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On Seeing The Poet:
Arabic, Italian and Byzantine portraits of Homer

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In a provocative new book, *The History Written on the Classical Greek Body*, Robin Osborne asks a simple question: 'What would the past look like if we took as our evidence not what people said but what people saw?'.[1] He then investigates how perceptions of the body shape ancient experience, and how such perceptions in turn demand a reassessment of classical Athenian history. There are some difficult issues of method with the enterprise: in particular, Osborne moves very quickly from ancient representations of the body to lived experience

[1] R. Osborne, *The History Written on the Classical Greek Body* (Cambridge 2011) 7. While this article waited for publication, Ludmilla Jordanova explored the question in another important book: *The Look of the Past: Visual and Material Evidence in Historical Practice* (Cambridge 2012).

– from how bodies were sculpted or drawn to how people saw their own and other people's bodies (an issue to which I return).[2] These difficulties notwithstanding, the approach he offers seems to me important and productive – not just for the study of history, but even for the study of literary history, a field which has understandably been dominated by the written word. I consider here some portraits of Homer displayed in Arabic, Italian and Byzantine manuscripts dating between the 9th and the 14th century, and approach them as evidence for the history of literature. I ask, in particular, what perspectives and insights they add to a history based solely on the written word.

My question belongs to a project which briefly needs to be set out here, as it provides the broader context for the range of explorations I offer in this article. From antiquity to the present, writers and artists produced a vast range of representations of the Greek and Roman poets. These representations, even the earliest ones, hardly contain reliable evidence about the poets, and are therefore easily dismissed. The case against the ancient biographies was authoritatively made by Lefkowitz in 1981: 'If this book can establish that these stories can be disregarded as popular fiction, some literary history will need to be re-written, so that it starts not with the poets' biographies, but the poems themselves.'[3] More recently, fictional biographies and anecdotes about the poets have begun to be treated more sympathetically, as evidence for the reception of literature.[4] Lefkowitz herself, in the second edition of her book, offers the following perspective: 'This second edition aims to provide a more sympathetic portrait of the writers who tried to create biographies for the poets whose works they admired and sought to interpret for posterity.'[5]

[2] See the review of Osborne by A. Petsalis-Diomidis in the *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 134 (2014) 231f.

[3] M. Lefkowitz, *The Lives of the Greek Poets* (London 1981) x. See also J.Fairweather, 'Fictions in the biographies of ancient writers', *Ancient Society* 5, (1974) 231-75.

[4] For what promises to be the most up-to-date and wide-ranging discussion, see R. Fletcher and J. Hanink (eds.) *Creative Lives: Poets and Other Artists in the Ancient Biographical Imagination* (Cambridge forthcoming).

[5] M. Lefkowitz, *The Lives of the Greek Poets*, second edition (Baltimore 2012) x, 'responding also to B. Graziosi, *Inventing Homer: The Early Reception of Epic* (Cambridge 2002)'.

Just like ancient biographies, portraits of the poets also fall in the category of fictional representation: they do not offer likenesses of real individuals, but rather visions of imagined types.[6] For this very reason, they tell us how different communities imagined the poets of Greece and Rome and how, in turn, their representations affected later receptions of the poets' works. This gradual shift towards considering authors as creations of those who imagine them is now at the heart of a research project funded by the European Research Council and hosted by Durham University: *Living Poets: A New Approach to Ancient Poetry*.[7] The aim of the project, as a whole, is to investigate verbal and visual representations of the Greek and Roman poets through the centuries, and the relationship between such representations and the reception of ancient literature. Within this overall framework, the portraits of Homer I consider here present specific challenges and opportunities for interpretation. In some contexts, portraits of Homer introduced his works;[8] but the miniatures under consideration here feature alongside narratives and arguments which are only very remotely connected to the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. For that reason, the portraits can be used to explore the limits of literary reception or, to put it differently, they can help to map the distance between readers of early Greek epic, and viewers of the poet Homer.

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[6] R. and E. Boehringer 1939, *Homer: Bildnisse und Nachweise* (Breslau 1939); T. Lorenz, *Galerien von griechischen Philosophen und Dichterbildnissen bei den Römern* (Mainz 1965); K. Schefold, *Die Bildnisse der antiken Dichter, Redner und Denker*, second edition (Basel 1997); P. Zanker, *The Mask of Socrates: The Image of the Intellectual in Antiquity* (Berkeley and Los Angeles 1995).

[7] The debate about the 'death of the author' is a major influence on the project, see the foundational articles by R. Barthes, 'La mort de l'auteur', *Manteia* 5 (1968), 12-17 , and M. Foucault, Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur?', *Bulletin de la Société Française de Philosophie* 63.3 (1969), 73-104.

[8] See E. Bethe, *Buch und Bild im Altertum*, ed. E. Kirsten (Leipzig and Vienna 1945) 1-3; on Callimachus' *Pinakes*, see R. Blum, *Kallimachos und die Lietraturverzeichnung bei den Griechen* (Frankfurt 1977).

An Arabic Homer

My first portrait features in an Arabic manuscript containing a selection of philosophical and medical texts, kept in the Staatsbibliothek in Berlin: Ms. or. quart. 785. On the basis of a bilingual seal in Arabic and Syriac, and of Syriac foliation, Cottrell argues that the manuscript originates from the Mar Mattai monastery in Mossul, and dates to the thirteenth century.[9] The portrait of Homer, on f. 21v., accompanies a version of the *Choice of Wise Sayings and Fine Statements*, an eleventh-century text by the Egyptian scholar Mubaššir ibn Fātik.[10] The scribe of this particular manuscript left blank spaces for illustrations of the Semitic, Greek and Egyptian wise men featured in the text; four of these spaces were filled by an illustrator working in a different hand, and using a different ink. A caption accompanies our portrait, announcing that it is 'a picture of the poet Homer'; so we can be in no doubt about the identity of this figure:

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[9] See E. J. Cottrell's entry on Al-Mubaššir ibn Fātik in H. Lagerlund (ed.), *Encyclopae-dia of Medieval Philosophy* (Heidelberg 2011) 817 and her chapter 'Al-Mubaššir ibn Fātik and the α version of the Alexander Romance', in R. Stoneman & I. Netton (eds.), *The 'Alexander Romance' in the East* (London 2012) 235f. The seal is also mentioned in the manuscript description provided by G. Schoeler, *Arabische Handschriften*, second volume (Stuttgart 1990), no. 327, p. 391.

