

The Renaissance Reception of Homer's *Odyssey*: A Review-Essay

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Jessica Wolfe's *Homer and the Question of Strife from Erasmus to Hobbes* examines how Renaissance readers variously approached the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* as illuminating the nature of *eris*, Greek word meaning "strife, conflict, or discord" (7). The Renaissance was an age of religious strife, sectarian violence, and civil war, and Wolfe contends that thoughtful readers looked to Homer's epics to help interpret the endemic strife of their own times. Although other classical works were also read in terms of their contemporary relevance, Homer's were read more widely than any other "as fables of discord" with "potent contemporary applications." Homeric characters and events came to provide "an idiom—a mythographic shorthand, as it were—to describe and analyse conflict." Wolfe acknowledges that readers often disagreed about the meanings of particular Homeric events, but the method of reading contemporary conflicts in the light of Homer was common. Wolfe's overall argument proposes not only that Renaissance interpretations of Homer centered on his treatment of *eris* with respect to their Renaissance religious and political conflicts, but also that the new method of interpretation led to reading other texts and contexts through the lens of the *eristic*.

Wolfe illustrates her argument by examining seven major northern writers of the Renaissance who responded to Homer in various ways: Erasmus, who included "several hundred Homeric maxims in his *Adages*" (8); Philipp Melanchthon and François Rabelais, who each produced a "counter-epic," or the "alternative" Homer (9); Edmund Spenser, whose *Faerie Queene* "incorporates into its own allegorical substructure a series of fables about the relationship between love and strife"; George Chapman, whose translation of Homer regards him as a "master ironist"; John Milton, whose imitation of Homeric conventions and allusions reflect his

own preoccupations about political and theological liberty; and, finally, Thomas Hobbes, whose translation “emphasizes the bathos of Homeric epic” (9–10). Wolfe also aims to pay attention to other aspects and themes common to the writers she surveys, such as Homer’s role as a provider of a “flexible and even encyclopedic rhetorical resource” (10), the idea of Homer as a comic poet, the influence of classical and late antique allegorical traditions, and efforts to correlate Homer to the Bible (11–12).

Wolfe then presents some common Renaissance views of Homer’s two poems. (This essay will focus on her discussion of the *Odyssey*, mentioning her discussion of the *Iliad* only when it is necessary for clarity or comparison.) The *Odyssey* was seen as a poem that “privileges peace and self-restraint over conflict and disorder, a work that offers criticisms of, or solutions to, the eristic world of the *Iliad*” (13). The nature of *eris* in the stories reflects that contrast: the goddess Eris personifying indiscriminate love of conflict in the *Iliad* does not appear in the *Odyssey*; and the story of Odysseus presents numerous positive examples of *eris*, while the *Iliad* “contains no occurrence of the word [*eris*] that is ‘clearly positive in tone’” (15). And Renaissance readers found “new kinds of heroism” than battlefield heroics in Homer, i.e., those “characterized by patience, modesty, moderation, or ironic detachment” (19).

The main influence of classical and late antique allegorical traditions on Renaissance interpretations of Homer was the habit of reading various Homeric episodes as “illustrations of the contrary yet complementary forces of *philia* [love] and *eris* (or *neikos*).” Such allegorical reading, based on the pre-Socratic cosmology of Heraclitus and Empedocles, was commonplace for Plato, Aristotle, Plutarch, and other writers of antiquity (21). This habit of reading Homeric episodes as illustrating how harmony is achieved through union of opposing elements was eagerly embraced by “sixteenth-century mythographers and other popularizers of classical philosophy and myth,” Wolfe writes, because they spoke to the “paradox of *concordia discors*,” “one of the most cherished and pervasive paradoxes shaping early modern thought.” As she goes on to explain, the

idea that harmony, beauty, or friendship depend upon or even arise out of discord, a principle that informs all manner of Renaissance thought ranging from courtly sprezzatura to musical composition, finds varied expression in Homeric epic as a cosmological principle, an aesthetic canon, a political rule, and a means of vindicating emotional or spiritual conflict. (22–23)

