditions about the Greek poets have been closely scrutinised with the aim of exposing their unreliability as historical documents. For example, at the beginning of *The Lives of the Greek Poets*, Mary Lefkowitz describes her aim as that of establishing the fictionality of the ancient biographical traditions and using it as a basis for dismissing them from the study of literature: 'If this book can establish that these stories can be disregarded as popular fiction, some literary history will need to be re-written, so that it starts not with the poets' biographies, but with the poems themselves.'<sup>7</sup> My main contention is that the fictionality and popularity of the ancient material on Homer's life does not warrant our 'disregard'. Precisely because they are fictional, early speculations about the author of the Homeric poems must ultimately derive from an encounter between the poems and their ancient audiences. For this reason they constitute evidence concerning the reception of the Homeric poems at a time in which their reputation was still in the making.<sup>8</sup>

## Scope

This brings me to my second point: the scope of the present work. In the extremely long history of representations of Homer, I have privileged two phases: the earliest portrayals of Homer available to us and – to a much lesser extent – modern academic representations of the poet. There are three main reasons why I focus on the period spanning the sixth to the fourth century BC. In the first place, the earliest extant representations of Homer are extremely influential: it is to our archaic and classical sources that we ultimately owe our acquaintance with the name 'Homer' and the figure of the authoritative poet whom it denotes. The importance of the

<sup>7</sup> Lefkowitz (1981) x.

<sup>8</sup> To an extent, Vitali (1990) and West (1999) share my approach, in that they investigate how ancient fictional narratives about Homer can be history for us. Yet I do not think either article fully exploits the potential of ancient depictions of Homer. Vitali (1990) tries to use the *Lives of Homer* to investigate a typically modern concern: whether Homer could write. West (1999) tries to circumscribe the invention of Homer to a particular time and place: sixth-century Athens. By contrast, I argue that it is a Panhellenic phenomenon linked to rhapsodic performances throughout the Greek world.

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Barbara Graziosi

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## THE INVENTION OF HOMER

early definitions of this figure for the subsequent reception of the Homeric poems is paramount. For example, while in the sixth century he was presented as the author of a vast number of works: *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, *Hymns*, *Cyclic poems*, *Margites*, *Oechaliae Halosis* and other poems besides, by the fourth century his oeuvre had been narrowed down to the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, because they are considered the best poems.<sup>9</sup> In this case as in many others, early discussions of the name Homer reflect important stages in the reception of epic.

A second reason why I focus on the archaic and classical periods is linked to the performance of the Homeric poems. One of the main contentions of this work is that, at a time in which oral performance is the dominant mode for the communication of epic, reflections about the poems do not focus on written texts but on people: those who perform the poems, those who listen to them and, most importantly for this project, the absent poet or ‘maker’ (ποιητής) whose poems are being performed. Much work has been done in order to develop a flexible model of ‘text’ which can be employed in contexts where poetry is performed and experienced orally;<sup>10</sup> my work can be seen as an attempt to explore the concept of ‘authorship’ in that same context.

A third and final reason why I focus on pre-Hellenistic representations of Homer is that there exists as yet no full study of the early and classical reception of the Homeric poems, whereas Hellenistic and later approaches to Homer have been better studied and understood.<sup>11</sup> It is often assumed that this is because the evidence

<sup>9</sup> The gradual restriction of the name Homer to the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* seems to parallel the increasing propensity, in the course of the archaic period, to represent Iliadic and Odyssean episodes on vases. A number of scholars have discussed and tried to explain why before the sixth century scenes from epics other than the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are as frequent as episodes found in those two poems. However, none of these scholars relates the issue to the use of the name Homer in the archaic and classical period: see Friis Johansen (1967), esp. 223–30; Kannicht (1982); R. Cook (1983); Brillante (1983); Shapiro (1989) 43–7; Scaife (1995); Snodgrass (1997) and (1998). In this book, I do not discuss the relationship between epic texts and epic scenes on vases, partly because my main topic is the poet Homer and there is no portrait of Homer on a vase, and partly because the methodological problems posed by discussing the relationship between the Homeric poems and Greek vases seem to me even greater than is usually acknowledged.

