



University of Pennsylvania
ScholarlyCommons

Departmental Papers (Classical Studies)

Classical Studies at Penn

2004

Roman Homer

Joseph Farrell

University of Pennsylvania, jfarrell@sas.upenn.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://repository.upenn.edu/classics_papers



Part of the [Classics Commons](#)

Recommended Citation (OVERRIDE)

"Roman Homer." In *The Cambridge Companion to Homer*, ed. Robert Fowler. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2004) 254–271.

This paper is posted at ScholarlyCommons. https://repository.upenn.edu/classics_papers/90
For more information, please contact repository@pobox.upenn.edu.

Roman Homer

Abstract

Latinists are accustomed to measuring Homer's presence in Rome by his impact on Roman poetry. Epic looms largest in this regard, but most poetic genres can be regarded to some extent as derivatives of Homer. And even outside of poetry, Homer's impact on Latin letters is not small. But the reception of Homer by Roman culture is a very widespread phenomenon that is hardly confined to literature. Homerising literature in Latin needs to be understood as part of a much broader and more pervasive Homeric presence in material culture and social practice. Abundant evidence from the material and social spheres shows that elite Romans lived in a world pervaded by Homer, and would have done whether Roman poets had interested themselves in Homer or not. That the poets did so should be regarded as an outgrowth of material and social considerations rather than as their source. This is not to challenge traditional ideas about the importance of literary–historical engagements with Homer by Livius Andronicus, Ennius, Virgil and others. Such ideas have been voiced many times, and each of these important authors is in his own way justified to claim the title of 'the Roman Homer'. But habitual celebration of poetic achievement without due attention to the broader cultural milieu in which the poets worked has produced a very partial picture of Homer's presence throughout Roman culture. Accordingly, in part one of this essay I will survey the nonliterary presence of Homer in Rome and elsewhere in Italy as a context for understanding Homeric elements in the realm of Roman literature. In the second half of the essay, I will proceed to literary evidence, but will focus on those aspects that look to the circulation of Homer in Roman social life, again as a context for more belletristic performances of Homer. In following this procedure, I do not mean to give short shrift to such monuments of Homeric culture as Ennius' *Annales* and Virgil's *Aeneid*. Rather, I hope to redress an imbalance between the use of literary and nonliterary evidence in assessing Homer's impact at Rome.

Disciplines

Arts and Humanities | Classics

16

JOSEPH FARRELL

Roman Homer

Latinists are accustomed to measuring Homer's presence in Rome by his impact on Roman poetry. Epic looms largest in this regard, but most poetic genres can be regarded to some extent as derivatives of Homer. And even outside of poetry, Homer's impact on Latin letters is not small. But the reception of Homer by Roman culture is a very widespread phenomenon that is hardly confined to literature. Homerising literature in Latin needs to be understood as part of a much broader and more pervasive Homeric presence in material culture and social practice. Abundant evidence from the material and social spheres shows that elite Romans lived in a world pervaded by Homer, and would have done whether Roman poets had interested themselves in Homer or not. That the poets did so should be regarded as an outgrowth of material and social considerations rather than as their source. This is not to challenge traditional ideas about the importance of literary-historical engagements with Homer by Livius Andronicus, Ennius, Virgil and others. Such ideas have been voiced many times, and each of these important authors is in his own way justified to claim the title of 'the Roman Homer'. But habitual celebration of poetic achievement without due attention to the broader cultural milieu in which the poets worked has produced a very partial picture of Homer's presence throughout Roman culture. Accordingly, in part one of this essay I will survey the nonliterary presence of Homer in Rome and elsewhere in Italy as a context for understanding Homeric elements in the realm of Roman literature. In the second half of the essay, I will proceed to literary evidence, but will focus on those aspects that look to the circulation of Homer in Roman social life, again as a context for more belletristic performances of Homer. In following this procedure, I do not mean to give short shrift to such monuments of Homeric culture as Ennius' *Annales* and Virgil's *Aeneid*. Rather, I hope to redress an imbalance between the use of literary and nonliterary evidence in assessing Homer's impact at Rome.

Italy as a Homeric landscape

It was very early that ancient Italy became mythologised by the Greeks. Hesiod's *Theogony* ends with a reference to the sons of Odysseus and Circe – Latinus and Agrius, who ruled over the Tyrsenoi (Etruscans), and perhaps Telegonus, who is elsewhere credited with the foundation of Praeneste.¹ The Etruscans, like many other peoples who came into contact with Greek colonists, seem to have accepted their place in the Greek system of heroic genealogy by about the seventh century. Within about two hundred years, Odysseus in particular, known in Etruscan as Utuse, was credited with the founding of Cortona and even with leading the Etruscan migration from Lydia to Italy.² By the late sixth or early fifth century, a tradition existed that Odysseus and Aeneas had journeyed to Italy together and jointly founded the city of Rome.³ The Romans themselves were responsible for insisting on Aeneas as their sole founder, apparently to distinguish themselves decisively from the Greeks. But although they rejected Greek ancestry, by adopting as their progenitor the Trojan Aeneas, they stayed within the Greek system of heroic genealogy.

To say 'Greek mythology' is of course not the same as saying 'Homer'. But the historical Greek colonists of the eighth and seventh centuries brought with them stories of a heroic colonisation that was the direct result of the Greco-Trojan diaspora set in motion by the fall of Priam's city. The authoritative source to which these stories were traced was naturally Homer, which means not only the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* but also the epic cycle and Homer's followers in other poetic genres, such as Stesichorus and the tragic poets of Athens, as well as a rich artistic tradition that developed in intertextual relation to the Homeric poems and their literary descendants. This dispersion of authority prevents us from making facile assumptions about what is and is not 'Homeric'. But even if one takes a conservative approach, adopting a limited purview in order to concentrate on evidence that points to Homer specifically, a conviction emerges that the settling of Italy took place within a Homeric frame of reference.