Guided by such allegorical reading habits and attuned to the paradox of *concordia discors*, Renaissance readers took Homer's two epics as together representing a "complete doctrine of life, divided into periods of peace and war," the *Odyssey* teaching "civil prudence" and the *Iliad* teaching "military" prudence (29). Renaissance readers also took Homer as a poet of universality and copiousness. Gifted with a "double genius," Homer was the father of both tragedy and comedy, and his two poems were considered "the source of all poetic genres and rhetorical forms, a copious nursery of all literary genres and styles" (35).

Renaissance editors, translators, and critics had to contend with the differences between ancient pagan customs and values depicted in Homer and their own. Aware of the reality that reception history always involves the "acknowledgement that past and present are always implicated in each other," Renaissance readers sought to bridge the gap between the two cultures. Guided by Homer's early Christian readers such as Origen, Clement, and Jerome, their overall approach was to "transvalue rather than reject" Homer's pagan elements. One way was to "assimilate, domesticate, and transcend the heroic tradition" by producing Christian epics such as Vida's *Christiad* or Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata* (44). Another way was to read allegorically. Odysseus's journey through the sea of the Sirens, for instance, was taken as a lesson that Christian readers like Odysseus's crew must have "circumcised ears," or like Odysseus must "tie themselves to the mast of Christian doctrines . . . in order to listen to the beautiful refrains of pagan antiquity without falling prey to its temptations." In such ways typical of the spirit of Christian humanism of the period, Homer's pagan poetry could serve as "a benign and legitimate object of study so long as it was interpreted in the service of Christian theology" (45).

Given Homer's privileged status in European culture, Wolfe reminds that for Renaissance readers "to read Homer was to be inaugurated into the study of all of literary and intellectual history." This was because they had inherited interpretations of his works shaped by a long tradition of readings by ancient and medieval writers such as "Plato and the ancient Stoics, rhetorical treatises by Aristotle, Cicero, Demetrius, and Longinus, the poetry of Pindar, Catullus, Horace, and Ovid, late antique and medieval allegories by Macrobius and Martianus Capella, the plays of Euripides and Aeschylus, the essays and dialogue of Lucian, Seneca, Smyrnaeus, Lucan, Statius, and Virgil" (50–51). Accordingly, Wolfe's treatment of Renaissance reception of Homer "from Erasmus to Hobbes" also includes discussion not only of Virgil but also of most of these (and other) writers, as well as the Old and New Testaments.

"Homer, Erasmus, and the Problem of Strife"

Wolfe acknowledges that Erasmus never edited, translated, or wrote a direct commentary on Homer, but she begins with him because his *Adages* did "more than any other single text of the period to introduce passages from Homeric epic into the intellectual currency of sixteenth-century Europe" (58). Homer was his "most popular choice of literary source" for the *Adages*, and by rendering thousands of Homer's lines into Latin and demonstrating their contemporary relevance Erasmus made Homer accessible and familiar to his readers. In particular, his collection of Homeric adages became a "vehicle for resolving, deflecting, or managing contention through wit" (60). Another Erasmus text Wolfe discusses in detail is his later work *In Praise of Folly*, whose title character she regards as the author's "creative revision of Homer's goddess of strife" (100).

Having a "profound distaste for war and its typical motives—honour and fame," Erasmus looked to St. Paul's teachings as a guide to life. His approach to Homeric adages, therefore, was to make them serve his own pacifistic ethics of "friendship, cooperation, and non-retaliation." Along with St. Paul, another influence on Erasmus was fifteenth-century Italian scholarship on Homer's poems that approached them as "rhetorical manuals" (64), and Erasmus's choice

of Homeric proverbs for the *Adages* was guided by both rhetorical and ethical considerations. From the *Odyssey*, for instance, Erasmus often chose lines that have “clear parallels in Acts or in the Pauline epistles” (65).

