

Homer and English epic

The subject of this chapter – in keeping with its chronological place in this section – is the importance of Homer for English epic up to the end of the eighteenth century. Its rationale, however, is not solely diachronic: the starting point is rather a widely accepted premise that between what goes before and what comes after there is a fault-line in the nature of the availability of Homer to English literary consciousness. A critical event can be readily identified, in the publication of F. A. Wolf's *Prolegomena to Homer* of 1795. This work itself is the product of a period of change and questioning: the eighteenth century saw a steady growth in historical, topographical and antiquarian interest in the ancient world. In relation to Homer, Robert Wood had provided one of the most influential landmarks in his investigation, based on travels undertaken in the early 1750s, of Homer's own time and culture, *An Essay on the Original Genius of Homer* (1769).¹ Wolf, however, is definitive:

The Homer that we hold in our hands now is not the one who flourished in the mouths of the Greeks of his own day, but one variously altered, interpolated, corrected, and emended from the times of Solon down to those of the Alexandrians. Learned and clever men have long felt their way to this conclusion by using various scattered bits of evidence; but now the voices of all periods joined together bear witness, and history speaks.²

The interests of classical scholarship and literary criticism rarely, if ever, keep precise step: a primitive and even 'patched together' Homer is a presence in English letters long before 1795, and the image of Homer as the supreme poetic ancestor prevails, for those who chose or choose to view him thus, long after. Homer – inevitably, as a focal point of ancient–modern controversies and of a range of aesthetic debates about simplicity, originality and the

¹ On the growth of the historical approach and on Wood, see Foerster (1947) *passim*, and Simonsuuri (1979) 133–42.

² Wolf (1985) 209.

heroic – is not a simple value in the period here under discussion. By the end of it, however, the ground is laid for the separation of a newly historicised and pre-literate ‘Homer’ from his text and its authority, and for a significant challenge to the possibility of a direct engagement with a single author as source: Homer becomes as emphatically a question as an authority. With this context in mind, the questions asked in this chapter are about the availability of Homer before this point for ‘epic’ creativity in English, and they will be explored in particular through a consideration of the two unquestionably creative Homeric readings of the period – those of Milton in *Paradise Lost* and Pope in his translation of the *Iliad*.

Another function of this chapter, before the focus is brought to bear on this specific argument, is to offer a broader characterisation of the place of Homer in English epic up to the end of the eighteenth century. It might first be pointed out that there is a latent paradox in the subject itself. A primary requirement of epic since its first theorisations has been that it should have a serious significance for its own age and nation. The neo-classical version of the premise that epic should have a serious moral purpose led Dryden not only to conclude that all succeeding poets ought rather to imitate Virgil than Homer (whose hero Achilles is seen as flawed by extremes of passion and revenge), but further – when contemplating his own epic project – to seek specifically an English story, one ‘neither too far distant from the present age, nor too near approaching it’.³ An English epic may draw strength from analogy with the epics of the past, but it must also typically render them anachronistic. Its relation to earlier examples is energetically revisionary. For E. M. W. Tillyard fifty years ago, ‘English epic’ is a qualitative rather than formal entity, the canon composed of works with a national or choric significance (*Piers Plowman*, *The Faerie Queene*, *Paradise Lost*, Bunyan’s *Holy War*, Pope’s *Iliad* and Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall*).⁴ What is characteristic of these greater works is also visible in the lesser, in the mostly forgotten ‘epic’ hinterland with which British poetry of this period abounds.⁵ English epic, whether qualitatively or quantitatively defined, has only limited contact with Homer: many epic endeavours have a Latinate rather than

³ Dryden (1962) 1.191; 2.186. ⁴ Tillyard (1954).