The earliest Greek colonists brought to Italy a culture that was every bit as Homeric as the ones they left behind, if not a bit more so. Important aspects of this culture were adopted by the Etruscans and adapted to their

¹ Latinus and Agrius: Hesiod, *Th.* 1,011–13. Telegonus is mentioned in the following line, which may be a late interpolation. But Telegonus was known in Roman times as founder of Praeneste and Tusculum: see Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 4.45, Festus *s.v. Mamiliorum*, Horace, *Odes* 3.29.8, Ovid, *Fasti* 3.92.

² Utuse: Colonna (1973–4) 132–50; Cortona: Malkin (1998) 173–5 with further references.

³ Analysed by Solmsen (1986) 93–110.

own practices. For the period of about 750 to 350 BC these developments are clearly illustrated by a series of monumental burials, one Greek and two Etruscan, in which Homeric elements play a central role.

In about 730 BC, a family of Euboean colonists living in Pithecoussae on the Bay of Naples buried their twelve-year-old son with a number of artefacts that, for us, attest a cultural milieu of material comfort, social sophistication and a traditionally Hellenic cultural identity. One of the objects is a cup inscribed with three lines of Greek. The form of the first line is uncertain, but the second and third are dactylic hexameters that read, 'I am the cup of Nestor, a joy to drink from, but anyone drinking from this cup will be struck immediately with desire for lovely-crowned Aphrodite'. The cup of Nestor, of course, is the star of a brief ecphrastic passage in the *Iliad*:

πὰρ δὲ δέπας περικαλλές, ὃ οἴκοθεν ἦγ' ὁ γεραῖός,
 χρυσείοις ἦλοισι πεπαρμένον· οὔρατα δ' αὐτοῦ
 τέσσαρ' ἔσαν, δοιαὶ δὲ πελειάδες ἀμφὶς ἕκαστον
 χρύσειαι νεμέθοντο, δύω δ' ὑπὸ πυθμένες ἦσαν.
 ἄλλος μὲν μογέων ἀποκινήσασκε τραπέζης
 πλεῖον ἔόν, Νέστωρ δ' ὁ γέρων ἀμογητῆι ἄρειν.
 (II.632–7)

. . . and a very beautiful cup, which the old man had brought from home, studded with golden nails. It had four handles, and two golden doves were feeding about the sides of each, and there were two bases underneath. Another man with effort might lift it from the table when it was full, but Nestor, an old man, could raise it without effort.

Irad Malkin brings out the contextual meaning of this artifact.⁴ The inscription, the vessel itself, and the other materials found in the grave (mixing bowls, for example), allude to the social context of the symposium, a cultural institution devoted to connoisseurship especially in the realms of wine, poetry and song, the visual arts and the pleasures of the body. It was an occasion for performing the aristocratic self as it had been formed, to no small degree, in the school of Homer. The symposiast, lifting his 'Nestor's cup' with ease, playfully demonstrates his 'heroic strength'. He might display his learning as well by quoting the lines of the *Iliad* cited above. An artefact of this type would be at home in any part of the ancient Greek world. Indeed, the ecphrasis of 'Nestor's cup' acquired a life of its own, in both the ancient exegetical and artistic traditions.⁵

⁴ Malkin (1998) 156–60.

⁵ Athenaeus, II.433b–d, 461d, 466e, 477b, 487f–493d, 781d; Eustathius *ad* II.635.

Our second burial, the François Tomb at Vulci, dates to the late fourth century BC and is also Iliadic. The central chamber of this tomb is laid out in the form of an inverted T. The room that one enters first, which represents the cross of the T, is decorated with a series of frescoes depicting various Greek mythological scenes – mostly Trojan and mostly Homeric – on the left and events from Etruscan history on the right. The twin programs are brought into focus in the next, smaller room, in which two scenes on the left, depicting Achilles as he sacrifices Trojan victims to the shade of Patroclus (cf. *Iliad* 23.175–7), face two scenes on the right of specific Etruscan warriors, Mastarna and the brothers Vibenna, defeating their enemies.⁶ The clear implication of this spatial relationship is that the Etruscan soldiers are engaged not in routine warfare, but in a heroic pursuit that casts them in the role of Homer's Achilles. This is perhaps curious: in light of those ancient traditions that regarded the Etruscans as Lydian in origin, and of the fact that the Lydians are in Homer allies of the Trojans, one might have expected a different typological alignment. Equally intriguing is the identity of the enemy in the historical panel: his name is given as Cneves Tarchunies Rumach, or none other than Gnaeus Tarquinius of Rome. The Tarquins, of course, were themselves traditionally Etruscan, but in this program they are treated as a foreign enemy and thus, according to the Homeric prototype, identified with the Trojans, while those who commissioned the monument assume the role of the Greeks. This inversion anticipates by several centuries the celebrated role-reversal that occurs between Trojan Aeneas (who plays the role of the victorious Greek hero Achilles) and Italian Turnus (who becomes the defeated Trojan hero Hector) in Virgil's treatment. Thus the Homeric pattern of victory and defeat trumps genealogy in determining how Etruscans and Romans understand their own myth and history.⁷

From Nestor's cup to the François tomb is in some ways a small step, but it is laden with cultural significance. The Pithecoussae burial is a Greek expression of the Greek ideals that a group of Euboean settlers brought with them to the Italian peninsula. To be sure, the implied equation between Nestor, the eldest of Homer's heroes, and a twelve-year-old boy who died before his time, between the still-heroic strength with which the old man lifted his cup and the unfulfilled manhood of the lamented youngster, requires a prior leap of imagination sufficient to connect eighth-century colonists in Italy with the heroic past and with the Greek mainland. The paintings of the

⁶ On the tomb and its pictorial program see Brilliant (1984) 30–4 with further references.

⁷ In a narrower sense, since gladiatorial contests originated among the Etrurians in a context of ritual sacrifice, the visual comparison of Etruscan soldiers to the greatest of Greek heroes in a most atypical moment may contain an element of tendentious self-justification as well.