[10] On Al-Mubaššir ibn Fātik, see Cottrell, quoted above n. 9. The text is edited by A. Badawī, *Muḫtār al-ḥikam wa-maḥāsin al-kalim,* second edition (Beirut 1980); for a discussion of extant manuscripts, see F. Rosenthal, 'Al-Mubaššir ibn Fātik. Prolegom-ena to an abortive edition', *Oriens* 12/14 (1960/61) 132-58.

This sudden epiphany of Homer invites a broader investigation of his place in Arabic culture. As Pliny points out, 'desire gives birth to faces whose appearance has not been handed down to us, as with Homer'; so here we can ask what kind of desire produced this specific portrait.[11] An answer begins to emerge by looking at the ways and contexts in which Homer appears in Arabic sources. After a brief investigation of these, I return to this portrait and ask what perspectives it adds to the textual evidence.

In general, the classical age of Islam was deeply influenced by the legacy of Greece: between the eighth and the tenth century AD, or the second and the fourth century AH,[12] the ʿAbbāsid dynasty presided over a flourishing culture where translation from ancient Greek into Syriac and Arabic played a central role. Homer, however, remained marginal to this effort of translation, as did the ancient Greek poets more generally. This fact has sometimes been adduced as evidence of 'some innate Arab philistinism' – a judgement that, above all, reveals the assumptions of those who make it.[13] In Europe, ancient epic always remained central to the classical tradition, and therefore its marginality in the Islamic context is especially striking by comparison. The Christian and Islamic reception of ancient Greek culture began to take different courses after the Arab conquests, but important links remained, and those deserve exploration, not least because they shed light on the position of Homer in the Arab world.

In accordance with their respectful attitude towards institutions of learning, the Muslims left intact the Christian academies, parochial schools and hospitals in Syria, and in these a version of the Alexandrian syllabus continued to be taught: the emphasis was on Aristotle in a Neoplatonic interpretation, astronomy, and Galenic medicine.[14] Arabic,

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[11] *Natural History* 35.9: 'Pariunt desideria non traditos vultus, sicut in Homero evenit'.

[12] Rather than Christian or Muslim dating (AD or AH), the rest of this article refers to the Common Era: although CE dates coincide with the Christian system, they at least express the wish for a universal dating system without religious affiliation.

[13] See further P. E. Pormann, 'The Arabic Homer: An Untold Story', *Classical and Modern Literature* 27.1 (2007) 28.

[14] For a very brief overview, see G. Strohmaier 'The Greek Heritage in Islam', in G. Boys-Stones, B. Graziosi and P. Vasunia (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Hellenic*

Christian and classical culture came into contact already during the first dynasty, residing in Damascus.[15] The second dynasty, of the ʿAbbāsids, was characterised by a long-lasting interest in ancient Greek culture. They founded a new capital, Baghdad, which quickly became a cosmopolitan centre of learning. There, in the eighth century, the Christian Theophilus of Edessa translated the *Iliad* into Syriac for the caliph Al-Mahdī.[16] The translation does not survive (except for a single verse),[17] and seems to have had little impact; but an awareness of Homeric epic, and a desire to access it, endured. Homer re-appears, for example, in an adventurous narrative involving a slave girl, a page boy and the famous caliph Hārūn ar-Rašīd, patron of the arts (and, incidentally, the inspiration behind Salman Rushdie's *Harun and the Sea of Stories*). In this particular story, which is preserved for us in a thirteenth-century source, a slave girl of the caliph teaches one of his page boys 'the literature of the Greeks and how to read their books'.[18] This page learns the language and later 'repeatedly recites Homer, the most eminent Greek poet, in Greek'.[19] One obvious problem is that the alleged public for these recitations, that is to say the ʿAbbāsid elites, would also need to learn Greek

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Studies (Oxford 2009) 140-9. For a detailed discussion of the Syrian context, see L. I. Conrad, 'Varietas Syriaca: secular and scientific culture in the Christian communities after the Arab conquest', in G. J. Reinink and A. C. Klugkist (eds.) *After Bardaisan: Studies on Continuity and Change in Syriac Christianity in honour of Prof. Han J. W. Drijvers* (Brussel 1999) 85-105.

[15] See, for example, A. Akasoy, J. E. Montgomery, and P. E. Pormann (eds.) *Islamic Crosspollinations: Interactions in the Medieval Middle East (*Oxford 2007) and, for a useful case-study, G. Fowden, *Qusayr 'Amra: Art and the Umayyad Elite in Late Antique Syria* (Berkeley 2004).

[16] On Theophilus of Edessa, see R. G. Hoyland (ed.) *Theophilus of Edessa's Chronicle and the Circulation of Historical knowledge in Late Antiquity and Early Islam* (Liverpool 2011); on the broader context of his translation, see P. Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity*, third edition (Oxford 2013) 310-13.

[17] The one surviving line is *Iliad* 2.204: see J. Kraemer, 'Arabische Homerverse', *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 106 (1956) 259-316, and esp. 261 on this particular line.

[18] Ibn Abī Uṣaibiʿa, ʾ*Uyūn al-anbāʾ fī ṭabaqāt al-aṭibbāʾ* (*The Excellent Information about the Classes of Physicians*), ed. A. Müller, vol. 1 (Cairo and Königsberg 1889; repr. 1972)185.