⁵ Writers of epic poems include Michael Drayton, Samuel Daniel, Abraham Cowley, Richard Blackmore and Samuel Glover. Hugh Blair in his lecture on epic poetry (Lecture 42) makes a case against what he calls ‘the pedantry of Criticism’ for the acceptance of a wide range of such poems into the epic canon along with the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid*, ‘though some of them approach much nearer than others, to the perfection of these celebrated Works. They are, undoubtedly, all Epic; that is, poetical recitals of great adventures; which is all that is meant by this denomination of Poetry’ (Blair (1783) 2.407–9).

Homeric fuelling, and nearly all involve a resistance to what might be seen as mere antiquarianism. The search for an appropriate and sufficient subject is a key element of epic endeavour. The several incompatibilities of classical epic with a true 'English' epic design seem to make themselves manifest in the eight-line *cul de sac* of Pope's late fragment 'Brutus', with the poet's plea to be 'snatched'

. . . . to thy holy hill of spotless Bay,
My Countrys Poet, to record her Fame,

followed only by a silence which constitutes an ironic and involuntary counterpart to the silence at the end of Book 4 of the *Dunciad*.⁶ Fielding's semi-serious construction of a classical epic genealogy for the English novel at almost exactly the same time in the 'Preface' to *Joseph Andrews* perhaps primarily serves to point up the discontinuities and departures of the new form.⁷

The more general importance of Homer for English readers up to the end of the eighteenth century has been well explored by scholars in recent decades, and new technologies now offer new ways of quantifying his presence in the world of the printed book.⁸ Thanks to the electronic resources of the ESTC, we can say with a new certainty that up to the end of the eighteenth century Homer comes in, in terms of English 'editions' (including translations), first of Greek and fifth of all classical writers (after Ovid, Horace, Cicero and Virgil, and just before Aesop and Xenophon); and that by the same sort of measure the *Iliad* is more than twice as popular as the *Odyssey*. A search of the English poetry database of *Literature Online* (<http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk/>) suggests that even excluding Pope there are more references to Homer before 1800 than to any other classical poet except Horace. As with all classical authors, the eighteenth century sees a significant increase in the availability of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* to the English reader, and in particular to English readers previously excluded by class or gender from access to the classics. The count of editions of Pope's Homer alone is startling evidence of the degree to which the translations that served Pope himself so well financially

⁶ Pope, 'Fragment of Brutus an epic', in Pope (1940–69) 6.404.

⁷ On the relations of classical epic to the eighteenth-century novel see, e.g. Maresca (1974), Mace (1996) 61–76.

⁸ General studies include Clarke (1981), King (1987), Simonsuuri (1979), Stanford (1963), Foerster (1947). The most important electronic resource for the study of the classical tradition in English is ESTC: *English Short-Title Catalogue* (1981–), online version, produced by the British Library and ESTC/North America (<http://eureka.rlq.ac.uk/cgi-bin/zgare2.prod>).

were to become a staple item for provincial, especially Scottish, booksellers and printers.⁹

Despite the availability of earlier translations like those of Arthur Hall (1581), Chapman (1598–1615), John Ogilby (1660–9) or Thomas Hobbes (1675–6), ‘Homer’ before the eighteenth-century colonisation of the classics was a more composite and more uncertain entity. Troy was Homer’s terrain, and a magnet for local ‘Homeric’ emotion both for visitors and in the imagination, but Troy in European and English literature is not always or even primarily Homeric. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* deal with two episodes falling before and after the fall of Troy – the wrath of Achilles, and the homecoming of Odysseus. The fuller story of Troy, from the marriage of Peleus and Thetis and the judgment of Paris to the death of Achilles, the Trojan horse and the returns of the various heroes to their homelands, is elsewhere, and the tradition feeding into the version of Troy known to writers and readers in the Renaissance – and beyond – has many later classical and post-classical threads. Chaucer’s apt vision is of ‘gret Omer’ with a number of others – Dares, Tytus [Dictys], ‘Lollius’, Guido and Geoffrey of Monmouth – all together ‘besy for to bere up Troye’ (*The House of Fame*, 1,464–80). Among the most influential rival accounts were the two allegedly ‘eye-witness’ memoirs of the war by ‘Dictys the Cretan’ and ‘Dares the Phrygian’, offering invitingly novelistic detail and verisimilitude. A new love emphasis is introduced, in Achilles’ love for Polyxena, setting the scene for the Ovidian developments of Benoît de Sainte-Maure’s twelfth-century *Roman de Troie* and the introduction of Troilus’ romance with Briseida, later the Cressida of Chaucer and Shakespeare. From its various medieval versions the Troy story moves to Lydgate’s *Troy Book* and Caxton’s *Recuyell of the Histories of Troye* (1475) – the first book printed in the English language, and an important source for Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida*.¹⁰ Chapman’s translation of seven books of the *Iliad* had been published in 1598, some three or four years before the production of the play. But *Troilus and Cressida* is a ‘Trojan war’ play rather than a Homeric one, one which builds on an awareness of the *Iliad* and its heroic mode – an awareness in