François tomb draw a similar analogy – indeed, one that is in some ways closer, since both the tenor and the vehicle of this comparison involve the military exploits of grown men. But this time, although the vehicle remains Homeric, the tenor is not Greek, but Etruscan. The procedure as well deserves notice. By placing the deeds of Etruscan warriors in a spatial composition that invites comparison with the deeds of Achilles, the designer of the tomb creates a distinctly typological relationship between the recent Etruscan past and distant but definite Homeric antecedents. This is a pattern that we shall see repeated again and again.

Our third burial – the Tomba dell’Orco at Tarquinia, also from the fourth century BC – is again decorated with frescoes, this time pointing to the Homeric *Odyssey*.⁸ As one enters the tomb, the first chamber is undecorated; but the second contains, on the right, a recessed area representing the cave of Polyphemus. Within this area is depicted the blinding of the Cyclops. Several details of this fresco indicate an especially close relationship with Homer’s telling of the story.⁹ An adjacent room is more amply decorated with scenes representing the Greek world of the dead. The decorative program incorporates traditional but non-Homeric denizens of the Underworld, such as Geryon, but corresponds in large measure to the Homeric *nekyia*, beginning with Odysseus’ sacrifice of a black ram and a black sheep (XI.20–33) and concluding with Theseus and Perithous (631).¹⁰

Monumental productions such as the François Tomb and the Tomba dell’Orco are not the only evidence of Homeric culture in early Italy. The material record contains many examples of bowls and cups, mirrors, burial urns, and other small-scale artefacts that bear representations of individual Homeric scenes.¹¹ A series of cinerary urns produced between about 250 and 25 BC depicts a variety of mythological topics, with dramatic moments from

⁸ On the Tomba dell’Orco in general, see Weber-Lehmann (1995) 71–100 with further references.

⁹ Here I follow the analysis of Weber-Lehmann (1995).

¹⁰ The addition not only of Geryon but of the Lernaean Hydra as well anticipates the appearance of these creatures in Virgil’s Underworld (*Aen.* 6.289, 287). Weber-Lehmann’s (1995) positing of a specific common source for the Tomba dell’Orco painter and for Virgil is too reductive. What is notable about this parallelism is that the Etruscan artist and the Roman poet allowed themselves similar licences in following their respective Homeric programs. The verse that names Theseus and Perithous (631) was suspected in antiquity (Plut. *Thes.* 20), but this very information suggests that, authentic or not, it was a commonly attested ancient reading and thus probably known to whoever was responsible for designing the pictorial program of the tomb.

¹¹ See for example Robert (1890), Weitzmann (1959) 31–51 and (1970) 14–17; Hausmann (1959), Moret (1975), Sinn (1979).

the *Odyssey* prominent among them.¹² In one type, used for the burial of a woman, Odysseus' victory over Penelope's suitors presumably praises the woman's fidelity to her husband.¹³ Episodes from Odysseus' career outside of Homer also figure in this genre: more than one urn depicts Odysseus' retrieval of Philoctetes, perhaps representing the death of the man whose ashes it contained as liberation from a debilitating disease.¹⁴ But especially common are representations of adventures – with Circe, with the Sirens, with Polyphemus – that have no obvious connection with the life or character of the deceased, or none that we can readily suggest.¹⁵ What these episodes all have in common, however, is the fact that the rationalising exegetical tradition placed them in Italy and Sicily. That is to say, the *Odyssey* itself, on this view, attests Odysseus' travels in the region where the people honoured by these burials had lived their lives. And, as was mentioned above, the Etruscans by the fifth century – at least 150 years before the earliest of these urns – had accepted Odysseus as the hero who brought their people to Italy. It seems quite likely, therefore, that among the purposes of depositing the ashes of the deceased in urns bearing such scenes was to assert a continuity of cultural identity between the Greek hero and his Etruscan 'descendants'. The prevalence of the urns may thus indicate that the heroic identification of an older warrior class with Iliadic ideals was gradually replaced by a more general sense of 'ownership' of Homeric mythology and a preference for Odyssean motifs among the well-to-do.

Like the Etruscans, the Romans lived with Homer on familiar terms from an early date. Some part of their Homeric culture was acquired from the Etruscans, some from direct contact with the Greek colonies of southern Italy and Sicily as well as with the mother cities of the Greek mainland. The smaller artefacts that dominate the record from about 250–25 BC are, as has been said, often difficult to tie closely to Homer rather than to a drama or some other type of literary work, not to speak of an independent tradition of visual representation. But they do attest a continuity of interest, throughout the various cultures of Italy from archaic to classical times, in Homeric stories. What is more interesting is that among the Romans as well as the Etruscans there existed a powerful tradition of representing not merely Homeric episodes, but Homeric narrative as well.

¹² Van der Meer (1977–8). For bibliography on workshops and favoured scenes see Brilliant (1984) 44 n.

¹³ Brilliant (1984), pl. 1.5. ¹⁴ Brilliant (1984), pl. 1.3.

¹⁵ A connection, of course, there may be. By the mid-third century, and certainly by the end of the first century BC, there is no reason to doubt that the choice of episode may be governed by allegoresis. On allegorical interpretation of the Homeric poems, see further below, n. 45.

This interest in visual Homeric narratives on a small scale is represented as well by a series of twenty small marble tablets known collectively as *tabulae Iliacae*.¹⁶ These were produced in Rome and its environs between the first century BC and the middle of the second century AD. Eleven of the tablets represent scenes from the *Iliad*, six concern the sack of Troy, and the others combine scenes from the rest of the Trojan cycle, including the *Odyssey*. What was the audience for these tablets? Nicholas Horsfall plausibly suggests that they were produced for a vulgar clientele, one with no real literary education, but with enough money, perhaps new money, to have acquired pretensions.¹⁷ However this may be, visual Homeric narratives on a grand scale eventually make their return among the Romans. In his treatise on architecture, Vitruvius mentions Homeric wall paintings as a traditional subject to adorn a fine home:

Ceteris conclavibus, id est vernis, autumnalibus, estivis, etiam atriis et peristyliis, constitutae sunt ab antiquis ex certis rebus certae rationes picturarum . . . nonnulli locis item signorum megalographiam habentes; deorum simulacra seu fabularum dispositas explicationes, non minus Troianas pugnas seu Vlixis errationes per topia (7.5.1–2).