[19] As above no. 14.

from the slave girl, in order to appreciate the page's performances. Still, as Pormann points out, 'whether this story is authentic or merely anecdotal, it well reflects the atmosphere of intense philhellenism that reigned in the courts of the caliphs in ninth- and tenth-century Baghdad.'[20]

As often, a personal story can be used to shed light on the broader cultural context. We are told that Aristotle himself appeared to the caliph al-Maʾmūn in a dream, and had an interesting conversation with him: 'What is the good?' asked the caliph; 'Whatever is good according to intellect', answered the philosopher; 'Then what?' asked the caliph; 'Whatever is good according to religious law' replied Aristotle.[21] This conversation in a dream was credited with enormous cultural significance: some Arabic sources suggest that it inspired the vast translation movement from the Greek over which al-Maʾmūn presided. In fact, it is likelier that the translation movement shaped the contents of the dream. The caliph probably leveraged the authority of Aristotle in order to reinforce his own authority against other religious leaders. As Gutas persuasively argues, 'the dream was the social result, not the cause of the translation movement'.[22] The story thus confirms, rather than explains, the prestige of Aristotle in Baghdad. And it is primarily through Aristotle that a memory of Homer was preserved. The *Poetics* was translated no less than three times during the ʿAbbāsid period, even if the poems at the core of Aristotle's discussion were not. Homer thus became a poet without an oeuvre: 'the best of the Greek poets', but otherwise known only through few and often misattributed quotations.[23] There were at least two reasons why Homeric poetry remained largely untranslated in Baghdad. The first was, as Ahmed Etman argues, mythological: there were cultural difficulties in translating the gods, heroes and monsters of

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[20] Pormann, 'The Arabic Homer', 28.

[21] This version of the dream is preserved in Ibn-Nubāta, *Sarḥ al-ʿuyūn fī šarḥ risālat Ibn Zaydūn*, ed. M. Abū l-Faḍl Ibrāhīm (Cairo 1964) 213; it is translated and discussed in D. Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture: The Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early ʿAbbāsid Society (2ⁿᵈ-4ᵗʰ/8ᵗʰ-10ᵗʰ centuries)*, (Abingdon 1998) 97-104.

[22] Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture*, 100.

[23] See Kraemer, 'Arabische Homerverse', and A. Etman, 'Homer in the Arab World', in J. Nelis (ed.), *Receptions of Antiquity: Festschrift for F. Decreus* (Ghent 2011), 69-79.

Greek poetry into Arabic.[24] The second was more specifically literary: poetry was widely held to be untranslatable. In the ninth century, the scholar Al-Jāḥiẓ, for example, argued: 'Poems do not lend themselves to translation and ought not to be translated. When they are translated, their poetic structure is rent; the metre is no longer correct; poetic beauty disappears and nothing worthy of admiration remains in the poems'.[25]

What contours Homer took in a context where Aristotle was intensely studied, but poetry was deemed untranslatable, emerges most clearly form the life and work of Ḥunayn ibn Isḥāq, the most influential translator in Baghdad. He was a Nestorian Christian born in Hira, and fluent in both Syriac and Arabic. He moved to Baghdad in the first decades of the ninth century to study with the greatest physician of his day, Yūḥannā ibn Māsawayh, but apparently he asked too many questions, irritated his teacher, and was soon expelled. Disheartened but by no means defeated, we are told that Ḥunayn left Baghdad for several years. Upon his return, he was able to recite from memory the Homeric poems in the original Greek. The story goes that his teacher, finally impressed, took him back, and Ḥunayn went on to become the greatest scholar of his time.[26] Judging from his work, Ḥunayn was indeed familiar not only with the Homeric poems, but also with some Homeric scholarship on them. In view of this impressive fact, Strohmaier has ventured the hypothesis that Ḥunayn travelled all the way to Byzantium in order to learn his Greek.[27] The question, then, is why he did not translate Homer – even though he had sufficient knowledge to do so (and even though he had a low opinion of Theophilus' abilities as a translator).[28] Perhaps he had different priorities, as a physician, but perhaps he also had other difficulties.

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[24] A. Etman, 'Homer in the Arab World', 71f.

[25] F. Rosenthal translates this and other key sources on Arabic theories of translation in *The Classical Heritage in Islam* (London 1975) 18.

[26] The account is preserved in Ibn Abī Uṣaibiʿa, who quotes a report by a contemporary of Ḥunayn's, Yūsuf ibn Ibrāhīm ibn al-Dāya; see edition by Müller, quoted in no. 18, 185.

[27] G. Strohmaier, 'Homer in Baghdad', *Byzantinoslavica* 41 (1980), 196-200.

[28] See G. Bergsträsser (ed.), *Ḥunayn ibn Isḥāq über die syrischen und arabischen Galen-Übersezungen* (Leipzig 1925) no. 84.

When commenting on Galen, Ḥunayn describes the mythical Paean, 'physician of the gods' in Homer, as a 'prophet and role model for doctors'.[29] This is a rather deceptive little comment: though based on Homer, it deliberately obscures Paean's divinity. More generally, in his translations, Ḥunayn leaves out the pagan gods: the procedure works relatively well for some prose texts, but when applied to Homer is obviously reductive. A pupil of Ḥunayn, the Christian scholar Qusṭā ibn Lūqā, is more forthcoming in using Homer for the purposes of theological discussion. In answer to a letter by a Muslim colleague called Ibn al-Munaǧǧim, Qusṭā appeals to the revered Aristotle, points out that Homer's style is inimitable, and uses that fact in order to cast doubt on the divinity of the Quran. The fact that the Sacred Book is beyond all imitation does not prove that it is divinely inspired, according to Qusṭā, because Homer likewise frustrates all imitators, and yet he is a pagan poet with no religious insight at all.[30] This is, *in nuce*, an argument about human – as opposed to divine – inspiration, and seems equally problematic for Islam and the other monotheistic religions represented in Baghdad.