* Of eighty-seven pre-1800 editions of Pope’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey* listed in the ESTC twenty-three were published in Edinburgh and a further nine in Glasgow (as well as two in Aberdeen). Pope’s version was anthologised in William Holwell’s *The Beauties of Homer* in 1775; Henry William Tytler as late as 1793 compared every line of the *Iliad* with Pope’s translation to put himself in ‘a congenial train’ for translating Callimachus (see *Critical Review*, January 1793, 59–65); and Gilbert Wakefield issued a new edition of Pope’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey* in 1796.

¹⁰ See Clarke (1981) 17–59; Bevington (1998) 375–97; also King (1987) 138–201; Stanford (1963) 146–58.

which burlesque is perhaps the primary feature – but revels in the eclecticism of the Greek and Trojan compound rather than suggesting any wish to draw on Homer himself as a significant challenge to it.

In the 1614 dedication to the *Odyssey*, Chapman invited Robert Carr, earl of Somerset, to the patronage of ‘Homer’s English life’, presenting his English versions of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* as together offering a complete and balanced exploration of what heroism might be:

In one, Predominant Perturbation; in the other, over-ruling Wisedome; in one, the Bodie’s fervour and fashion of outward Fortitude to all possible height of Heroicall Action; in the other, the Mind’s inward, constant and unconquered Empire, unbroken, unalterd with any most insolent and tyrannous infliction.¹¹

Directly through example, or indirectly through allegory, Homer here represents not only the source of epic poetry but also mastery of all useful knowledge. What may not be immediately apparent to a modern reader is the degree to which – despite his fame and the many ancient testimonies to it marshalled by Chapman himself – Homer was, and was to remain, in need of patronage as a worthy epic authority. The stability of the crowded Homeric pillar in Chaucer’s *House of Fame* (1,477–9) is threatened by the stresses of envy (‘Oon seyde that Omer made lyes, | Feynyng in hys poetries, | And was to Grekes favorable’), and the history of the Homeric wars of detraction and defence from antiquity to the eighteenth century has been well documented by Howard Clarke and others.¹² In seventeenth-century France Homer became the primary target of the supposedly progressive ‘modern’ faction anxious to rid themselves of allegiance to the classical past in general, but the manners of both gods and heroes in the poems were in any case unsurprisingly vulnerable on a number of counts to the proprieties of seventeenth-century neo-classicism and religion. Travesty and burlesque abound in English responses to Homer and translations of Homer.¹³ Even among the advocates of the ‘ancients’ aesthetically Homer was not secure, given the strength of the championship of Virgil and the representation of the *Aeneid* as the perfection of epic form. The octogenarian Thomas Hobbes will go on to defend Homer specifically against Virgil in his preface ‘Concerning the vertues of an heroique poem’, but a curious light is shed on what might be called the consumer profile by the summary of events incorporated (perhaps

¹¹ Nicoll (1956) 2, 3–4. On Chapman see Lord (1956), Sowerby (1992).