In all other [kinds of rooms] – whether used in spring, fall, or summer, and even in courtyards and colonnades, particular cycles of painting dealing with particular subjects have traditionally been used . . . Some rooms have paintings on a large scale where sculpture is usually found: images of the gods or narrative tableaux, even the Trojan War or the wanderings of Ulysses from place to place.

A good example of what Vitruvius means is found in the famous cycle of Odyssean landscapes from the Esquiline.¹⁸ The panels, which were painted in about 30 BC, present generous vistas of varied landscapes, including beaches backed by wide expanses of ocean; mountainous hinterlands; a few, but significantly placed, trees; and at least one architectural complex. At first sight it is the scenery itself that is the hero of this composition; but on closer inspection, one notices the figures that inhabit this landscape, and realises that they are telling a story. The first panel has been lost, but those that survive depict a sequence of episodes from the *Odyssey*: the adventure with the Laestrygonians (1–3); Odysseus' encounter with Circe (5; an additional panel, 6, has probably been lost); and the *nekylia* (7–8). A further fragment appears to contain the adventure of the Sirens, and is thought to have contained as

¹⁶ Sadurska (1964), Horsfall (1979); Weitzmann (1959) 34–49, 107, 131; Schefold (1975) 125–8.

¹⁷ Horsfall (1979) 34–35, endorsed by Brilliant (1984) 57; Sadurska (1964) 18.

¹⁸ Andrae (1962) 106–17; von Blankenhagn (1963) 100–46; Weitzmann (1970) 19; Schefold (1952) 81.

well the struggle with Scylla. Looking back over this sequence, it seems certain that the lost first panel contained Polyphemus, and that the cycle was devoted to those adventures that occupy the central books of the *Odyssey*.

What is immediately obvious is the similarity between the pictorial program of the Tomba dell'Orco and that of the Esquiline house. To be sure, differences exist as well: not all of the Esquiline scenes are present in the tomb; the domestic setting of the landscapes differs from the funereal setting of the tomb (even if ritual banqueting did take place at the burial site); the styles of the two sequences differ radically, as one would expect in view of the three hundred years that separate them. Nevertheless, the fact that both programs focus on the central books of the *Odyssey*, and that they supplement the Homeric text in similar ways, remains striking. There seem to be three possibilities: (1) the similarity is pure, meaningless accident; (2) the plan of the Etruscan tomb was the more or less direct model for the Roman triclinium; (3) the program represented in both places was of a type that was familiar throughout Italy from at least the fourth century BC onward.

The last of these possibilities seems likeliest, even if examples of large-scale compositions between the fourth and first centuries are not plentiful. But in any case, the kind of Homeric program embodied in the the Esquiline frescoes remained a feature of domestic decoration for generations. In the via dell'Abbondanza of Pompeii there are two houses that exhibit such programs, all involving not the *Odyssey*, but the *Iliad*. The House of D. Octavius Quartio contains a cycle of fifteen or more episodes from the *Iliad*, subordinated to a different Trojan cycle representing Hercules and Laomedon.¹⁹ A second house, called the House of the Cryptoporticus, shows in one room about 300 feet of Iliadic material culminating in the flight of Aeneas, Anchises and Ascanius under the protection of Hermes.²⁰

As a final example of this tradition – and undoubtedly the most spectacular – let us briefly consider the remarkable sculpture garden of Sperlonga. This litoral town, known in antiquity as Spelunca, was the site of a villa owned by the emperor Tiberius.²¹ The town was aptly named. Excavations in 1957 revealed a seaside cave that served as a nymphaeum and also, it is thought, as a summer triclinium.²² The main feature of the complex is, however, a spectacular sculptural program. The centrepieces are two

¹⁹ Spinazzola (1954), Kemp-Lindemann (1975).

²⁰ Discussed by Brilliant (1984) 63–4. For the relationship between the Iliadic material and Aeneas' flight, cf. the *tabulae Iliacae*.

²¹ Suetonius, *Tib.* 39; Tacitus, *Ann.* 4.59.1.

²² On the investigation of the place and the discovery and reconstruction of the statuary, see Jacopi (1958) and (1967). The form and purpose of the complex are lucidly discussed by Viscogliosi (1996).

monumental recreations of scenes from the *Odyssey*, one of Scylla attacking Odysseus' ship and the other of the blinding of Polyphemus. Additional subjects are drawn from the *Iliad* and the Trojan cycle, including Ganymede, Menelaus and Patroclus, the body of Achilles, Diomedes and the Palladium.²³ The significance of this design has been widely discussed and variously interpreted in specific details. What is unmistakable is that it incorporates crucial episodes from both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* into its design. The *Odyssey*, which is represented by the two colossal sculpture groups of Polyphemus and Scylla, assumes by far the larger share of importance, as is not uncommon in ancient Italian art over the centuries. In particular, the central books of the poem and the adventures that were thought to have taken place on or near Italian soil are the focus – just as was true centuries before in Etruscan tomb painting. The Iliadic material focuses on Achilles and Patroclus, like the climax of the typological program in the François Tomb. The cyclic elements contribute thematic associations that are absent from the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* proper, but that establish an important reference for the intended audience: Ganymede, for example, is a common symbol of apotheosis – a motif of pointed significance within a Roman imperial setting – and the Palladium, of course, represents the transferal of Trojan cult to Rome. Much has changed between the arrival of Homeric stories in seventh-century Italy and the design of this astonishing masterpiece, but the main forces that govern the reception of Homer in a context of cultural identification and appropriation have remained amazingly constant.

