CHAPTER 2

The Rhetorical Criticism of Homer

Richard Hunter

1 Homer and Homeric Criticism
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Homer’s grip on Greek literate culture gave him a dominant role in education, scholarship and criticism of all kinds, and this predominance is reflected in the centrality of the Homeric texts to the growth of critical practice and terminology, particularly as we can trace these from Aristotle onwards. This chapter will be largely concerned with critical practices and ideas which flourished, and in some cases arose, in the Hellenistic period, but it is important always to bear in mind the classical, and in some cases, archaic roots of these phenomena. The modern study of ‘ancient literary criticism’ has always suffered from uncertainty as to what actually is being studied and where and how early the relevant material is first found. Does one start, for example, with Odysseus’ praise of the Phaeacian bard Demodocus (Od. 8.487–491) and Alcinous’ praise for the manner in which Odysseus himself tells his tale (Od. 11.363–368),1 with Pindar’s rich ‘metatextual commentary’ on his own and others’ poetry,2 with tragedy and satyr-play, where some of the richest reactions to Homer and the Homeric ethos are to be found, even though the explicit dramatisation of scenes from Homer is very uncommon in our surviving texts (Euripides’ Cyclops, [Euripides] Rhesos),3 with Attic Old Comedy—and, most notably, the Frogs of Aristophanes, or with Plato?4 The concerns and critical practices of the Frogs were certainly influential for centuries, texts such as the famous discussion of an ode of Simonides in Plato’s Protagoras and of the expertise of the

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1 The bibliography on Homeric ‘poetics’ is of course daunting; Halliwell [2011] Chapter 2 offers a thought-provoking guide through the maze.
2 For foreshadowings in Pindar of later critical ideas cf., e.g., Richardson [1985].
4 Ford [2002] is an excellent guide to these issues and their bibliography. For origins and beginnings of ancient scholarship see also Novokhatko in this volume.
rhapsode in the *Ion* foreshadow important concerns of Alexandrian scholarship, and—above all—the criticisms (in both senses) of Homer in the *Republic* set an agenda for the discussion of poetry which was to last throughout antiquity.

Some histories of the ancient reception and criticism of Homer would choose in fact to begin with the *Odyssey*, a poem which is widely held to acknowledge and react to the *Iliad*, not only in the general spirit and values of the (almost certainly) later poem, but also in specific passages (such as the *Nekuia*) and by the device of largely ignoring the ground covered by the more martial poem. It may indeed be argued that the *Odyssey* is the first ‘postclassical text’, if by that is meant a text which consciously exploits its sense of otherness and distance from (to put it simply) a more heroic past. The first four books of the poem show Telemachus growing up and learning about the past, searching, if you like, for ‘the classical’ before it was lost, and in that search, no less than in Odysseus’ confrontation with the past in the *Nekuia*, the ‘critical’ spirit which explains that earlier world (and its poetry) is being formed before our eyes. As for Telemachus’ father, Odysseus is πολύτροπος, the man ‘of many turns’; however that epithet is to be interpreted (cf. further below), the repeated stress in the opening verses on multiplicity and hence complexity and change, “the man of many turns wandered a very great deal. . . he saw the cities of many men . . . and suffered many griefs. . . .”, was to take its place within a long discourse in which the world gets ever more ‘complex’ and the past looks ever more ‘simple’. When in the Platonic *Hippias Minor* (cf. below) Hippias contrasts a ‘very straightforward’ (ἁπλούστατος) Achilles with a ‘very twisting’ (πολύτροπώτατος) Odysseus (364c4–365b6), we are already on the way to what was to be an influential contrast between the ethical values of their respective poems.

The broad concerns of ancient discussions of Homer, and of literature more generally, may be roughly divided into the stylistic, the didactic (*i.e.* what did Homer know and what can we learn from him), the rhetorical and the ethical, though little weight is to be given to the boundaries between these four categories. Thus, for example, style was always regarded as an expression of êthos and very closely tied to rhetorical analysis, just as a principal aim of rhetorical analysis was establishing the êthos of the speaker; whether the subject be ethics or rhetoric, moreover, ‘Homer as (our) teacher’ was a theme never far away, and dominates one of the most important ancient texts about Homer.

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6 Cf. Usener [1990].
7 See Nünlist in this volume.