¹² Clarke (1981) 106–55; Patey (1997); Weinbrot (1993) 193–236, 296–307. On the prevalence of pro-Trojan feeling see Spencer (1954), esp. 8–12.

¹³ Cf., e.g. Thomas Tooley, *Homer Travestie: being a new translation of that great poet. With a critical preface and learned notes. Shewing how this translation excells Chapman, Hobbes, Ogilby, Dryden, Pope, and all other pretenders* (1720).

by the bookseller) into the title page of Hobbes' first Homeric offering in 1674: *The travels of Ulysses; wherein is related how he got from the Ciconians and Lotophagians, where his men eat forgetfulness. Coming to the land of the Cyclops, Polyphemus eat six of his men. Having with difficulty got from him, Aeolus gave him a wind ty'd in a leather sack. How Circe turn'd his men to boars; and how the Lestrygon giants eat his men like fishes. Also what converse he had with the ghosts in Hell; and at his return, how Scylla eat six of his men at one mouthful. How he escaped the charming Syrens; and falling on the Suns isle, the dreadful effects of it, &c. With many other passages, strange and wonderful. Translated out of Greek by Mr Hobbes of Malmesbury, author of the Leviathan.*

It is against this contested and various context that I want to look more closely at the two specific examples of Milton and Pope as Homeric readers. It has become a necessary device in studies of Milton simply to incorporate acknowledgement of the accumulating body of work on the dense compound of reading and recollection that makes up Milton's epic strain.¹⁴ Some works attempt exhaustive trackings of classical reference, some offer new hierarchies of influence within the classical tradition, and some argue that classical influences have in various ways been over-estimated. The issue of Milton's relation to Homer brings into question, as many critics have recognised, the very nature of allusion, and with it the difficulty of bridging the gaps in 'fitness' to read between Milton himself as a seventeenth-century polymath, his variously educated contemporaries, and the readers of an age like our own in which that learning has been displaced in favour of other things. Milton could read Greek with ease, and as his earliest published remarks on his poetic ambitions make clear (in *The Reason of Church Government*, 1642), he was fully immersed in an older and more eclectic European tradition which fed into his own rousing brand of literary patriotism:

I apply'd my selfe to . . . fix all the industry and art I could unite to the adorning of my native tongue; not to make verbal curiosities the end, that were a toylsome vanity, but to be an interpreter & relater of the best and sagest things among mine own Citizens throughout this Iland in the mother dialect. That what the greatest and choycest wits of Athens, Rome, or modern Italy, and those Hebrews of old did for their country, I in my proportion with this over and above of being a Christian, might doe for mine; not caring to be nam'd abroad, though perhaps I could attaine to that, but content with these British Ilands as

¹⁴ See, e.g. Higher (1949), Harding (1962), Steadman (1967), Mueller (1969), Blessington (1979), DuRocher (1985), Lewalski (1985), Martindale (1986) and Burrow (1993).

my world, whose fortune hath hitherto bin, that if the Athenians, as some say, made their small deeds great and renowned by their eloquent writers, *England* hath had her noble achievements made small by the unskilfull handling of monks and mechanicks.¹⁵

All Milton's 'industry and art' as revealed twenty-five years later in the publication of *Paradise Lost* is clearly a tall order for any reader or even any scholar to match, then or now. There is however one simpler overarching pattern which effectively contains almost any degree of awareness of or sensitivity to the texture of allusion in the poem. As Michael's immediately post-lapsarian tutorial to Adam makes manifest, the action of *Paradise Lost* establishes itself as a pre-condition of all other examples of the heroic or epic within the history of mankind. Adam (himself still, or already, inclined to look forward to a good conventional fight between the Son and the serpent at 12.384–5) is looking forward, not back, to an age in which 'Might only shall be admir'd | And Valor and Heroic Virtue call'd' (11.689–90). Throughout the poem Milton resolutely refuses the condition of 'following after': the wit of this densely composite work is to assert its own primacy over the *disiecta membra* of which it is composed. References and allusions – however explicitly invoked or hidden, however easily recognised or far-fetched – are thereby transformed into fore-shadowings, ironic typologies, echo-chambers of the future rather than the past. This paradoxical but powerfully evocative effect both ironises and in its inclusiveness sanctions the allusion-hunting industry which has flourished ever since Patrick Hume's *Annotations* of 1695 and Addison's *Spectator* essays of 1712; and it inevitably throws its colouring over the presence of Homer as of the other 'greatest and choicest wits' in the poem.