This partial survey shows that elite Romans, like the Etruscans before them, surrounded themselves with visual *Iliads* and, especially, *Odysseys*. The interest in such scenes both in Rome and in provincial cities like Pompeii and the habit of constructing narratives that link the heroic past of Greece to the Italian present hark back to the monumental burials of the seventh to the fourth centuries; and the procedure of focusing on sequences rather than on individual episodes implies an interest not in detachable stories but in monumental narrative structures. Furthermore, the structures in question are undoubtedly Homer's masterpieces, and not popular treatments of this or that story in tragedy or any other, less expansive genre.²⁴ The popularity of Odyssean cycles seems to have been connected with the idea that

²³ The sculptures are evidently from the same workshop that produced the famous Laocoon: see Conticello, Andraea and Bol (1974).

²⁴ Confining the inquiry to evidence that depends on larger narrative structures than tragedy typically avoids questions about whether Homer or tragedy is the 'real' source of the scenes being depicted. In view of the thoroughly Homeric character of tragedy in general, however, paying homage to this false antithesis may be felt unnecessarily to limit one's field of vision. On Homer and tragedy see the remarks of Hunter in this volume. On the 'theatrical mentality'

Odysseus was an Italian culture hero and even the ancestor of some peoples. Also notable in at least some of these examples is a typological relationship between Homeric mythology and the deeds of the Italian patrons who sponsored the creation of the monuments. These relationships remain relatively constant from the time that they first appear in classical Etruscan culture down to the Roman imperial period. With this background in mind, let us turn to the literary evidence for Homer's impact on Roman culture.

Living with Homer

As the artistic evidence suggests, Homer was an important element of elite Roman ideology. His texts defined a world of aristocratic epistemology and stood as the paradigm against which to measure one's own experience. And if artistic representation suggests a typological relationship between the Homeric poems and ancient perceptions of contemporary events, no less is true of the literary record. The most renowned instance of typing a situation by quoting Homer must be Scipio Aemilianus' comment on the destruction of Carthage. As he viewed the dying city, Scipio famously wept and quoted the words of Hector to Andromache in *Iliad* 6 –

ἔσσεται ἡμαρ ὅτ' ἄν ποτ' ὀλώληι Ἴλιος ἱρή
καὶ Πριάμος καὶ λαὸς ἔμμελίω Πριάμοιο.
(6.448–9)

There will be a day when holy Troy will perish, and Priam, and the people of Priam of the good ash-spear.

– and in doing so thought of the future of Rome.²⁵ Scipio's behaviour in this anecdote does a lot to explain why he came to be regarded as a hero of humanistic sensibilities. But it did not take such a momentous event to bring Homer to Roman lips. Homerisms came to mind casually as well, and with humorous effect. Cicero is our best source, who in his letters drops Homeric quotations freely. These range in tone from the purely ironic and jocular to sincere expressions of high-minded principle. For the latter sort, which are in a similar vein to that of Scipio's famous utterance, we may consult a letter to Atticus about the stance Cicero should adopt towards Caesar's first

of Hellenistic and Imperial culture and the effect of this mentality on the reception of Homer, see Zeitlin (2001) 208.

²⁵ Appian, *Punic*. 132 = Polyb. 39.6. Other quotations of Homer on historic events: Plutarch, *Aem*. 28.8: 1.528–30; Polyb. 36.8.8: x.495 (Cato on Scipio); Diod. fr. 34 (35) 7.3: 1.47 (Scipio Aemilianus on death of Ti. Gracchus); Cicero, *Att*. 10.1.1: 22.804–5 (quoting Sex. Pompeius); Val. Max. 1.5.7: 16.849 (cf. Plut. *Brutus* 24.2); Plut. *Brut*. 23.3: 6.429, 491; Plut. *Brut*. 34.4: 1.259; Suet. *Oct*. 65: 3.40.

agrarian law in 60 BC. After spelling out the advantages of supporting the law – better relations with both Pompeius and Caesar, a chance to make peace with former opponents and to ingratiate himself with the masses, all in all an opportunity to play the tranquil role of elder statesman – he declares that he will be consistent with his principles and not consult personal convenience by supporting the law, but will oppose it on patriotic grounds, because, in the words of Hector,

εἷς οἰωνὸς ἄριστος, ἀμύνεσθαι περὶ πάτρησ
(12.243)

One omen is best, to defend your country!

But Cicero might also make fun of the pretensions implied by such quotations. In a letter addressed to Caesar *imperator* (and therefore written in 45 BC), Cicero recommends a young man by the name of Precilius.²⁶ The letter refers to Cicero's obstinacy in opposing Caesar in the war with Pompeius, and cites young Precilius as one of the many who had in vain urged him to relent. This was clearly a delicate situation: even if Cicero and Caesar had achieved a superficial rapprochement, they were hardly now on easy or affectionate terms. How might Cicero acknowledge the political differences that had divided him from Caesar, but still establish enough of a bond that he could ask Caesar for a favour on behalf of this young man? The 'innovative' solution that he found was to lay on the Homer.²⁷ The letter is in fact a virtual cento of Homeric quotations, leavened by one of Euripides. By resorting to Homer, Cicero can avoid speaking too directly of his political differences with Caesar and emphasise the humane interests that the two great men of letters share. At the same time, the abundance of quotation is so over-the-top that one cannot read the letter without a smile. This too must have been part of Cicero's intent, to release tensions between himself and his correspondent not only by referring to shared cultural interests, but by doing so in a humorous way.

There are also what might be called burlesque quotations. These generally occur in Cicero's most intimate correspondence, the letters to Atticus. For example, in the wake of Caesar's assassination, Cicero writes to Atticus about the decision he faces about which side to join in the civil war that is approaching, and imagines that his friend will counsel neutrality. The words that he puts in Atticus' mouth are playfully adapted from Homer:

²⁶ *Fam.* 13.15 = 317 Shackleton Bailey.

²⁷ Innovative: '*genere novo sum litterarum ad te usus ut intellegeres non vulgarem esse commendationem*' (13.15.3).

