Homer and the Good Ruler in the ‘Age of Rhetoric’: Eustathios of Thessalonike on Excellent Oratory*

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The Byzantine twelfth century gained a reputation of being an ‘age of rhetoric’, not in the least because from this period a large amount of occasional prose and verse has survived.¹ In this context, rhetoric should be understood in a broad sense as the art of speaking, the art of saying the appropriate thing in the appropriate way, or, in short, as a near synonym of eloquence. Rhetorical education was imperative for everyone pursuing a career in the complex and sophisticated imperial or patriarchal administration, and for every aspiring intellectual competing in the intellectual arena of twelfth-century Byzantium.² The curriculum included rhetorical handbooks by, for instance, Hermogenes (second century AD), Menander Rhetor (probably late third century AD), and Aphthonios (fourth century AD) on the one hand, and ancient literature on the other.³ Throughout the Byzantine period, Homer remained the most influential ancient author and continued to be considered ‘The Poet’.⁴ Homeric poetry provided twelfth-century writers with a treasure trove of material to quote from and allude to. Moreover, writers of rhetorical prose should study Homer’s admirable methods and techniques in order to imitate them in their own writings, as Eustathios, archbishop of Thessalonike, argues in the proem of his Commentary on the Iliad.⁵ Following earlier rhetoricians like Hermoge-

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3 On education in (twelfth-century) Byzantium, see e.g. Browning (1997), Markopoulos (2006), Giannouli (2014).  
4 On Homer in Byzantium, see e.g. Basilikopoulou-Ioannidou (1971–1972), Browning (1975) and (1992).  
5 Eust. in Il. 1.27–30. See Cullhed (2016) 9*–11* for a discussion of Eustathios’ Homeric commentaries in their social and intellectual context. On Homer and rhetoric in Eustathios’
Eustathios considers poetry a form of oratory and the greatest poet, Homer, the greatest orator of all time.

The central position of rhetoric in twelfth-century Byzantium is reflected in the image of emperor Manuel I Komnenos (1143–1180) as it emerges from the imperial encomia composed in his honour. Manuel is celebrated for his wide learning and oratorical accomplishments especially in the encomia from the later years of his reign. In his epitaphios or funeral oration for Manuel, Eustathios recapitulates many of the virtues and achievements that he had praised in Manuel in prior encomiastic orations, most of which he gave in his capacity of maistōr tōn rhētorōn, head of rhetoricians and official court orator. At both a previous occasion and upon the emperor’s death, Eustathios celebrated Manuel’s outstanding oratorical skill. He specifies various qualities that made Manuel an excellent orator: his voice was sonorous and majestic; his memory was extraordinary; his wisdom was all-encompassing. In the epitaphios, three aspects of the good ruler as a good ‘speaker of words’ receive much attention: firstly, the emperor successfully combined attractive style and profound content, thereby appealing to both educated and uneducated audiences; secondly, his orations never failed to display novelty; thirdly, the dense content of his orations was expressed with remarkable clarity of style.

These three qualities of Manuel’s excellent oratory are also found in Eustathios’ Commentary on the Iliad as the qualities of Homeric oratory. This parallelism is programmatic: for Eustathios, Homer is the consummate orator and


Hermogenes expounds his ideas on poetry as panegyric rhetoric and Homer as the best poet in Id. 2.10.29–33 ed. Patillon (2012b). On Hermogenes and Eustathios, see esp. Lindberg (1977).

Wide learning and excellent oratory are not set topics of imperial encomia from the Komnenian period. See Magdalino (1993) 465–468.


The earlier oration is Op. min. 13 ed. Wirth. On this oration, see Karla (2007).