Perhaps the most striking Homeric allusion in *Paradise Lost* is the evocation as a parallel for Satan's journey through Chaos of the wanderings of Odysseus, although the dialogue with the *Iliad* – as a narrative of the fatal consequences of error culminating in a version of reconciliation – is in terms of the poem's structures arguably the more consistent. Rhetorically, the relation with the Homeric poems is constructed through complex but controlled processes of *contaminatio* (the mixing of several traditions in one), *retractatio* or revisionary handling, and overt comparison, where the axis of allusion is always as much that of discrimination as of similarity. In Book 9 of *Paradise Lost*, for example, there are three explicit references to

¹⁵ 'The reason of church-government urg'd against prelacy', in Milton (1953–82) 1.811–12. Fletcher (1956–61) offers a useful and comprehensive account of the educational background, although his account of Milton's Greek reading relies on the attribution to Milton (no longer accepted) of copious marginal annotations in a 1620 edition of Pindar. See also Parker (1996).

Homer's *Odyssey*, all suggesting a negative calibration of comparability: in the invocation, where the just rebuke and judgment of Jehovah is asserted to be 'not less but more heroic' than 'Neptune's ire . . . that so long | Perplex'd the Greek'; in the garden of Eden, 'spot more delicious' than the gardens of Alcinous; and in relation to Eve herself, as an innocent Circe, attended by 'more duteous' beasts. Seen from one side the trope is a relatively simple one of augmentation, with the primacy of Milton's subject constantly asserted, whether as prototype or superior replacement: as seen from the other it becomes what Puttenham calls the 'disabler', with the classical world invoked always as a paler, paradoxically secondary, imitation. These moments where the *Odyssey* surfaces – or perhaps rather, is held under – in explicit reference are held in a kind of tension with a more diffuse and uncertain network of refraction, where Satan 'like a black mist low creeping' (9.180) is suddenly suggestive not only of Thetis in the *Iliad* (1.359) but also of Odysseus swathed in Athene's protective mist (VI.15), and Eve in her garden is like Nausicaa with her washing (VI.85–98) as well as like Patroclus in fatal confrontation, in *Iliad* 16, with a foe larger than had been imagined. In this frame of reference, Odysseus' notorious interest in the *Odyssey* in where his next meal was coming from offers a mundane counterpoint not only to the reality of the temptation of taste but to the whole emphasis throughout Book 9 on the need for food – a need whose perils will also be exemplified in Homeric history by the Lotos-eaters, the cattle of the Sun and Circe.

In a surprisingly literal sense *Paradise Lost* becomes in effect a primer for reading Homer – one as thoroughly revisionary as Blake's later reading of Milton himself or any later 'readings against the grain'. In this light, the reader's own active engagement with and reassessment of the allusive qualities of the poem act as an empirical demonstration of the secondary and subordinate nature of whatever reserves may be conjured up of pagan learning and commentary. Milton argues elsewhere¹⁶ that no learning is necessary to expound the truths of scripture: here, in *Paradise Lost*, he brings the whole of his creativity to bear in a complex poetic mechanism of intellectual challenge generating – ultimately, as its most triumphant outcome – the recognition and acceptance of moral defeat. Alexander Pope – a man with his own strong Scriblerian views on the abuses of commentators' commentary, and one who in the *Essay on Criticism* (127–8) had recommended 'the Mantuan Muse' as the best comment on Homer – was one reader who found it natural to use Milton as well as Virgil in this role. On Hera's seduction of Zeus in *Iliad* 14, for example, he devotes a whole note to Milton's various imitations of 'the