What remained of Homer, in the absence of his work, was an echo of how significant he had been in his original, ancient Greek context. Whereas Aristotle was, quite simply, the best philosopher; Homer was the best poet 'of the Greeks'. This qualification suggested the untranslatability of his work, and kept Homer at a distance. When Mubaššir ibn Fātik introduced Homer in his *Choice of Wise Sayings and Fine Statements*, he very much emphasised his Greek reception as the reason for his fame. This is how his entry on Homer begins:[31]

> He was the oldest Greek poet, and the Greeks held him in the
> highest regard. He lived roughly five hundred and sixty years

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[29] The comment features in the margin of a manuscript now kept in Florence, Laurent. 226/173 fol. 73r, 13f. For discussion, see Strohmaier, 'Homer in Baghdad', 196f.

[30] See P. Nwyia and K. Samir (eds.), 'Une correspondance islamo-chrétienne entre Ibn al-Munaǧǧim, Ḥunayn ibn Isḥāq et Qusṭā ibn Lūqā', *Patrologia Orientalis* 40.4 (1981), 664–9.

[31] Mubaššir ibn Fātik in A. Badawī (ed.), *Muḫtār al-ḥikam wa-maḥāsin al-kalim,* 30. All translations are by Prof. P. E. Pormann, and will be published at www.livingpoets. dur.ac.uk.

after Moses, peace be upon him. He produced many maxims and beautiful and glorious poems. All Greek poets who came after him imitated him: they took and learnt from him. He was their model.

What follows after this opening is a brief biographical narrative, which is only very distantly related to the Greek biographical tradition, and a short collection of maxims. The effect of both the biographical details and the maxims is to generalise, to turn Homer into a wise person able to fit any cultural context. So, for example:

> He was captured, and the divider [*al-muqassim*] took him away to sell him. One of the people wanting to buy him asked him: 'Where are you from?' He replied: 'I am from my father and mother.' The person then said: 'Do you think that I should buy you?'. He answered: 'You have not bought me yet. Have you made me your financial advisor?' The person bought him. Someone else wanting to buy him asked him: 'What are you good for?' He retorted: 'For freedom'. He felt compassion for a while, and then he was freed. He lived a long life.

Speculating about Homer's place of origin was a standard game in Greek antiquity, but the answer provided here, 'I am from my father and mother', turns Homer quite simply into a biological human being, from no place in particular. Mubaššir continues by giving a physical description:

> He was of moderate stature, beautiful appearance and brown complexion; he had a large head, but the area between his shoulders was narrow. He walked swiftly, and often looked around. On his face there were scars from smallpox. He joked a lot, was fond of insulting those who preceded him, and he was funny. He frequented chieftains. He died at the age of one hundred and eight years.

This puzzling account seems to reflect a variety of influences, but what interests me here is the echo of physiognomical texts. One Greek treatise attributed to Aristotle, for example, claims that 'the talented man' has 'shoulder-blades closely knit and supple flanks', just like our Arabic

Homer.[32] Significantly, one of the maxims later in the text validates the physiognomical method of inference, for Homer is credited with saying: 'The face announces what is in the conscience.' Unsurprisingly, perhaps, given this physiognomical premise, the portrait of Homer found in the Berlin manuscript follows closely the verbal description given in Mubaššir's text: here too we have the large head and narrow shoulders, while the small feet may suggest swiftness. Still, the image does more than translate the verbal account, partly because it works in a different idiom.

Osborne characterises the differences between visual and verbal communication as follows: 'In verbal language "the universal concept that is meant by the meaning of the word is enriched by the particular view of an object", that is, context enriches the meaning of words by rendering them particular. But in visual language the object itself is always particular, and what context offers is not particularity but an indication of the place of that object in the world that enables the particularity to be tempered and offers at least some hints towards universal meaning. This is surely one reason why we are happier to think we can understand the art of another culture than we are that we can understand its language (even in translation). Images break down barriers of space and time because they are "actual apparitions"; texts offer no such sense of epiphany.'[33] Particulars are added to the verbal description of Homer only when they are deemed worthy of mention ('moderate stature...brown complexion.... large head'); the illuminator's work, by contrast, offers a complete picture. And that picture confirms, in the first instance, that physiognomy is the determining principle of representation. The beard and the attire are those of a philosopher, any philosopher; what distinguishes Homer, and makes him unique, is his body. This fits with the manuscript context, where Homer is surrounded by medical and philosophical texts, and with the broader history of Arabic receptions. But it does not fit with the writ-

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[32] [Aristotle] *Physiognomy* 807b, transl. T. Loveday and E. S. Forster, revised by S. Swain, in S. Swain (ed.) *Seeing the Face, Seeing the Soul: Polemon's Physiognomy from Classical Antiquity to Medieval Islam* (Oxford 2007).

[33] Osborne, *The History Written on the Classical Greek Body*, 12, quoting H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, second edition (London 1975) 388.

ten insistence that Homer is Greek, the best poet 'of the Greeks'; there are no visual indications of Homer's Greekness. The portrait suggests a humanism of the human body, not one that dwells on cultural or ethnic belonging. Of course, the illumination does in fact contain culturally specific traits – most obviously the turban – but their meaning depends very much on the context of viewing. For Arabic readers of our manuscript, including our illuminator, the turban naturalises Homer: it makes him look like the people who are looking at him, and therefore establishes an easy face-to-face correspondence. For European viewers, this Homer speaks of an often neglected strand of Homeric reception.