οὐ τοι, τέκνον ἐμόν, δέδοται πολεμήϊα ἔργα;
 ἀλλὰ σύ γ' ἱμερόεντα μετέρχαιο ἔργα γάμοιο.
 (5.428–9)

So, at least, reads the received text, in which Zeus counsels Aphrodite, who has been wounded by the mortal Diomedes, to stay clear of the battlefield. Cicero, however, ‘emends’ γάμοιο ‘marriage’ to λόγοιο ‘language’. Shackleton Bailey well captures the effect in his translation,

My child, the works of war are not for thee,
 but thy concern the works of *worded* [v.l. *wedded*] joy.

In a similar vein, Cicero frequently calls Clodia Metelli by the Homeric nickname βοῶπις.²⁸ In giving Clodia an epithet that in Homer is the exclusive property of Hera, Cicero no doubt means to scoff at this noble lady’s imperious attitude. Because Hera was married to her own brother, Cicero may allude to gossip about Clodia’s relationship with her brother, P. Clodius Pulcher, one of Cicero’s greatest political enemies.²⁹

One might object that Cicero was unusual in the range and frequency of his Homeric citations, but in fact this is almost surely not the case. We are exceptionally well informed about Cicero because we possess so much of his voluminous correspondence. But passages similar to those just discussed are to be found in the correspondences of Pliny and of Fronto and in the historiographical and biographical tradition as well. As for literature, the great works of epic poetry have been intensively studied from this point of view. At the other end of the spectrum, a work like the *Apocolocyntosis* ascribed to Seneca is but the most visible representative of a rich tradition of Homeric parody in the literary realm, one that corresponds to and exaggerates the informal banter found in Cicero’s letters. This text makes use of epic formulas for ludicrously incongruous purposes, such as telling the time of day.³⁰ When Claudius arrives upon Olympus, Jupiter is informed that no one can understand the stranger, because he seems to speak neither Latin, nor Greek nor any other known language.³¹ Jupiter therefore dispatches the well-travelled Hercules to investigate; and, uncertain where to begin, Hercules addresses Claudius in Homeric terms:

τίς πόθεν εἰς ἀνδρῶν; πόθι τοι πόλις ἦδὲ τοκῆς;
 (1.170 etc.)

²⁸ *Att.* 2.12.2, 2.14.1, 2.22.5, 2.23.3.

²⁹ Reference to the gossip concerning incest at *Cael.* 32; cf. Catullus, 79.

³⁰ Seneca, *Apoc.* 2. ³¹ Seneca, *Apoc.* 5.

Claudius gaudet esse illic philologos homines, sperat futurum aliquem historiis suis locum. Itaque et ipse Homericō versu Caesarem se esse significans ait:

Ἰλιόθεν με φέρων ἄνεμος Κικόνεσσι πέλασσευ
(IX.39)

Erat autem sequens versus verior, aequē Homericus:

... ἔνθα δ' ἐγὼ πόλιν ἔπραθον, ὤλεσα δ' αὐτοῦς
(IX.40)

‘Who in the world are you, what your city and who your parents?’

Claudius, delighted that there are literary people there, hopes that there will be some place for his histories. And so he too replies with a line of Homer by way of saying that he is a Caesar:

‘A wind carrying me from Ilium drove me to the Ciconians.’

But the following verse was more accurate, and just as Homeric:

‘There I sacked the city and killed the people.’

And in equating the Roman Senate with a Homeric *concilium deorum*, the *Apocolocyntosis* draws on a satiric tradition extending back at least as far as Gaius Lucilius in the second century BC.³²

Men like Cicero, Pliny, Seneca and Lucilius quote Homer casually and sententiously, habitually and deliberately, often amusingly and always with effect, in a manner that suggests not superiority to, but fellowship with their readers and interlocutors. The picture that emerges from their practice is of an elite society that sees itself in Homeric terms, whether in ironic detachment or in commitment to high ideals. Such shared habits of mind were formed early in life. From what we know of Roman schools, Homer occupied a central place in the curriculum.³³ Horace has left a famous, if fragmentary, account of his own education. After primary school in Venusia with the sons of centurions, he went to Rome to learn the kind of things that were reserved for the sons of senators (*Serm.* 1.6.71–8). That meant Homer (*Epist.* 2.2.41–2). In Rome, young Horace’s schoolmaster Orbilius apparently drummed Homer into his pupils almost literally, using both the Greek text and, in the case of the *Odyssey*, the classic translation of Livius Andronicus (*Epist.* 2.69–71).³⁴ Horace’s vignettes agree with the professional educator’s point

³² Seneca, *Apoc.* 8–11. A similar treatment of the *concilium deorum* was the subject of Lucilius’ first book of satires. Cf. Ovid, *Met.* 1.163–252.

³³ On Homer’s place in Hellenistic education, see Marrou (1965) 246–7; Morgan (1998) 69–71, 105–15; for Rome specifically, cf. Bonner (1977) 213.

³⁴ As a mark of his punishing tuition, Orbilius receives from Horace the (mock-Homeric?) epithet *plagosus*: ‘Orbilius of the many blows’ (*Epist.* 2.1.70).

of view as stated by Quintilian over a century later: ‘The best principle is to begin by reading Homer and Virgil, even though one needs more mature judgement to appreciate their qualities. But there is time for that, since one will read these authors more than once.’³⁵

In Horace’s boyhood, Homer was paired with Livius. By Quintilian’s time, Homer remained, but Virgil had supplanted Livius. What should we make of these pairings? They could suggest that Latin epic – first Livius, then Virgil – was more familiar and accessible than Greek and that it provided the context within which Roman students learned their Homer; but the converse is probably closer to the truth. Horace may have used texts like Livius’ *Odusia* as a trot, but that would have exposed him to the consequences faced by a modern student who, when called upon to translate, speaks in a pidgin of undergraduate argot and Alexander Pope.³⁶ If, as Quintilian suggests, Virgil eventually replaced Livius in such settings, the *Aeneid* will not have been used to facilitate translation of Homer’s Greek. The overt point of comparing Latin translations and adaptations to the original must have been to develop the student’s facility for creative imitation of approved models and his connoisseurship in this important aesthetic domain. Both the cultural translations pioneered by Livius – invoking one of the Italian Camenae, for instance, instead of a Greek Muse – and the narrative transformations wrought on Homer’s epics by Virgil will have provided excellent opportunities not only for refining the student’s command of Greek and Latin, but also for drawing conclusions about the larger implications of studying Greek poetry on Italian soil.³⁷ How did Homer become, and why did he remain, such an important element in Roman education?