In Wolfe’s discussion of Erasmus’s interpretation of the *Odyssey* the character that clearly stands out is the story’s hero. Erasmus compares Odysseus to St. Paul for his rhetorical abilities, prudence, and versatility. As a character reflecting Homer’s own rhetorical brilliance, Odysseus is praised for his ability to use “the well-tempered mixture of sweet and harsh words,” like Paul who “knew how to become all things to all people, and how to accommodate his eloquence to the character of any listener” (74). Odysseus and Paul are also held up as models of religious toleration. Glossing the adage “*Quot homines, tot sententiae* [So many men, so many opinions],” Erasmus cites Odysseus’s words that “different men take joy in different works (*Od.* 14.228)” and Paul’s exhortation “for the putting aside of strife . . . we should allow every man to have his own convictions” (*Rom.* 14.5) (94).

Erasmus highly values the virtues of friendship and fellowship, and attributes their origins to Homer. To illustrate the virtue of Concord, Erasmus cites Nestor’s words that he and Odysseus were “always of the same mind, having the same ideas and coming to the same conclusions” (*Od.* 3.127–28). As a lifelong bachelor, Erasmus adapts *homophrosunê* [like-mindedness] (which in the *Odyssey* is a virtue that “inheres between husband and wife”) to serve the cause of friendship. Relating friendship to Christian fellowship, Erasmus defines *homophrosunê* as “the cultivation of intellectual and spiritual harmony among men, a form of fellowship exemplified by the apostles, who are knit together by the Holy Spirit ‘in the same mind and in the same thought’ . . . 1 Cor. 1.10” (90).

Outstanding examples that show Erasmus’s indebtedness to the allegorical tradition as well as his technique of relating Homer to the Bible concern the nature of wisdom. One comes from Odysseus’s meeting with the disguised Athena in Book 13 of the *Odyssey*. On learning her true identity Odysseus says to her, “you change your shape at will” (*Od.* 13.313). Erasmus takes this comment as revealing

the nature of wisdom hidden beneath many guises, and explains that Odysseus's description is "a synecdoche for the 'wisdom that is concealed with different wrappings ... in the ancient writers and is presented in ever-changing images, especially in holy scripture,'" in order to make the wisdom "fitted to things and times" (76–77). This technique of reading Homer through the lens of the New Testament becomes a "hermeneutic model" for Erasmus and his followers. Another example of correlating Homeric and scriptural wisdom involves a "strikingly parallel" storm scene in the *Odyssey* and Acts. To illustrate a proverb about belated wisdom, namely "*Sero sapiunt Phryges* [The Phrygians (i.e. Trojans) learn wisdom too late]," Erasmus paraphrases what Paul says to his fellow sailors after surviving a storm at sea (Acts 27.21): that "although they might have avoided their current distress, 'it remains for you to be wise, though belatedly.'" The title character of *In Praise of Folly* also cites Homer's authority for the saying "even the fool is wise after the event." As Wolfe comments, the kind of wisdom that is being discussed is "a belated wisdom, but also a preposterous or foolish wisdom." This is the same idea expressed by Paul's paradoxical claim that "one must become a fool in order to become wise" (1 Cor. 3.18). Thus, Wolfe explains, Folly's speech "helps to establish Homer and Paul as twin patrons of morosophy, a tradition of interpreting Homer that would shape the responses of later sixteenth-century writers including Melanchthon, Rabelais, and Michel Eyquem de Montaigne, who each detect in Homer a different aspect of foolish wisdom, and accommodate it to a distinctly Pauline brand of wise folly" (103–4).

Wolfe concludes by observing that Erasmus saw Homer's vision of strife and the world as "at once deeply tragic and profoundly comic." The *Adages* and *In Praise of Folly* represent Erasmus's engagement with and commentary upon that "seriocomic" vision (111).