An Italian Homer

Another context where Homer remained alive in the imagination while knowledge of his poems faded, was the Latin west. At around the same time as our Arabic Homer was depicted, several artists drew Homer in order to illustrate Dante's *Divine Comedy*, and more specifically the encounter between Dante, Virgil, Homer and three Roman poets at *Inferno* 4.79-105. I reproduce here, *exempli gratia*, an illumination of a Venetian manuscript of ca 1345, now kept in the University Library in Budapest (ms 33 fol. 4v), though there are many other illustrations of the same episode. Unlike our isolated Arabic Homer, this Homer is in good company – both in the sense that he is surrounded by other poets, and in the sense that many different versions of the same scene were produced at roughly the same time.[34] In this particular example, a caption helps to identify the central figure as Homer, because it quotes *Inferno* 4.87 (with a slight variant compared to standard editions): *'che va dinanzi a' tre si como sire'*, a description of Homer leading the three poets who stand on the right: Horace, Ovid, and Lucan. On the left, Virgil talks to Dante.

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[34] See P. H. Bierger, in P. H Bierger, M. Meiss and C. S. Singleton, *Illuminated Manuscripts of the Divine Comedy* (London 1969) 121f.
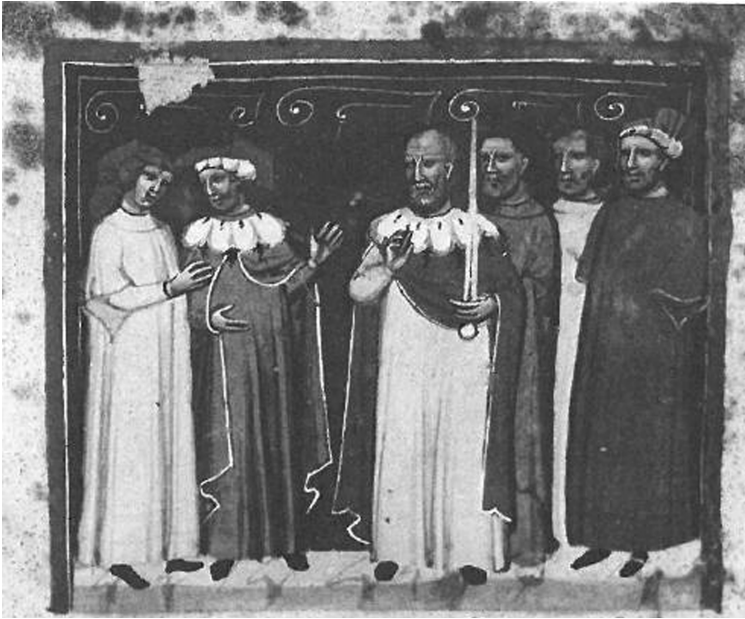
At this point in the *Divine Comedy*, Virgil and Dante are walking through Limbo, the first circle of Hell, which is where Virgil normally resides because – although good and noble – he is not baptized. Virgil left his usual companions in order to fetch Dante at the entrance of Hell, and is now walking back towards them. As they approach, the two poets hear a voice out of the darkness, announcing that Virgil is coming back, and inviting some unknown interlocutors to pay him honour on his return. Soon Dante sees four figures emerging from the darkness, and Virgil explains who they are. One walks in front carrying a sword, a symbol of heroic poetry: he is Homer, *poeta sovrano* – the sovereign poet, whose voice (we can deduce) was just heard calling out of the darkness. The 'fair school' of Homer assembles before Dante's eyes: it is the school 'of that lord of the highest song, which over the others like an eagle soars', '*di quel segnor de l'altissimo canto / che sovra li altri com'aquila vola*' (*Inferno* 4.95). As in the earlier attribution of the voice out of darkness, this description of Homer is almost unintelligible; indeed, compounded with some tex-

tual difficulties, it defeated many medieval and modern readers.[35] There is now a consensus that Dante is indeed referring specifically to Homer, rather than all the ancient poets, as some medieval commentators argued (*di que' segnor*, plural); but this is a case where textual uncertainty points to difficulties of interpretation. For early readers of the *Divine Comedy*, and for Dante himself within the text, Homer was barely discernible.

The meeting in Limbo is a first encounter, and a 'recognition' in every sense of the word. Homer invites the Roman poets to pay homage to Virgil on his return; Virgil accepts the compliment, as befits his magnanimous spirit (and here we are in the realm of the medieval virtues); then Dante himself receives a greeting: Virgil, his teacher, smiles at the recognition his pupil has been granted, and Dante rejoices when he realises that he has become the sixth poet among such distinguished company. Conversation ensues, and a sense that the Greek, Roman and Italian poets belong together quickly emerges. The last lines in the episode are justly famous, as they express the ease of conversations that were pleasurable at the time, but which do not bear repeating beyond the intimate circle where they were shared.[36] There is something exclusive about Dante's account: we are not told what the poets said to each another, because we do not belong in their number. More importantly, there is a palpable sense of intimacy and ease. And that intimacy is important, I suggest, for subsequent literary history.

The Homeric poems are inaccessible to Dante, but only a generation later, Petrarch and Boccaccio contrive to import a manuscript of the *Iliad*, and employ a teacher and translator of Greek in order to read the text. They even persuade the city fathers of Florence to endow the first Chair of Greek in western Europe: the enterprise fails miserably, allegedly because the man chosen for the job (a Greek speaker from southern Italy, Leontius Pilate) is unsuitable for the task. Anguished letters between Petrarch and Boccaccio convey something of the impression this Leontius makes on them: 'gloomy', 'stubborn', 'vain', 'volatile', 'badly

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[35] See the persuasive discussion by U. Bosco and G. Reggio (eds.), *La Divina Commedia* (Milan, 1988), vol. 1, 60.