<sup>10</sup> For example, Jensen (1980); Gentili (1988); Nagy (1996b); Bakker (1993) and (1997).

<sup>11</sup> On the Hellenistic reception of Homer, see, for example, Montanari (1979–95), with further bibliography.

Cambridge University Press

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Barbara Graziosi

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## INTRODUCTION

for Hellenistic and later responses to the Homeric poems is more abundant, detailed and reliable than that for the archaic and classical period. While this is true, it hardly constitutes an explanation, since many aspects of the archaic and classical world are intensely studied, no matter how much better the evidence for later periods may be. The problem rather lies with the models that have been used to study the reception of epic or, indeed, ancient literary criticism at large: scholars focus on responses to written texts, rather than on the construction of authors.<sup>12</sup> As long as one looks for discussions of specific Homeric passages or sustained interpretations of the texts, the pre-Hellenistic evidence for the reception of Homer is indeed scant and hardly allows far-reaching conclusions. By contrast, I argue that discussions of the poet Homer represent a rich and nuanced body of evidence for the early reception of epic.

In a study of the constructions and representations of Homer from the sixth to the fourth century, Plato deserves a place of honour, not only because he is an important source for the period, but also because his views about Homer proved to be extremely influential. Plato's discussion of Homer is an important and difficult subject which has attracted the attention of philosophers and classicists through the centuries.<sup>13</sup> The present book does not tackle the issue of Plato's relationship with Homer in its entirety, but rather focuses on an aspect of it which has received little attention. The absence of an overall study of the reception of Homer in the fifth and fourth century fosters the tendency to discuss Plato's views in isolation, without uncovering connections between his portrayal of Homer and those found in earlier and contemporary sources. Plato himself, of course, emphasises his own isolation as a critic of Homer, yet a patient reconstruction of early and classical representations of Homer can help to uncover the ways in which

<sup>12</sup> On the ancient reception of Homer, see, for example, Labarbe (1949); Buffière (1956); N. Richardson (1975); Clarke (1981); Lamberton (1986); Lamberton and Keaney (1992); N. Richardson (1993) 25–49; Sanz Morales (1994). On ancient literary criticism: Atkins (1934); Lanata (1963); Grube (1965); Pfeiffer (1968); Russell and Winterbottom (1972); Russell (1981); Too (1998); A. Ford (forthcoming). All these studies focus on responses to texts.

<sup>13</sup> For discussions of Plato's relationship to Homer and other poets see, for example, Tigerstedt (1969); Murdoch (1977); Gadamer (1980) 39–72; for further bibliography, see Kraut (1992) 509–10 and P. Murray (1996) 239–45.

Cambridge University Press

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Barbara Graziosi

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## THE INVENTION OF HOMER

Plato draws on this wider tradition. For this reason, I emphasise the connections between Plato's portrayal of Homer and other representations, even when Plato himself does his best to dissimulate such connections.

Apart from sixth- to fourth-century constructions of Homer, I also devote some space to modern academic representations of the poet, focusing in particular on two debates: the so-called Homeric Question, and the role of authorship in the study of texts. The traditional formulation of the Homeric Question is based on the assumption that we may discover real, historical authors from reading their texts, an assumption that is closer to the approach to Homer adopted by Alexandrian scholars than to archaic and classical conceptions of the poet.<sup>14</sup> Accordingly, classicists have tended to privilege the Alexandrian conception of Homer, as the author of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* alone, and as the criterion for establishing the only correct text of those poems. By focusing on the earlier representations of Homer, I hope to show that the modern formulation of the Homeric Question is based on a conception of Homer very different indeed from that of our early sources: in those sources, Homer is the object of invention, not of discovery.

In looking for different models of authorship from those envisaged by traditional formulations of the Homeric Question, this book aims to contribute to a recent debate about the role of authors in the understanding of literature. The concept of authorship has come under close scrutiny in recent years: an increasing pessimism about the possibility and usefulness of discovering authorial intentions behind texts has led critics to view authors as features of the text itself, rather than as transcendental authorities which determine its meaning. In the field of classics, this has led scholars to study the ways in which certain texts (usually canonical ones such as the *Odyssey* or the plays of Aristophanes) point to the figure of the absent author.<sup>15</sup> This book relies on such studies, but focuses mainly on the figure of the poet Homer outside the texts attributed to him. In the case of Homer, it is particularly obvious

<sup>14</sup> On the Alexandrian quest for the 'real Homer', see Nagy (1996b) ch. 5.

