

HOMER WITHIN THE BYZANTINE FRAMEWORK

C. Matzukis, Rand Afrikaans University

The present paper is intended to provide the reader with a brief insight into the attitude to Homer in Byzantine society as reflected particularly in the works of John Tzetzes (poet) and Eustathios, archbishop of Thessalonika (both 12th century writers).

The paper further incorporates Tzetzes' allegories in his interpretation of Homer as well as Eustathios' examples of human relationships drawn from the characters of Homer's epics.

In Byzantium children generally began their education at the age of six by studying grammar in order to "Hellenize" their language as the Byzantines themselves put it. Basic to their study of classical literature was the reading of Homer, a school prescribed text book from which lines were more often than not memorized (Geanakoplos 1984:401). Ever since the 5th century, school children had to memorize many meanings of the 'Ομήρου γλῶττα (Homer's language). The Iliad was read more than the Odyssey. Since Homer was a schoolbook, we find allusions to and quotations from Homer throughout Byzantine literature. These quotations, however, are not evidence of the writers' direct acquaintance with the Homeric text. Many Homeric verses became proverbial and were independently transmitted by a writer. Extracts of ecclesiastical oratory were embroidered with frequent Homeric quotations and rhetoricians would often use Homer as a model of eloquence. John Tzetzes wrote *Allegories on the Iliad* in which he actually states "Ὅμηρον ἐχέτω μοι παράδειγμα τῆς τέχνης (let Homer be an example of a work of art for me) (Browning 1975:15 n.4). Tzetzes dedicated the *Allegories* which he wrote in the Political Metre (15 syllabic verse), to his patroness, the Empress, Bertha von Sulzbach, wife of Manuel I, Emperor of Byzantium (1143-1180). Tzetzes introduced the *Allegories* with a metaphorical representation of the Empress Bertha as the "moon" which would shed light on Homer (Jeffreys 1974:151). He wrote a translation of the *Iliad* to assist his patroness. Jeffreys writes the following on Tzetzes (1974:151): "Later his aim shrinks to a brief précis. He asks for large rewards, because a précis will require much research for small results. The full translation is again offered as an alternative, for the Empress' wishes are plainly in doubt (488-504). At the end of the introduction he becomes really impatient with her silence (1207-1214). Does she want a brief treatment of the *Iliad* as a whole, or independent sections for each book? "Let me be told quickly, for I am in real perplexity". Finally there is a note between Books XV and XVI. Tzetzes had lost his sponsor since the Emperess had died, and it seemed that the rest of the work would not be written. But Constantine Kotertzes had come forward with the necessary money".

The following are a few lines drawn from the *Prooemion* of the *Iliad Allegories* written in the 15 syllabic metre (Jeffreys 1974:151): Ὡς γὰρ αἱ πάλαι γράφουσι τὸν Δία μυθουργαὶ μεταβαλεῖν εἰς μῶρφωμα πιθήκων τοὺς Τιτᾶνας, οὕτω κἀγὼ νῦν βούλομαι τρόποι οἰκονομίας, μεταβάλλειν τοὺς ἥρωας συγγράμμασι πιθήκων (*Iliad Allegories*, Prooemion, 37-40). (For as the old mythographers wrote that Zeus transformed the Titans into the shape of apes, I too now wish, in the ways of οἰκονομία, to change the heroes into writings of apes [?]).

Tzetzes later wrote the *Odyssey Allegories* also for commission, and announced in his poem that he would write in "a clear, comprehensible and rather playful way, and in the offscourings of kitchen talk": κἄν τοῖς σαφέσι καὶ ληπτοῖς καὶ παιγνιωδεστέροις καὶ τοῖς ἀποκαθάρμασι τοῦ λόγου τῆς οἰκίας. Tzetzes had no qualms in his boasting (Jeffreys 1974:155) that his work was an easy way of learning: "You have everything set out for you in

a clear language: Ἦχεις ἀναπτυχθέντα σοι πάντα σαφεῖ τῇ λέξει (*Odyssey Allegories* XXIV, 277-279).

Tzetzes developed three types of allegory in his interpretation of the epics of Homer (Kazhdan & Epstein 1985:134). The three types were (a) that connected with cosmic elements, (b) psychological and (c) pragmatic.

The type connected with the elements was the interpretation on mythological characters as meteorological and cosmic elements (e.g. Zeus as air or ether); psychological allegory was the representation of mythological characters as the functions and forces of the psyche (e.g. Zeus as reason); the pragmatic (historical) allegory portrayed the gods as men, women, kings, queens and villains. In his game of allegories, Tzetzes always had contemporary allusions e.g.: Paris was a youth who excelled in javelin throwing, archery ball training, "and all other training befitting an emperor". Paris was also described as well trained in rhetoric and even as having written a book. Tzetzes and Eustathios related ancient works with their own times by modernising the texts and making them more comprehensible to readership.

So widespread was the knowledge of Homer among educated Byzantines in the 12th century that Anna Comnena who paraphrases or quotes Homer no less than 66 times in her *Alexiad* does not even bother to explain those references and Michael Psellos the statesman-philosopher, refers to Homer simply as *the* poet (Geanakoplos 1984:402).