[36] *Inferno* 4.103-5: '*Così andammo fino alla lumera / parlando cose che 'l tacere è bello, / sì com'era 'l parlar colà dov'era.*'

dressed', 'head as hard as a stone', 'intractable'.[37] The whole project of learning Greek is, as a result, delayed by some fifty years. As Dionisotti rightly points out, the debacle cannot simply be imputed to Leontius' personal failures, but must be the result of a more general attitude of suspicion, mistrust, and superiority towards Byzantine culture on the part of Petrarch and his circle.[38] Still, what interests me here is that Petrarch expresses the whole project of employing Leontius Pilate, and having the *Iliad* translated, as an intimate conversation between himself and Homer. He writes a letter to the ancient poet, claiming that up to now he could only catch vague glimpses of his face, 'his flashing eyebrows, his flowing hair' – but that as soon as the *Iliad* is translated, he will be able to talk to Homer face-to-face, and finally be close to him.[39] It is tempting to conclude that Petrarch is writing figuratively; that he is describing a practical enterprise (the translation of the *Iliad*) through a personification (a letter to Homer). But, in fact, I suggest that the personal comes before the practical: that the possibility of seeing and conversing with Homer inspires Petrarch's attempt to study Homer's work and language. Historians have become increasingly prepared to argue that discourse can precede and inspire event.[40] What I suggest here is that – in literary history – the discourse of personal encounter can precede the act of reading.

I return to the illumination, and ask how it enriches our understanding of the transition from poet to work, from other-worldly conversation to reading. The artist adds clothes and this, in the context of the *Divine Comedy*, is extraordinary: the characters Dante meets in Hell are usually depicted in the nude, as befits the damned. Some other illuminated manu-

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[37] The relevant passages from the letters are collected in A. Pertusi, *Leonzio Pilato fra Petrarca e Boccaccio* (Venice 1964) 40-1.

[38] C. Dionisotti, *Storia e geografia della letteratura italiana* (Turin 1967) 147-9.

[39] F. Petrarca, *Familiarium Rerum Liber* 24.12.2: 'preter enim aliquot tuorum principia librorum, in quibus velut exoptati amici supercilium procul ambiguum et raptim vibrans seu fluctuantis come apicem intuebar, latini nichil obtigerat, nichil denique sperabatur ubi te cominus contemplarer…'.

[40] I am thinking, for example, of postcolonial approaches to history. P. Vasunia, *The Gift of the Nile: Hellenizing Egypt from Aeschylus to Alexander* (Berkeley 2001) 248-50 offers a series of examples, drawn from antiquity, the Middle Ages and the early modern period, in order to illustrate 'the claim of discourse driving Empire'.

scripts do in fact present Homer, Horace, Ovid and Lucan naked; but, in the majority of manuscripts, the poets are fully and even sumptuously dressed.[41] Their clothes emphasise, visually, that the poets enjoy extraordinary honours, and that they belong together. Homer and Virgil are even granted the distinction of ermine capes, thus suggesting that they are the noblemen of poetry. All characters are dressed in contemporary Italian fashion, but their bodies betray historical distance. Homer is the oldest, Dante the youngest, the Roman poets are middle-aged. For the characters in Hell, history has come to an end, and so assigning them to different historical (or physiological) ages makes little sense; but for our illuminator Homer belongs to a remote past. In his world, rather than Hell, the Greek poet is distant, almost inaccessible. This sense of remoteness, of the passing of time, of the difficulty of an encounter, is important to Petrarch too. And there are other ways in which fourteenth-century illuminators of the *Divine Comedy* point to concerns shared also by Petrarch. At the most basic level, they tend to choose the encounter between poets as the one episode worthy of illustration in the fourth *canto*. There could be others: Dante's faint after the earthquake, the unbaptised children, Christ paying his visit to Limbo, the great Aristotle surrounded by his school; the lonely Saladin; the brightly illuminated castle, brook and meadow granted to good pagans. Of all those subjects, artists grant pride of place to Dante's intimate encounter with the other poets, although it is visually undistinguished, indeed it happens in near darkness. Conversely, Petrarch fashions his own textual encounter with Homer in strikingly visual terms: he wants to see the face of the ancient poet, and offers a memorable verbal portrait of Homer in his *Africa*.[42] Intimacy easily translates as visual experience.

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[41] For further discussion, see Bierger in *Illuminated Manuscripts of the Divine Comedy*, 121.

[42] Petrarch, *Africa* 9.166-70; for Petrarch's visual interest in Homer see further G. Crevatin, 'Il poeta dell'*Africa*: Omero in Petrarca' in G. Lazzi and E. Viti (eds), *Immaginare l'autore: il ritratto del letterato nella cultura umanistica* (Florence 2000) 135-48.

A Byzantine Homer

In order to learn Greek, and read the Homeric poems, Petrarch and Ḥunayn had to turn their attention towards Byzantium. There, knowledge of the Homeric poems was never lost, but representations of Homer – both textual and visual – nevertheless stemmed from a complex and highly mediated process of reception, which was by no means determined by the Homeric epics alone. Only two images of Homer have been identified on Byzantine manuscripts: it seems that there was greater reluctance to represent Homer in fourteenth-century Byzantium than in Florence. One portrait has been recently discovered by Filippomaria Pontani on a fourteenth-century Byzantine manuscript now kept in the Biblioteca Laurenziana (and containing extensive annotations by Politian): that portrait is most probably the work of the Byzantine scholar Theodore Antiochites, since he identifies himself as the corrector of the manuscript, and writes some marginalia in the same hand and ink used for the drawing.[43] The portrait introduces a text of the *Iliad* and, as Pontani convincingly argues, represents Homer in the guise of a prophet or an evangelist. The image thus immediately, visually, legitimizes the pagan poem for its Christian readers. The only other known Byzantine portrait of Homer belongs to a manuscript of the ninth century, now kept in the Biblioteca Ambrosiana in Milan (Ambr. ms E 49-50 inf. 751): it is this portrait that I propose to discuss in further detail, partly because it has received little attention, and partly because (like my other examples) it accompanies a text only remotely linked to the Homeric poems: the homilies of Gregory of Nazianzus.

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[43] See further F. Pontani, 'A Byzantine portrait of Homer', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 68 (2005), 1-26.