<sup>15</sup> For example, Goldhill (1991). For further references see p. 18 n. 16, and p. 55 nn. 9 and 10.

Cambridge University Press

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Barbara Graziosi

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## INTRODUCTION

that a broader range of texts is needed in order to respond to Foucault's encouragement to investigate 'how the figure of the author became individualized'.<sup>16</sup>

In attempting to strike a balance between a detailed discussion of archaic and classical constructions of Homer on the one hand, and the broader implications of my work on the other, I privilege the study of ancient sources: this choice deserves some explanation. Certainly, the focus of my work could be broader. For example, the idea of looking at ancient biographies of authors as evidence for the reception of their work could be extended to other Greek and Roman poets and prose writers. Indeed, it seems to me that all representations of authors, ancient and modern, result from the impact of their work on a particular set of readers, listeners or viewers. So, the approach I propose here could potentially be extended to a very large selection of authors and readers. It could also be used to study how views about Homer and his work changed from the sixth century to the present day. For example, it would be possible to investigate how Wilamowitz's approach to writing Homer's life reflects the intellectual and social context in which he wrote. I explore some of the directions in which the present work could be extended in the Conclusion. By and large, however, I focus on the invention of Homer in the archaic and classical period for at least three reasons.

In the first place, Homer is eminently suited to the approach I propose. Because there is almost no documentation about the composition of the Homeric poems, other than what can be deduced from the poems themselves, there are very few constraints on what can be said about Homer. In other words, a description of Homer is the very direct expression of a particular interpretation of the poems. In the case of William Shakespeare or Thomas Mann, it is possible to speak of a feminine side to their writing, but it cannot simply be stated that they were women.<sup>17</sup> In the case of Homer, even that has been suggested: Samuel Butler famously argued that the author of the *Odyssey* was a woman.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Foucault (1979) 141.

<sup>17</sup> On the 'man-womanly' mind of Shakespeare and on the androgynous nature of writing, see Woolf (1929).

<sup>18</sup> Butler (1897).



Cambridge University Press

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Barbara Graziosi

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## THE INVENTION OF HOMER

The second reason for my choice of topic is that Homer is an extremely influential author, and that classical Greece has been held up as an ideal. In recent years, the Western canon of great literature has been challenged in various ways. Critics have turned their attention to uncanonical texts, and have attempted to read the canon ‘against the grain’.<sup>19</sup> Yet it seems to me that these are not the only possible strategies that can be used to challenge dominant ways of thinking. The texts on which I base my discussion belong not only to classical literature but, often, to the most canonical period within classics. Moreover, I do not consciously read these sources ‘against the grain’: on the contrary, I try very hard to understand what the Greeks wanted to say about Homer, not what they tried to hide or failed to understand. Yet, paradoxically, archaic and classical views about Homer seem to me to challenge some claims about Homer and the Homeric poems which are by now considered canonical.

A third and related reason for my specific focus is that a study grounded in one particular area can, paradoxically, be more illuminating for other fields of enquiry than an attempt to study simultaneously a very broad spectrum of contexts and phenomena. The anthropologist Marilyn Strathern makes a similar observation when discussing the concept of ‘transferable skills’. She observes that anthropological fieldworkers who successfully embed themselves in a particular site are more likely, not less, to be able to do so in a different site in the future. At the same time, they would find it difficult to immerse themselves in the life and organisation of a particular community, if they were constantly thinking about how they might do it somewhere else.<sup>20</sup> The archaic and classical representations of Homer discussed in this book constitute a small proportion of what can be said about Homer, let alone about other poets and artists, yet they clearly show how authors can themselves be objects of creative processes.

I should add here that, while in theory it is possible to isolate the archaic and classical periods from Alexandrian and later times as I have suggested, in practice such a neat distinction cannot be

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990) or Spivak (1993).