There were certain Homeric quotations (Hunger 1969-70:28) that enjoyed special popularity e.g. οὐκ ἀγαθόν πολυκαιρανίη εἷς κοίρανος ἔστω εἷς βασιλεύς (Il., 2.204) (no good thing is a multitude of lords; let there be one lord, one king); οὐ νέμεσις Τρῶας καὶ εὐκνήμιδας Ἄχαιούς τοιῆδ' ἀμφὶ γυναικὶ πολλὸν χρόνον ἔλγεα πάσχειν (Il., III.156f.) (Small blame that Trojans and well greaved Achaeans should suffer a long time for such a woman).

The oldest copy of Homer's *Iliad* dates back to the beginning of the 10th century and that of the *Odyssey* to the middle of the same century. The 11th century saw the first original exegesis on Homer by a certain Niketas who explained the epic's adventures as moral parables: e.g. Odysseus' escape from the island of Circe and his return to his fatherland would represent his seeking the "heavenly Jerusalem" (Kazhdan & Epstein 1985:134).

When Constantine IX brought his mistress to the court for the first time, an onlooker murmured οὐ νέμεσις (no cause for wrath). Niketas Choniates the 12th century historian, in his references to the Emperor Andronikos I describes him in Homeric epithets applied to Odysseus: πολυπλανέστατος ἀνθρώπων, πολυμήχανος (much wandering and most resourceful of men) inter alia. Readers were supposed to have already been acquainted with Homeric epithets and phrases (Browning 1975:19).

Aside from Tzetzes, the best known scholar of classics is Eustathios, archbishop of Thessalonika who was an active teacher. One of his most voluminous works are his commentaries on Homer (Kazhdan 1984:132). Eustathios fills several pages with the exegesis of the first line of the *Iliad* to a fault of tedious verbosity. He states in his preface that it was written at the request of students rather than of the wealthy patrons. He also expressed the hope (Wilson 1983:198) that youth would derive much benefit from reading Homer. The preface of Eustathios' commentaries on the *Odyssey* however, is brief, and his main concern in the preface is that the *Odyssey* is not full of false myths. Eustathios declares that Homer's accounts of Aeolus, Calypso and the Cimmerians are based on facts poetically embroidered by Homer:

"The Cimmerians are really a race living in the north who have been wrongly located in the west so as to be near the entrance to Hades ... Exaggeration is exemplified by the representation of the Laestrygonians, a fierce tribe in reality, as cannibals."

Eustathios shows a rare trace of humour (Wilson 1983:199) by quoting Eumaeus' words to Odysseus (14.365-366): "Why should a person such as yourself tell lies?" According to Eustathios, the *Odyssey* teaches the love of husbands and shows Penelope as a model for both sexes.

Throughout the entire Byzantine period Homer was the essential basis of education. The following passage drawn from Eustathios' *Commentary on the Iliad* (Browning 1975:18) constitutes a section of his introductory lecture to students who began their study of the *Iliad*:

It would perhaps be best to shun the Sirens of Homer by blocking one's ears with wax or turning away in another direction, so as to avoid their spell. If one does not shun them, but reads the poem, he will not pass by willingly even if many bonds restrain him, nor if he did pass by would he be grateful ... From the ocean flow all rivers, all springs and all wells, according to the old saying. And from Homer comes if not all at any rate much of the material of later writers. For there is no one, whether his concern be with higher things or with nature or with human affairs or with any subject of profane literature whatever it be, who has passed by Homers' hostelry without being entertained, but all have stopped there.

And some have stayed with him to the end of their days, enjoying his catering, while others have merely satisfied some need and taken something from his store to put in their own work.

(EUSTATHIOS, *Comm. in Iliadem*. Proem)

In this lecture, Eustathios emphasizes not only Homer's literary attraction and his influence on all subsequent literature but the importance of Homer as a foundation for students' further studies.

The late Byzantine period (13th, 14th and 15th centuries) saw many other commentaries on the *Iliad* Book I. These were accompanied by interlinear and very elementary grammatical and lexical commentaries for the purpose of teaching.

Eustathios not only admits that a person's character may be good mingled with bad, but also shows admiration for the contradictory nature of Achilles: Homer first praises him as an exemplary hero, then shows him as one to be pitied, who begs to be delivered, humbled before a wretched death (Kazhdan & Epstein 1985:191).

Eustathios emphasizes both Homer's literary attraction and his influence on all subsequent literature, as well as the importance of Homer as a foundation for students' further studies (Browning 1975:18).

To sum up, we have seen that original Byzantine exegeses on Homer began in the 11th century and that Homeric scholia and criticism became more profound in the 12th century. Eustathios attempted to understand Homeric heroes in terms of contemporary ethnography and cultural life and Tzetzes, adhering to ancient tradition, developed his three modes of allegory in his interpretation of the Homeric epics. Whatever the fate of Homer in Byzantium, of one thing we can be certain and that is, that Homer, throughout the entire Byzantine period was the primary stable of education. Furthermore, the "modernizing" of the texts simply allowed for a wider literary audience.

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