“The Remedy of Contraries; Melanchthon, Rabelais, and Epic Parody”

Philipp Melanchthon and François Rabelais continued and adapted Erasmus’s approach to Homer as a seriocomic poet. Wolfe implies that their task was made easier because Renaissance readers believed that in addition to the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* Homer was also the author of “a motley jumble of hymns, epigrams, and mock-epic works such as the *Margites* and the *Batrachomyomachia*” (113). At home with the idea of such diverse genres and styles produced by Homer, Renaissance readers did not demand congruity of style or outlook, unlike the neoclassical critics of later centuries.

As professor of Greek at Wittenberg who taught two generations of northern humanists, Melanchthon was “instrumental” in shaping interpretations of Homer. Following Erasmus, he focused on the aspects of Homeric epic that could be harmonized with Christian values, representing him as “a pagan champion of Christian peace and piety” (117). In a telling episode, Melanchthon began his professorship with a lecture “on Homer and on Paul’s Epistle to Titus, one of several Pauline epistles that vehemently condemn ‘quarrels and fights’ ... as ‘unprofitable and pointless.’” Thus, the verse was taken as “an argument for the potential wholesomeness of classical texts if piously interpreted by judicious and charitable readers.” Like Erasmus, Melanchthon holds up Homer and Paul as teachers of civil life “against contemporary *barbaroi* who oppose humanistic learning or devalue tolerance and peace” (118). Homer teaches “grace and gentleness of manners” essential to civility and concord, Melanchthon argues. Not surprisingly, he preferred the *Odyssey* as depicting “a picture of civil and peaceful life,” in which Polyphemus and the Suitors represent “tyrants and ... quarrelsome and vicious men” that the hero must overcome. Melanchthon also relates Homer to Socrates and Christ, all of whom concealed their “pious wisdom beneath a seemingly worthless or foolish exterior.” In sum, like Erasmus before him, Melanchthon saw Homer as a poet of “counter-epic” values that could be reconciled with Christian teachings and Paul’s exhortation to “become foolish [*moros*] so that you may become wise [*sophos*]” (119–20).

Rabelais composed the “most sustained and complex Homeric parody” of the sixteenth century, modeling it on Homer both in style and in structure. Stylistically, he “stitches together a pastiche of Homeric lines and episodes” to present “palpably counter-epic values, some of which are vices inverted (cowardice, hunger, self-interest) while others (fellowship, peace) align with the spirit of Christian humanism” (121). Structurally, his mock epic loosely follows Homer’s poems, “the first two books imitating the battle scenes of the *Iliad* and the latter two (or three, for proponents of Rabelais’s authorship of *Le Cinquième Livre*) imitating the voyages recounted in the central books of the *Odyssey*” (122).

Rabelais’s way of adapting the Odysseus character is to create two characters, Epistémon and Panurge, who represent the Homeric hero’s rational and irrational sides, respectively. Epistémon is compared to Odysseus for his “crooked wisdom,” and his journey to the Champ Élysées in chapter 30 of *Pantagruel* burlesques the Homeric hero’s journey to Hades in Book 11 of the *Odyssey*. In Rabelais’s version, “Achilles is turned into a ‘dyer, Agamemnon a licker-out of dishes, Ulysses a scyther, Nestor, a rag-and-bone man ... Priam traded in rags and tatters ... Hector a stir-sauce, Paris a tattered beggar, Achilles, a baler-up of hay.” Wolfe does not see Rabelais as mocking Homer, but rather as channeling “a profoundly counter-epic impulse already latent” in the *Odyssey*, because the Hades episode is “itself somewhat parodic of Iliadic values” (129), Wolfe notes.

Like Melanchthon, Rabelais also pairs Homer and Socrates, following “the tradition of interpreting Homeric epic—particularly the *Odyssey* and the spurious mock-epic works—as foundational texts of scepticism” (150). Homeric scepticism is used to combat boastfulness in the *Tiers Livre*, which interweaves the “lineaments of an epic quest” and a “sceptical mission to defeat the dogmatism, arrogance, and contentiousness of characters such as Herr Trippa and Hippothadée.” By referring to his boastful foe Herr Trippa as Irus, Panurge aligns himself with “polypragmon” Odysseus as he invokes “Aristotle’s two contrary extremes of truth: *alazoneia*, or boastfulness, and *eirōneia*, concealed or dissimulated wisdom”

that can be difficult to distinguish from each other (151). It was traditional to discern two contrary strains of skepticism in Homer: one deeply pessimistic, derived from his awareness of “the weakness and vulnerability of mortal life,” and the other playful and joyous, drawing on his predilection for “linguistic ambiguity and for representing the flux of human judgments.” Homeric poems not only endorse such an approach, but also “*dramatize*” such dilemmas (151–52).

