PREFACE

The Homeric poems provide our earliest direct insights into the religious thought of the Greeks, and, with few interruptions, the presence of Homer in the Greek religious imagination, pagan and Christian, remained continuous until the decline of the Byzantine church in the late Middle Ages. Indeed, when we find Nikolaos Mesarites, a metropolitan of Ephesus early in the thirteenth century, describing a striding image of St. Paul in a mosaic at Constantinople with a phrase borrowed from a description of a Homeric hero (*θέα μοι τοῦτον μακρὰ βιβῶντα*) and borrowing from the Homeric chimaera the qualities to describe the teachings of the Apostles (*τούτων αἱ διδαχαὶ πνέουσι μένος πυρός*),[1] it is clear that for the Greeks not only the myths but the very diction of Homer never ceased to be a part of that highly charged realm of imaginative experience that is the province both of poets and of religious thinkers.

Nevertheless, the relationship of the Homeric poems to the various conceptions of divinity successively articulated in the Greek tradition between the sixth century B.C. and the Christian Middle Ages was never a comfortable one. It is surely one of the great and characteristic ironies of Greek intellectual history that, at the source of the tradition and at the dawn of Greek literacy, we find in full bloom a tradition of oral poetry apparently so utterly secularized, irreverent, and disillusioned that the gods could be used for comic relief. As has often been noted, Homer has a great deal in common with his Ionian compatriots of the sixth century, whose rationalism was to pave the way for the effective demythologizing of Greek metaphysical thought in the fifth and fourth.

1. G. J. M. Bartelink, "Homerismen in Nikolaos Mesarites' Beschreibung der

This study is concerned not with religious thought as such, but rather with a single phase of the history of the interaction of the Homeric poems with Greek ideas concerning the nature of reality and the divine: the reading of Homer by thinkers in the Platonic tradition from the second to the fifth century after Christ. The focus of attention is the problem of interpretation raised during that period by two important shifts in the cultural status of the Homeric poems. On the one hand, these interpreters strove to redeem the reputation of Homer as a bulwark of pagan Greek culture by demonstrating that his stories and the model of reality that could be deduced from them were in fact compatible with contemporary idealist thought. On the other hand, the more exoteric Platonists were simultaneously concerned to make use of Homer's prestige—to whose appeal no Greek could be immune—to bolster the doctrines of later Platonism.

This double impulse toward a redefinition of the meaning of the Homeric poems and their relationship to reality led to many formulations and exegeses that are not without an element of the absurd. When we learn from Proclus, for instance, that Proteus is an angelic mind (*νοῦς τις ἀγγελικός*) containing within himself the forms of all things that come to be and pass away, that Eidothea is a demonic soul (*ψυχή τις . . . δαιμονία*) joined to that divine intellect, and that seals are the mythoplasts' means of representing the flock of individual souls dependent on this particular divine "procession," there is no doubt that we are seeing the apparent meaning of the Homeric text distorted to the limit of recognition.[2]

However, the exegeses are by no means uniformly farfetched, and, more important, the demands made by them upon the text of the Homeric corpus represent a new departure in the context of ancient literary criticism.

We know relatively little of methods of interpreting literary texts in antiquity. G. M. A. Grube expresses the traditional view of the matter:

> Much is absent from ancient criticism which we should expect to find there. The ancients seem to have felt that great writers were quite capable of expressing their meaning clearly to their audiences, directly, without intermediaries. There is very little in the ancient critics of any period about purpose or meaning, about imagery, symbolism, levels of meaning—these and other aspects of poetry which

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Apostelkirche in Konstantinopel," p. 307.

2. Proclus *In Rep.* 1.112–13.

are not easily subjected to intellectual analysis are nearly completely ignored.[3]

Nevertheless, it seems clear from a passage in the *Republic* that, by Plato's time, the whole of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* had been interpreted allegorically,[4] and there is no doubt that explication of texts as well as myths formed part of the sophists' curriculum in the fifth century.[5] A papyrus from Derveni in Macedonia (still not adequately published) demonstrates that in an Orphic context, allegorical interpretation was applied to hexameter poetry as early as the middle of the fourth century.[6]

Grube's statement, then, must be qualified. The fact that we have very little literary exegesis from classical antiquity is *not* an indication that "the ancients . . . felt that great writers were quite capable of expressing their meaning . . . directly, without intermediaries." Intermediaries existed, but very little of their commentary comes down to us, because they were in many cases not primarily writers but oral teachers, and survive at all only by chance and usually at second hand in the scholia.