Homer appears here in the guise of a young man declaiming in front of an older and seated Orpheus, playing a kithara. Pontani argues that the portrait is 'designed to discredit Homer, reflecting Gregory's criticism of ancient poets who discussed theology (Hesiod, Orpheus and Homer).'[44] As further evidence that the portrait is meant to be derogatory, Pontani quotes Zanker's study of ancient portraiture: 'in the Greek imagination, all great intellectuals were old'.[45] Gregory's text, however, need not entirely determine the interpretation of this image; just as the conventions of classical portraiture need not so straightforwardly apply to ninth-century manuscript illuminations. The portrait belongs to the only manuscript of Gregory's homilies containing pictures of his classical subjects: it seems, therefore, that we are dealing with an artist, or a commission, particularly concerned with pagan antiquity. The broader context for our image may therefore partly be provided by other Byzantine accounts of the poet Homer.

Unlike the Arabic and Italian sources I discussed, Byzantine texts often describe Homer as an imitator of earlier models: he is not necessarily 'the oldest Greek poet', and this consideration may help to explain our depiction of a young Homer next to an older master. Homer the imitator tends to feature in contexts where discrepancies between different accounts of the Trojan War need to be negotiated. As Ingela Nilsson points out in a helpful survey, many different legends about Troy circulated in Byzantium.[46] There was an ancient account attributed to Dictys of Crete, an alleged participant in the war and friend of the Iliadic character Idomeneus. There was Dares of Phrygia, another Homeric character (a Trojan priest mentioned at *Iliad* 5.9) who was also credited with a pre-Homeric account of the Trojan War. And then there were Byzantine chronicles, and Trojan-War romances that belonged to the 'novelistic fringe'.[47] Among all these criss-crossing versions of the Trojan saga, the Homeric poems were considered neither the oldest nor,

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[44] See further Pontani, 'A Byzantine portrait of Homer', 14.

[45] Zanker, *The Mask of Socrates*, 22.

[46] See I. Nilsson, 'From Homer to Hermoniakos: some considerations of Troy matter in Byzantine literature', *Troianalexandrina* 4 (2004), 9-34.

[47] See Nilsson, 'From Homer to Hermoniakos', 9.

necessarily, the most authoritative. In the sixth century, for example, John Malalas offered an extensive account of the Trojan War, ending with this biographical note on Homer:

> Ταῦτα δὲ Σίσυφος ὁ Κῷος συνεγράψατο ἐν τῷ πολεμῷ ὑπάρχων σύν τῷ Τεύχρῳ· ἥντινα συγγραφὴν εὑρηκὼς Ὅμηρος ὁ ποιητὴς τὴν Ἰλιάδα ἐξέθετο, καὶ Βεργίλλιος τὰ λοιπά. ἅτινα καὶ ἐν ταῖς τοῦ Δίκτυος ἐμφέρεται ῥαψῳδίαις. ὅπερ πόνημα μετὰ πολλὰ ἔτη Ὁμήρου καὶ Βεργιλλίου ηὑρέθη ἐπὶ Κλαυδίου Νέρωνος βασιλέως ἐν <κασσιτερίνῳ> κιβωτίῳ.

> Sisyphus of Cos, who was present at the war with Teucer, has written about this. The poet Homer found his book and wrote the *Iliad*, while Virgil wrote the rest of the story. These events are also recorded in the writings of Dictys: this work was found many years after the time of Homer and Virgil in a tin box during the reign of the emperor Claudius Nero.

This presentation of Homer distances him from the events he recounts in the *Iliad*, and makes him dependent on an earlier, written account. Homer's source, the mysterious Sisyphus of Cos, is on a par with Dictys, since he too was a participant in the war. Also, like Dictys, he was the friend of a character mentioned in the *Iliad*, in this case Teucer. Whether an actual account attributed to a Sisyphus of Cos ever existed has been debated.[48] In any case, the story allows Malalas to grant equal authority to the putative Sisyphus and to Dictys, while distancing the narratives of later poets who wrote about Troy: Homer and Virgil. At one level, this account downplays the authority of Homer as a textual source; at another, it uses the poet as a model for a particular set of literary practices. Homer becomes a chronicler who – like Malalas himself – bases his account on earlier sources.

Another Byzantine source can be used to shed light on our young Homer declaiming to Orpheus. Photius, patriarch of Constantinople in

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[48] For a skeptical view, see Nilson, 'From Homer to Hermoniakos' 15 n. 13, who quotes earlier literature; for an argument in favour of the existence of a text attributed to this Sisyphus, see A. Cameron, *Greek Mythography in the Roman World* (Oxford 2004) 149.

the ninth century, includes the following anecdote in his *Library* cod. 190.151ab Henry:

> ὅτι Φαντασία τις Μεμφῖτις Νικάρχου θυγάτηρ συνέταξε πρὸ Ὁμήρου τὸν Ἰλιακὸν πόλεμον καὶ τὴν περὶ Ὀδυσσείας διήγησιν καὶ ἀποκεῖσθαί φασι τὰς βίβλους ἐν Μέμφιδι, Ὅμηρον δὲ παραγενόμενον, καὶ τὰ ἀντίγραφα λαβόντα παρὰ Φανίτου τοῦ ἱερογραμματέως, συντάξαι ἐκείνοις ἀκολούθως.

> They say that certain Phantasia, from Memphis, daughter of Nicarchus, composed before Homer both the war of Troy and the story of the *Odyssey*, and deposed the bookrolls in Memphis; later Homer got a copy from Phanites, the temple scribe, and composed his version according to that model.

Photius takes this story about Phantasia, original authoress of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey,* from Ptolemy Chennos, 'the Quail', an Alexandrian grammarian active at the time of Hadrian (and who in turn was prone to inventing his own sources).[49] So this is not a Byzantine anecdote in origin, but it recurs in a Byzantine text and resonates with Byzantine concerns: a similar story about Homer the plagiarist of Phantasia later features in Eustathius, who attributes it to an unknown Naucrates.[50] The suggestion is that Homer bases his poems on earlier, imaginative accounts. Photius may tell his story with an eyebrow raised in disapproval, but what emerges – again – is Homer as a model for specific literary practices. Just like his Byzantine readers, this Homer bases his accounts on ancient bookrolls.