“Spenser, Homer, and the Mythography of Strife”

Edmund Spenser, according to Wolfe, incorporates the contrary yet complementary forces of love and strife into the narrative and ethical structure of *The Faerie Queene*. She argues that although much of what Spenser knew about Homeric epic was mediated by other poets and writers and the allegorical tradition, his “persistent reliance on elements of Homeric allegory constitutes a protracted imitation of Homeric epic.” Notable elements of Homeric allegory Spenser uses in his poem include “the houses of Morpheus and Ate; Phaedria’s Phaiakian dystopia; Mammon’s Hephaestian forge; Acrasia’s Circeian bower; Florimell’s Aphroditian girdle; Cambina’s Nepenthe; Artegall’s Achillean shield” (178).

Book 2 of *The Faerie Queene*, which contains Spenser’s invocation of Homer, features Guyon, the knight of Temperance, whom Wolfe calls the “most Odyssean of Spenser’s heroes.” Guyon acquires the virtue of temperance by “learning to discern between the *Odyssey*’s more wholesome values and its dangerous ones.” Guyon’s temperance, Wolfe remarks, is not quite the same thing as Homeric moderation practiced by Odysseus. The example she uses to illustrate the difference is the stories’ treatment of the model of gift-giving. Odysseus willingly accepts gifts from his hosts (albeit not always, Wolfe points out: he does refuse Calypso’s offer of immortality in favor of returning to his mortal wife), but Guyon is reluctant to be indebted to strangers. Wolfe locates the reason for such reluctance in Spenser’s desire to “interrogate whether the Odyssean ideals of courtesy and hospitality are really consonant with the canons of Elizabethan chivalry.” The giving and receiving

of gifts in Homer establish reciprocal bonds between guest and host; Wolfe thinks Spenser challenges this model in various ways. When Guyon declares himself “eternally bound” to Arthur for rescuing him from Pyrochles, Arthur replies, “what need / Good turnes be counted, as a servile bond, / To bind their doers, to receive their meede?” (2.8.56.1–3). For Arthur the epitome of Elizabethan chivalry, the kind of reciprocal obligation expressed by Guyon’s words smacks of a “tit-for-tat mentality” that cheapens “the golden chain of chivalric friendship” (192).

Guyon’s refusal of gifts prepares for his eventual destruction of the Bower of Bliss, an act that is “often misconstrued by readers as excessively violent.” Understood aright, Guyon’s act “transforms a specifically Odyssean conception of the virtue of moderation” (193). In the course of Book 2 Guyon eventually achieves a “brand of temperance that works hand in hand with the righteous indignation, or Nemesis, with which temperance was often associated in sixteenth-century emblem books and mythographies.” By having him destroy the Bower of Bliss, Spenser seeks to “recuperate Homeric wrath as a species of righteous indignation or pious scorn” (194–95). Spenser’s treatment of the motif of Homeric gift-giving culminates at the end of Book 2 with Arthur and Redcrosse exchanging gifts. “Spenser transforms the epic convention of armourial exchange,” Wolfe writes,

into an allegory of divine grace—a gift for which there is no adequate recompense. Both Arthur’s gift to Redcrosse, a diamond-encrusted box containing a liquor of “wondrous worth, and vertue excellent,” and Redcrosse’s gift to Arthur, a copy of the New Testament and a “worke of wondrous grace, and able soules to save,” are divine gifts; neither really belongs to each knight to give away, since, as Spenser is keen to remind us in the invocation to Book 1, canto 10, whatever virtue mortals possess derives from the gratuitous gift of God’s grace (1.ix.19, 4; 1.ix.19, 9). As symbols of divine grace whose bestowal is made without regard to merit and cannot be reciprocated, the gifts exchanged by Arthur and Redcrosse complicate the role played by gift-giving in the culture of pagan epic, where the mutual exchange

of objects creates reciprocal bonds of *philia* by establishing debts that can and will be paid back in turn. (195–96)