The process of interpretation and reinterpretation was, and is, continuous, constantly creating new images of the poet and of the meaning of the poems. Nevertheless, the surviving interpretive essays permit us to mark a watershed. Neither Heraclitus's *Homeric Allegories*[7] nor the essay on the life and works of Homer that comes down to us under Plutarch's name can be dated with precision, but they represent two widely divergent intellectual stances, the one hostile to Plato, the other eclectic but concerned with finding the sources of Platonic and Pythagorean thought (along with those of Stoic and Peripatetic thought) in Homer. Neither is committed to finding in Homer a single, fixed, and accurate account of reality.

3. G. M. A. Grube, "How Did the Greeks Look at Literature?" p. 99. See James A. Coulter, *The Literary Microcosm*, p. 22, on the "anti-allegorical bias" of most modern histories of ancient literary theory.

4. Ἥρας δὲ δεσμοὺς ὑπὸ υἱέος καὶ Ἡφαίστου ῥίψεις ὑπὸ πατρός, μέλλοντος τῇ μητρὶ τυπτομένῃ ἀμυνεῖν, καὶ θεομαχίας ὅσας Ὅμηρος πεποίηκεν οὐ παραδεκτέον εἰς τὴν πόλιν, οὔτ' ἐν ὑπονοίαις πεποιημένας οὔτε ἄνευ ὑπονοιῶν (Plato *Rep.* 2.378d). Cf. Konrad Müller, "Allegorische Dichtererklärung," col. 17.

5. See N. J. Richardson, "Homeric Professors in the Age of the Sophists."

6. See S. G. Kapsomenos, "Ὁ ὀρφικὸς πάπυρος τῆς Θεσσαλονίκης." An unauthorized text of the papyrus was published in the *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 47 (1982):1–12 in a new sequence following p. 300. For the most up-to-date discussion of the interpretation of the papyrus, see Jeffrey S. Rusten, "Interim Notes on the Papyrus from Derveni."

7. Throughout this study, the name Heraclitus will normally refer, not to the

These two works provide a background against which a focused image of Homer emerges, an image articulated by dogmatic Platonists and Neopythagoreans. This, to a large extent, was the tradition the Latin Middle Ages inherited, independent of the text of Homer, itself clothed in a forgotten language. The image finds its strongest medieval expression in Dante's portrait of Homer as the prince of poets, and the probability seems very great that the Neoplatonic exegesis of Homer and the model of the levels of meaning in literature for which Proclus is our primary source in antiquity may have had a profound, if indirect, influence on Dante's conception of his own work and his role in the development of the epic tradition.

Dante, moreover, is not the only major poet in whom the influence of this interpretive tradition may be perceived. The beginnings of deliberate and conscious allegorical poetry in the fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries after Christ appear to represent the transfer into the creative realm of the expectations with which allegorizing interpreters approached Homer and other early texts. The tradition of epic poetry was one of allegory, of masked meanings—or so the dominant tradition of interpretation claimed—and poets such as Prudentius and "Musaeus" seem to have created poems designed to be approached with exactly these expectations.

The history of the influence of the mystical-allegorical tradition beyond the Renaissance lies largely outside the scope of this study, but it is clear that Renaissance manuals of mythology tap medieval traditions, themselves ultimately reaching back to the Neoplatonists of late antiquity. After Ficino, the rediscovery of Plato, along with the Neoplatonist commentaries, again made available the philosophical basis of allegorical interpretation, and allegorizing interpretive texts regularly accompanied new editions of Homer down into the eighteenth century. Thomas Taylor, whose influence can be seen in Blake and the English Romantics, directed the attention of yet another generation of poets to the Neoplatonists and their habits of reading and interpretation.

As noted, the present study is concerned primarily with the evidence for the understanding of the meaning of the Homeric poems among the Platonists of late antiquity—the high period of mystical allegory, in which the figure of the visionary Homer and the scope of the allegorical meanings of his poems were fully developed and articulated. Neverthe-

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sixth-century Ephesian philosopher, but to the author of a work on Homer that probably belongs to the first century after Christ.

less, since it is my purpose to portray a neglected and crucially important period of *transition* within the tradition of epic poetry (and, more generally, of literature), considerable attention is paid to the proximal end of that period and to the impact of the ancient Neoplatonists' reading of Homer on the Middle Ages.

The Neoplatonic allegorists refashioned Homer not by any interference with the text itself, but by exerting their influence on the other factor in the equation of reading: the reader. In so doing, they predisposed subsequent readers to expect, and so to discover, a certain scope of meaning in early epics. Had they simply reshaped and reorganized Homeric verses to convey their own teachings explicitly, their general effect would have been no greater than that of the Homeric *centones* of the Gnostics. As it was, however, the effect of their refashioning of the poems was far subtler and far more pervasive: it generated a *reading* of the received text of Homer that was to become inseparable from the meaning of that text for later generations.