The answer to this question has a lot to do with class and social rank. Here we must bear in mind Horace’s distinction between the education of centurions’ sons and that of future senators. Easy familiarity with Homer was the mark of an expensive education, and those who had had one liked to sneer at frauds. But some knowledge of Homer appears to have circulated throughout Roman culture in quite casual forms. Even the illiterate might converse in quasi-Homeric expressions that had become proverbial. Of course, it can be difficult to determine whether a given reference to, say, Achilles is ‘Homeric’ in any particular way. In Plautus, for instance, the

³⁵ *Ideoque optime institutum est ut ab Homero atque Vergilio lectio inciperet, quamquam ad intellegendas eorum virtutes firmiore iudicio opus est; sed huic rei superest tempus, neque enim semel legentur* (*Inst.* 1.8.5). Cf. the remarks of Morgan (1998) 96–9.

³⁶ The essential point is made by Mariotti (1986) 14.

³⁷ Camena: Livius, fr. 1. On the artistic and cultural issues involved in Livius’ translation see Mariotti (1986) and Traina (1970).

insufferable Pyrgopolynices is repeatedly compared with Achilles, just as a clever slave like Pseudolus or Bacchides might be called a Ulysses.³⁸ Such references hardly depend on a close familiarity with Homer. And even when Plautus speaks of ‘an *Iliad* of hate’ – a phrase closely paralleled, as it happens, by Cicero – we move into the realm of proverbs that might well have circulated in general conversation even among the less well educated.³⁹

How deeply such sayings penetrated into the social hierarchy is unclear: our sources, including those I have just cited, mainly represent the Hellenised literary culture rather than the lower, less literate strata of society. Still, literary representation takes it for granted that some generalised, very imperfect knowledge of Homer did exist among the uneducated and alleges that social climbers pretended to greater knowledge than they actually had. Trimalchio, the unbearable vulgarian immortalised by Petronius, tries to fake it, with hilarious results. After boasting of his Greek and Latin libraries, Trimalchio asks the *rhetoricus* Agamemnon whether he knows ‘the story of Ulysses, how the Cyclops took off his thumb?’⁴⁰ He later brings on a band of ‘Homeristae’ and informs his guests that they are witnessing Homer’s account of the war between Troy and – Tarentum!⁴¹

These gaffes resemble certain odd features in Trimalchio’s self-mythologisation, but here I want to focus on a specific point.⁴² Not only is Trimalchio’s grasp of Homer ludicrously weak, but he is so unsure of himself as well that he resorts to following the performance of his Homeristae with a libretto. Trimalchio’s insecurity is well justified; but the poseur’s reliance on such crutches is clearly a matter for ridicule, here and elsewhere. Seneca skewers a similar expedient adopted by one Calvisius Sabinus (suspected by some to be the living model for the fictitious Trimalchio). Calvisius, being very rich but lacking a polite education, wished to seem familiar with the Greek classics. Solution: he bought himself a *familia* of slaves, each one of whom had either Homer, or Hesiod, or one of the nine lyric poets by heart. For going to such lengths, he made himself the favourite target of Satellius Quadratus, who loved to expose the pretensions of the ignorant rich.⁴³ It is clear from such stories as these that knowledge of Homer was valued by the elite not merely as a context for appreciating Latin literature but as a mark

³⁸ Achilles: *Mil.* 61, 1,054, 1,289; Ulysses: *Pseud.* 1,063, 1,244; cf. *Bacch.* 949.

³⁹ Plautus: ‘*Ilias odiorum*’, *Mil.* 743; Cicero: ‘*tanta malorum impendet Ilias*’, *Att.* 8.11.3. Cf. Dem. *De fals. leg.* 148, Zenob. 4.43, Diogen. 5.26; Ovid, *Pont.* 2.7.34. See Leutsch-Schneidewin *Paroemiogr.* 2: 34; Otto (1890) *s.v.* ‘*Ilias*’. The modern version of this proverb appears to be ‘longer than *War and Peace*’.

⁴⁰ *Sat.* 48.7. ⁴¹ *Sat.* 59.

⁴² On Trimalchio’s self-mythologisation, see *Sat.* 29–30. ⁴³ Seneca, *Epist.* 27.7.

of their social rank, and that this knowledge could not be counterfeited if one wished to be accepted by polite society.⁴⁴

Snob appeal aside, Homer was more than a decorative element in Roman social life. The *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were revered as repositories of profound wisdom and as guides to proper behaviour. Not that many Romans were as naïve as Ion, the rhapsode of Plato's dialogue, who regarded Homer as an expert even on technical matters, such as strategy, horsemanship, and so forth. But where moral and ethical matters were concerned, Homer's prestige was immense. The clearest illustration of this reverence for Homer's ethical teachings is contained in the opening lines of Horace's epistle to Lollius Maximus:

Troiani belli scriptorem, Maxime Lolli,
Dum tu declamas Romae, Praeneste relegi.
Qui quid sit pulchrum, quid turpe, quid non,
Planius ac melius Chrysippo et Crantore dicit.
(Epist. 1.2.1-4)

While you were declaiming at Rome, Lollius Maximus, I was at Praeneste reading the writer of the Trojan War, who says more plainly and better than Chrysippus and Crantor what is fair, what is base, what is useful and what is not.