Thus, Spenser dramatizes the transformation of “pagan virtues of generosity and hospitality” that entail reciprocal obligation into “Christian ideals of charity or grace” (195) that imitate God’s free giving.

Another significant Homeric borrowing in *The Faerie Queene* Wolfe discusses is the Bower of Bliss, which adapts both Phaiakia and Circe’s bower from the *Odyssey*. Phaiakia is “a paradise in which tranquility and contestation happily coexist,” and while its inhabitants enjoy a peaceful, prosperous life, their “appetite for food and drink is counterbalanced by an emphasis on *arête* or heroic excellence.” In Spenser’s Bower of Bliss, by contrast, Phaedria and Acrasia, siren-like figures of idleness and intemperance, persuade their guests that they must choose between a life of sensual pleasure and a life of virtuous action. Guyon is given a complicated test. He must first detect “the fallacy of the choice,” since “pleasure and heroic action are not simple opposites in *The Faerie Queene* any more than they are in the *Odyssey*” (211). In addition, Guyon must also learn to distinguish between “virtuous and unwholesome strife,” because he is presented with false models such as the wrestling maidens who “seemed to contend, / And wrestle wantonly” (2.xii.63, 7–8) and a merchant ship stuck fast in quicksand, an image of “futile or imprudent conflict” which represents “Spenser’s imitation of Scylla.” Francis Bacon interpreted Scylla “as a symbol of ‘contentious learning’ and ‘monstrous altercations.’” Although Spenser’s Bower of Bliss imitates Homer’s Phaiaka by contrast, it “both imitates and subverts” Circe’s bower. Circe and her four handmaidens were allegorized as “symbols of the elements or the seasons, the dynamic and conflictive forces that are ‘tempered’ through a process of ‘commixtion and composition’” (211–12).

The last major example in Spenser of Homeric borrowing that Wolfe discusses concerns the ending of the *Odyssey*. Spenser adapted Athena’s intervention at the end of the *Odyssey* into Book 4, canto 3 of his poem. In Homer’s story Athena descends

from Olympus to put an end to the opposing forces that are evenly matched. At her direction to Odysseus to “stop the strife of war” (24.543), the two parties swear a truce and the story ends. Similarly, the long battle between Cambell and Triamond in *The Faerie Queene* is in “doubtfull balance,” and the stalemate is only resolved by the coming of Cambina. Wolfe explains that Cambina’s literary lineage includes Homer’s Athena and Aristophanes’ *Eirene*, “a figure frequently invoked by sixteenth-century poets as a goddess of peace.” But Cambina’s method of resolving the conflict is different from Athena’s: she does not make the contestants swear an oath; instead, she “binds together Cambell and Triamond with her dose of Nepenthe ... [and] they are bound by heart and hand, and not by word.” Wolfe notes that in an earlier episode Blandamour and Paridell swear an oath of friendship but easily break it in the next canto; Wolfe sees it as Spenser’s way of questioning the effectiveness of “the tenuous bonds of a spoken oath” (221–22). Spenser calls Nepenthe, “a Homeric opiate” that was given by Helen to her husband and Telemachus, a “drinck of soverayne grace” and thus makes it “a symbol of ... divine grace.” This reading of Spenser’s has the authority of Clement of Alexandria, Wolfe acknowledges.