<sup>20</sup> Strathern (1997) 124f.



Cambridge University Press

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Barbara Graziosi

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## INTRODUCTION

maintained. As Dougherty and Kurke point out at the beginning of their study in cultural poetics,<sup>21</sup> any scholar working on the archaic period must rely on later sources and judge to what extent they may reflect earlier views. I have thus used Hellenistic and later sources when I thought that they helped to illuminate archaic and classical representations of Homer. I use 'illuminate' in a broad sense: I have referred to late sources when I believe they illustrate certain patterns that can already be detected in the archaic and classical periods.<sup>22</sup> For example, the idea that Homer was a Roman is not one that would have occurred to a fifth-century audience; but the possibility of adding a new hypothesis about Homer's place of origin is embedded in the earliest controversies about his birth. In other words, later portrayals of Homer can be used to illuminate the logic of earlier representations: the archaic and classical discussions open up certain possibilities that are often taken up, developed, and modified in later tradition.<sup>23</sup> In short, while I do use some late sources, I do so only when they relate to issues which were important in the early period: for example, Homer's blindness or his poverty. In this respect, my bias towards early representations of Homer is obvious: I do not include chapters on portrayals of Homer which become important after the classical period, such as 'Homer the natural scientist' or 'Homer the scribe'.

The late collections of biographical material usually known as the *Lives of Homer* seem to me to encourage my approach. Unlike the biographies of other poets and famous personalities, they emphasise the lack of a coherent, unified and self-consistent version of Homer's life. Rather than presenting us with a continuous narrative, they tend to focus on relatively few specific aspects of the life of Homer, and list a series of contradictory opinions about them, opinions which typically span several centuries. While these texts do not follow recognisable ancient conventions about the writing of

<sup>21</sup> Dougherty and Kurke (1993). Introduction.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Dougherty and Kurke (1993) 6: 'There is some justification for mining later sources (as we must, given the exiguousness of actual archaic evidence) if we can identify metaphors or systems of signification that correspond to archaic ones.'

<sup>23</sup> In this respect, my approach can perhaps be compared to that adopted by students of myth. Buxton (1994) offers a useful introduction to approaches to myth as a 'language' with certain rules and sets of possibilities.

Cambridge University Press

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Barbara Graziosi

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## THE INVENTION OF HOMER

biography, they display remarkable similarities with one another.<sup>24</sup> The *Vita Herodotea* is the only *Life* which tries to refute, rather than list, contradictory views about Homer: yet its refutations actually show how easily Homer's life breaks down into a series of debates and contrasting opinions. In short, by listing earlier opinions and refusing to incorporate them into a coherent whole, the *Lives of Homer* encourage, or at any rate allow, my selective focus on sixth- to fourth-century debates.

## Structure

The emphasis on specific aspects of Homer's biography in the *Lives of Homer* leads me to the third and last issue that needs to be addressed here: the structure of the book and the organisation of the material discussed. Those scholars who have discussed the pre-Alexandrian reception of Homer have tended to organise their material according to the sources which treat Homer. Thus Mehmél, for example, has individual sections on, among others, Hesiod, Xenophanes and Herodotus.<sup>25</sup> By contrast, this book begins with a discussion of the origins of the legend of Homer and the contexts in which it flourished (ch. 1), and continues by focusing on particular aspects of Homer's life which lie at the heart of archaic and classical representations of the poet: his birthplace and genealogy (ch. 2); his date (ch. 3); his blindness, poverty and closeness to the gods (ch. 4); his relationship with other poets (ch. 5); and his legacy to his descendants and followers (ch. 6). There are various reasons why I believe that this thematic organisation is preferable to that which isolates specific sources.

First, I deliberately allow Homer's life to shape my work, proceeding from his birth (chs. 2–3), through his adult life (chs. 4 and 5), to his legacy (ch. 6). In doing so, I wish to pay homage to ancient biographical modes of thinking about Homer. A second and related point is that this mode of presentation draws attention to the ways in which debates about particular aspects of Homer's life straddle many different texts and visual representations. All our

<sup>24</sup> For the development of Greek biography, see Momigliano (1993).

<sup>25</sup> Mehmél (1954).