CHARACTERIZATION THROUGH GNOMAI IN HOMER’S *ILIAD*

BY

A. LARDINOIS

Characterization in Homer is a controversial subject. For a long time scholars denied the possibility of any consistent characterization in Homer, believing the poems to be written by multiple authors, or perceiving the technique of oral composition or the state of the archaic Greek mind to be insurmountable obstacles.¹ Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, for example, claims that “to speak of a character of the Homeric Achilles or Odysseus at all is a piece of stupidity, as different poets conceive the same hero differently” (1912: 12), and Geoffrey Kirk maintains that “the depiction of the heroic character is limited both by the technique and aims of oral poetry and by the simplicity of heroic virtues and vices” (1962: 265).² Bruno Snell’s influential study of the early Greek mind is largely responsible for the notion that Homer could not perceive of the ‘individual’, and although there is some truth to this idea—γνῶθι σεαυτόν does not mean ‘know your inner self’ but ‘know that you are a mortal human being’ (Burkert 1985: 148)—, one should not go so far as to deny the archaic Greeks the possibility to distinguish between different human beings.³

More recently, the notion of character has been critiqued from a structuralist and semiotic perspective.⁴ I agree that Homer was,

¹) For an overview of opinions, see Griffin 1980: 50-51, who himself firmly believes in the consistency of the portrayal of the heroes in the epics.
²) Kirk admits that “in a few cases—notably Achilles and Hector, and to some extent Odysseus and Telemachus in the Odyssey—the great epics manage to transcend these limitations” (1962: 265); how they would do so is left unexplained. Richard Martin in Martin 1989 and 1993 has argued that the perceived limitations of the oral poetic style in fact offer great opportunities for the poet to develop subtle character traits.
like the tragic poets, “concerned at least as much with the objective place of an act in the world, its relation to the human order of house and city or the divine order of the cosmos, as with the interior, mental processes of conflict and decision” (Segal 1981: 8), but this does not mean that figures in Homer cannot exhibit certain recognizable traits. Recent studies have convincingly shown that Homeric poetry is capable of creating distinctive characters, especially in the manner in which figures in the epic speak.  

5) In this paper I would like to examine the use of gnomai, or ‘wisdom sayings’, by three figures in the Iliad: Achilles, Nestor and Odysseus. I will argue that the different manners in which these figures use gnomai agree with other characteristics attributed to them in the epics and help to shape their characters. At the end of the article I will add some comments about the use of gnomai by the gods.

For my analysis of the use of gnomai in the Iliad I have adopted a model which the ethnolinguist Peter Seitel developed for the study of proverbs in their social contexts.  

6) Greek gnomai are not the same as proverbs, but they can be studied effectively in the same way, because both are general expressions applied to a particular situation. When we use a proverb like ‘a friend in need is a friend in deed’ in ordinary conversation, the saying always refers to a specific friend and a specific situation.  

7) The importance of the occasion for the understanding of ancient Greek gnomai is noted by Aristotle, who in his chapter on gnómologia in the Rhetoric observed that ‘people are pleased when they hear said in general terms things which they happened to have grasped before in the particular case’ (χαίρονται δὲ καθόλου λεγομένων ἢ κατὰ μέρος προοπόλαμβάνοντες τυχόνουσιν).  

8) A Greek gnome, like a proverb, is a general expression that is applied to a particular case.

For a survey of modern opinion on characterization in ancient Greek literature, see Pelling 1990.  

5) See esp. Martin 1989: 88 ff.; see also Griffin 1986, who discusses some earlier studies, Mackie 1996, Worman 1999 and 2001. Martin (o.c., 98 n. 27), citing Dionysius of Halicarnassus and Eustathius, observes that the Homeric heroes were already in antiquity credited with individual styles of speaking.  


8) Rhet. 1395b5-6 Kassel. Aristotle’s treatment of the use of gnomai in rhetorical speeches extends from Rhet. 2.1394a19 to 2.1395b19. On the difference between Greek gnomai and modern proverbs, see Lardinois 2000.