“Chapman’s Ironic Homer”

Wolfe argues that George Chapman saw Homer’s two epics as studies in irony and that he strove to convince other readers of it through his translations and his commentaries. In particular, his prefaces and commentaries frequently point out the rhetorical tropes of “ironic and scoptic [scoffing, derisory, or sarcastic] speech” in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Wolfe discerns three main purposes behind Chapman’s efforts: he identifies “a model for rhetorically effective and ethically valid means of moral correction”; he “legitimizes the obscurity that characterizes much of his own poetic corpus and likewise validates his hermeneutic authority as a translator of Homer”; and he “smooth[s] out some of the most disturbing theological and ethical problems in the poems, namely, the grim sense of humour ascribed to the gods and the narrator’s associated scorn for mortal ignorance and arrogance.” In focusing on Homer’s use of rhetoric Chapman

was representative of his time, but at the same time his commentaries reveal “a stubbornly eccentric mind” intent on establishing himself as “Homer’s most genuine and intimate poetic heir” as well as an authoritative translator and critic (243).

Wolfe notes that Chapman’s translation of Homer was carried out during the period surrounding the Bishops’ Ban of 1599 and the War of the Theatres. And she contends that those two events shaped his view of irony and sarcasm “as more justifiable or permissible means of expressing scorn than the biting and misanthropic satires of John Marston, Thomas Nashe, and other late Elizabethan writers censored by the Bishops’ Ban.” Chapman was typical in this regard, for after verse satire and epigram were officially banned other writers also sought “an effective yet safe means of expressing scorn and disdain” by writing essays, character sketches, and allegories. After discussing a few such examples, Wolfe points out the quality that distinguishes Chapman from others: he aimed at “the reconstruction of Homer’s authorial intent” (244). And he frequently claimed that he had discovered “hitherto undetected ironies” in Homer that prior translators and editors of Homer had “overlooked, misinterpreted, or wrongly condemned,” making himself not only Homer’s heir but also his “ideal reader” (245)

The irony that Chapman claimed to detect in Homer is “a species of *inversio*, a type of irony in which, as Quintilian defines it, the ‘meaning is contrary to that suggested.’” He saw Homer’s two epics as embodying a grand ironic inversion: the “magnificent” (*Iliad*) is replaced by the “low” or “jejune” (*Odyssey*). Chapman was working in the interpretive tradition going back to Aristotle that Homeric epic is “at once tragic and comic in that it combines the ‘serious’ ... and the ‘laughable,’” or that it offers “both tragic sublimity and comic bathos,” but molding it into a paradoxical argument that “it is in the most trifling or ridiculous episodes of Homeric epic that one finds concealed the most serious truth about human nature” (261).

Chapman insists again and again that Homeric irony, like Socratic irony, “conceal[s] profound wisdom in the most trivial or vulgar containers.” Unlike other Renaissance readers such as Melanchthon who preferred the *Odyssey* to the *Iliad* as more

peaceful and pious, Chapman preferred it precisely because it is “the more trivial and vulgar poem” (263).

Homeric irony is “the product of an insurmountable gulf between divine and mortal points of view,” and also “between the poet’s perspective and that of his characters” (273–74). The ability to recognize Homer’s irony depends on understanding “the circumscribed and limited nature of human wisdom,” and Odysseus is the story’s hero because of “his prudent and humble scepticism” (277).

After further discussion of the rhetorical, political, and cultural contexts of Chapman’s ironic reading and translation of Homer, Wolfe concludes with a brief discussion of Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida* as “a play saturated with precisely the sort of ‘abusive quarrel’” that Chapman so assiduously analyses in his Homeric commentary” (299).

Conclusion

Wolfe’s valuable book continues for more than a hundred further pages, offering chapters on Milton (the subject of another essay in the present volume), Hobbes, and on the later interpreters from Giambattista Vico to Arendt. Limitations of space prevent further examination of her study, but enough has been said already to show the thoroughness and importance of her contribution to the study of Homer in the Renaissance. He was, as she shows, already considered a major author soon after the first modern, printed edition of his works appeared in 1488. And, of course, his status and stature have only grown during the intervening centuries.

Work Cited

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