The manuscript illumination which decorates Gregory's homilies suggests that Homer is reciting his lesson to an older Orpheus – who may in fact not be above suspicion as a teacher (just as Phantasia may

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[49] See Cameron, *Greek Mythography*, 134-59 (and esp. 147 on Phantasia, authoress of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*). The anecdote has received considerable attention since I first submitted this paper, see now E. Cullhed, 'The blind bard and 'I': poetic personas and Homeric biography in the twelfth century,' *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 38 (2014) 49-67, and Pizzone, Aglae. "Lady Phantasia's 'Epic' Scrolls and Fictional Creativity in Eustathius' Commentaries on Homer", *Medioevo greco* 14 (2014) 177-97.

[50] Eustathius, *Commentary on the Odyssey* 1.2, 23-29 Stallbaum.

not command authority as Homer's source). Still, the picture is not simply disparaging. The relationship between Homer and Orpheus, expressed through their gestures and postures, suggests a history of Greek literature, where music and poetry are followed by rhetoric. Orpheus' kithara and his Phrygian cap confirm that our illuminator is conversant with ancient culture, as does Homer's classicising attire, and rhetorical pose. Pontani helpfully compares this illumination to a slightly later ninth-century manuscript of Gregory of Nazianzus, where two fourth-century teachers of rhetoric (Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, and either the Christian Prohaeresius or the pagan Himerius, who taught Gregory himself) wear ancient-looking robes that leave one shoulder bare.[51] Precisely because ancient culture is alive in Byzantium, our portrait of Homer expresses – through the visual medium of clothing – an awareness of historical distance.

That sense of distance finds clear parallels in ancient and Byzantine textual sources. The relationship between Orpheus and Homer is often expressed in genealogical terms in the biographical tradition.[52] That Homer models his poems on earlier accounts of the Trojan War is a recurrent theme in both ancient and Byzantine scholarship as has already emerged.[53] But what the picture adds is unique: a vision. We have no other portrait of Homer as a young lad, learning his lesson from an old master. Nowhere else, in our extant sources, is the poet so thoroughly identified with those who study his works.

Conclusions

Representations of Homer are often taken to reflect an interest in Homeric poetry, but the fact of the matter is that they also often precede it, and sometimes produce it. Portraits occur in places where the poems do not reach, as my first manuscript illustration suggests. It would be

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[51] The pictures of the teachers of rhetoric are in the margins of fols 104r and 332v of Paris, BnF ms gr. 510; see further Pontani 2005: 15.

[52] See Graziosi, *Inventing Homer,* 83f.

[53] For a quick summary see Cameron, *Greek Mythography*, 147.

reductive to state, as many have done, that Homer did not feature in Arabic receptions of classical Greek culture: he did, though his poems fared less well. In some contexts, as my second example shows, a desire to see Homer, and talk to him, can lead to concrete efforts to access his works. And, even in situations where the Homeric poems are accessible and well known, portraits of Homer are always informed by broader cultural engagements: in the hands of Byzantine miniaturists, Homer can become an evangelist, or a young student of ancient poetry. In all my examples, portraits reveal the cultural spaces that Homer can inhabit: Arabic philosophical and medical traditions; Dante's first circle of Hell; the schools of Byzantium. Such spaces are also defined through texts, of course; but what the portraits add is a human face and body. And that, it seems to me, is an addition of some importance. Emmanuel Lévinas presents the face-to-face encounter as the first, irreducible relationship, the moment where both closeness and distance with the other is established. Lévinas derives the primacy of his ethics from this face-to-face encounter.[54] What I describe here is different in many respects: I consider the encounter with a portrait, rather than an actual face; but even in the case of portraits there is (as Lévinas himself insists) an ethical appeal on the viewer. It becomes possible, through the image, to identify with Homer, and simultaneously map our distance from him. The relationship is triangular, since the portraits reveal not Homer, but the faces of those who cared to picture him. The objection can be made, of course, that my argument moves too quickly from representation to real-life experience. It is true that, from the point of view of the art historian, the conventions of visual representation are what matters. But these always point to a relationship, however mediated, with the real. According to Mubaššir, Homer displays the physiognomical traits of the talented man – and, also, he *is* talented.

Portraits, and the face-to-face encounters they suggest, fit a model of interaction far more complex than that of linear literary histories – including those implied by some of the images I discuss, where Homer guides the Roman poets who in turn guide Dante; or where Orpheus is

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[54] I am thinking particularly of E. Lévinas, *Totalité et Infini: essai sur l'extériorité* (The Hague 1961).

followed by Homer in a straightforward succession. For example: after Petrarch depicts Homer in words; a miniaturist of the fifteenth century depicts Homer in the guise of Petrarch.[55] Such criss-crossing dialogues between art and literature suggest an open-ended and densely networked model of interaction; and this is one reason why the broader project *Living Poets: A New Approach to Ancient Poetry* offers several Collections of authorial representations, linked by a multiplicity of narrative Guides.[56] The overall aim is to move beyond a mode of scholarship where the study of ancient poetry is neatly followed by an excursus into its later reception, or *Nachleben*. For, often, the poet is already alive, as the product of the imagination, before any act of reading takes place. Portraits give human shape to the imagination and testify to the personal contribution of both readers, and indeed non-readers, to the history of literature.

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[55] The laureated Homer in Petrarch 's clothes appears on fol. F of Pistoia, Biblioteca Forteguerriana ms A.55; see G. Lazzi, 'Alla ricerca del ritratto d'autore', in Lazzi and Viti*, Immaginare l'autore*, 41-51.

[56] See www.livingpoets.dur.ac.uk.