There follows a précis of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* in no more than twenty-five lines that sketches both poems as morality plays. The *Iliad* is described as an allegory of human passion getting the better of sound government: the rank and file suffer for the self-indulgence of their leaders. In the *Odyssey*, on the other hand, the hero is a paradigm of self-control. The Sirens and Circe stand for the worldly temptations that he must resist, and his men, who succumb to these temptations or who would do if not for their leader's stratagems, are set on the same level as the suitors and the Phaeacians, who live for pleasure. Both readings are tendentious, but consistent with the interpretive procedures that prevailed in Horace's day, and there is no reason to doubt that these sketches were meant to be broadly familiar to Horace's cultivated readership.⁴⁵ The *mise-en-scène* of the epistle is significant as well. Horace claims to have written this letter from Praeneste, which was traditionally

⁴⁴ Cicero's Homerising might easily seem precious to a modern reader. Certainly the character Bloch in Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, who constantly refers to acquaintances as 'so-and-so of the shining helm' and 'brilliant, swift-footed such-and such', is open to the charge. But Bloch displays no evidence of having a sense of humour. It would be hard to make such a charge stick to Cicero.

⁴⁵ On the long history of interpreting Homer allegorically see Buffière (1973), Lamberton (1986) 1-43; Lamberton and Keane (1992), *passim*; Hardie (1986).

regarded as a foundation of Telegonus, son of Odysseus and Circe. Thus the Homeric content of the epistle resonates with the fact that it is sent from an Italian town that was founded by the son of one of Homer's two greatest heroes.

Why, then, did the Romans esteem Homer to this extent? What made those who mattered in the most powerful nation on earth adopt the foundational texts of an alien culture as a central element in their own aristocratic self-fashioning? Was it indeed the influence of Homer's great Roman imitators in the field of epic – Livius Andronicus, Naevius, Ennius, Virgil – that made it so important for elite Roman readers to gain an accurate knowledge of Homer in the original Greek? Or is this not to put matters the wrong way around? Is it not far more likely that the Roman epigoni found their audience so receptive because that audience was already familiar not merely with the text of the canonical *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, but with certain habits of interpreting those stories that had been practised on Italian soil for centuries before the specifically literary imitations that we know ever came into being? Significant here is not merely the extreme frequency with which Homer sprang to the lips of educated Romans, but particularly the fact that this was as likely or perhaps even more likely to happen in trivial and humorous contexts as compared with serious occasions. Such habits seem to imply a very long tradition – longer, perhaps, than the recorded history of Roman literature – of comparing aspects of contemporary life to Homeric paradigms. In fact, self-identification with the actions and characters depicted in Homer's epics and adoption of ideals embodied in those actions and characters, is characteristic not only of Roman but of other Italian elites as well.

Conclusion

To approach even the most familiar literary texts with this background in mind changes measurably our appreciation of their engagement with the Homeric poems. Epic poets like Livius, Ennius and Virgil are not to be seen as revolutionaries in the intensity of their engagement with Homeric material, nor should the history of that engagement be seen in purely literary terms. The kind of Homeric agon represented by the *Aeneid*, for example, has important forerunners not only in earlier Hellenistic and Roman epic, but in the compositions devised by unnamable Greek and Etruscan artisans and patrons centuries before. And the kinds of cultural comparisons implied by these monuments of literary and visual artistry were paralleled by the everyday behaviour of the Roman elite and of those who emulated them. In this sense, Homer was part of Roman culture from an early date, and he remained an important force throughout the classical period. Several other

authors claimed for themselves or have had claimed for them the title of Roman Homer, but if we consider all the available evidence, it is clear that the Roman Homer was none other than Homer himself.

FURTHER READING

On Homer as the school not only of Hellas but of Rome, see Zeitlin (2001). Zeitlin's focus is on Greeks in the imperial period, but her important observations on the 'theatrical mentality' (a phrase borrowed from Pollitt (1986)) and on the behaviour of the Roman elite complement many of the points made in this chapter. Malkin (1998) situates Etruscan and Roman experience within the context of Greek settlement throughout the Mediterranean in the archaic period. Gruen (1992) presents a lucid and convincing analysis of Hellenism and Roman identity in the classical period. The literature on Homeric scenes in the visual arts is vast but not very well organised from a cultural-historical point of view. Essential reading includes Brilliant (1984). On the reception of the *Odyssey* in the visual arts, see Touchefeu-Meynier (1968); Andrae (1982); Andrae and Presicce (1996); Andrae (1999). The *Iliad* is less well served in general, but on the *tabulae Iliacae*, see Sadurska (1964). Literary material attesting Homer's presence in Roman elite culture is collected by Tolkhien (1897). Tolkhien's more analytical study *Homer und die römische Poesie* (1900) has itself been translated, updated, and equipped with an introduction and notes by Scaffai (1991). But the study of the relationship between Homer and the Roman epic poets has always been a major scholarly industry. On issues of translation, see Traina (1970). On poetic self-fashioning in the early period, see Suerbaum (1968a). Questions centering on religion and literary convention are surveyed by Feeney (1991). There are in addition many important studies of Homeric influence on individual Roman poets. On Livius Andronicus see Mariotti (1986); on Naevius, Mariotti (1955) and Barchiesi (1962). Ennius is very well served by Otto Skutsch's magisterial edition and commentary on the *Annales* (Skutsch (1985)); see also Brink (1952). Virgil looms especially large over this landscape. For the *Aeneid* the essential study remains Knauer (1964a) (English summary Knauer (1964b)). The system that Knauer explicates is open to interpretation from many points of view. Crucial contributions include Heinze (1915; English version 1993); Otis (1964); Barchiesi (1984); Hardie (1986). Homer also exerts a formative influence on the *Georgics*, largely through the procedures of ancient allegoresis: see Farrell (1991); Morgan (1999). For Statius, Valerius Flaccus and Silius Italicus see Juhnke (1972) with, however, the important modifications to Juhnke's approach suggested by Smolenaars (1994) xxvi-xlii. Homer's influence was felt in other poetic genres as well, particularly in elegy, but comprehensive general studies are lacking. The *Odyssey* is universally acknowledged as the ultimate model for the typical novelistic plot. On Petronius see Courtney (2001) ch. 6, 'The Voyage' and *passim*. On Apuleius see Harrison (1990); for further reading cf. Schlam and Finkelppearl (2000).