¹⁶ See, e.g. *Considerations Touching the Likeliest Means to Remove Hirelings out of the Church* (1659).

several beautiful parts of this episode': in particular, he notes, 'that which seems in Homer an impious fiction, becomes a moral lesson in *Milton*; since he makes that lascivious rage of the passion the immediate effect of the sin of our first parents after the fall'. Pope's note does not stop here, with the bald statement: unapologetically, he quotes in his note the whole passage from Book 9 of *Paradise Lost*, forcing the revisionary Miltonic filter on to Homer's eighteenth-century readers at the same time as elevating the beauty of both passages through the juxtaposition.¹⁷

The allusive mode of *Paradise Lost* operates as a series of tests or challenges thrown out to winnow the audience down to the 'few' who are truly 'fit' to hear. Even if the thrust is ultimately a simplifying rather than an esoteric one, it is of course arguable that – in relation to Homer, for example – only those with a sufficient pre-existing engagement with Homeric epic can experience the full revisionary paradox enacted through reading. An *absence* of learning becomes a readerly equivalent of the untested innocence rejected in *Areopagitica* as 'a fugitive and cloistered virtue, unexercised and unbreathed'. Pope's 'epic' achievement, by contrast, is a popularising one, intent both on rescuing Homer from the degradations and irrelevancies of scholars and critics, and establishing the Homeric poems at the centre of a new literary market-place. The achievement of his processing of Homer is all the more impressive in view of the fact that this was a market better attuned to mock-heroic and to the sceptical positions of modernism than to automatic veneration of the monuments of the past. Homer holds a key place in any battle of the ancients and the moderns, and Pope's Homer is at one level a strikingly successful engagement in that ongoing controversy.¹⁸ Pope was by no means an uncritical impresario. Although the hyperbolic images of his 'Preface' to Homer – figuring Homer as 'a wild paradise', a chariot-wheel setting itself on fire, 'a powerful star, which in the violence of its course, drew all things within its vortex' – may strike today's readers as little short of adulatory, the preface itself was seen by some of the partisans of the ancients as dangerously attuned to the modern side. Pope's annotations show him constantly adjusting between the greatness he perceives in 'Homer's' poetic spirit and the things in the poems which are plainly, or ought to be, unacceptable to the modern age.¹⁹ But for Pope it is clear that the relevance of the Homeric poems for the modern age far outweighed these difficulties of adjustment. This conviction is bodied forth not only in the detail of the arguments but in the whole strategy of dissemination: the processing of the

¹⁷ Pope (1996) 694–6. ¹⁸ See esp. Patey (1997), Weinbrot (1993) 193–236, 296–307.

¹⁹ See, e.g. his criticism of Macrobius and the '*Je ne sçay quoy*' in the 'Observations on the second book', Pope (1996) 129; also Weinbrot (1993) 296–303.

Greek text into verse which over thirty-three thousand lines of heroic couplet establishes itself as a poetic lexicon for the eighteenth century;²⁰ the way in which the commentary buttonholes all sorts of readers beyond those normally to be expected for a Greek poem, and especially female readers;²¹ and the importance of the marketing of the work itself, with the building up of a subscription list with a glittering array of noble and other worthy subscribers to the point where the list can itself be seen as a 'satisfactory piece of vanity' for Pope to transmit to posterity.²² Modern advertising techniques would have little to teach Pope about selling an epic experience, but at a more instinctive level too Pope is often most engaged with his text and his commentary when he is responding to the sense that others have been there before him, that reading Homer is an experience which accrues value from being shared, and from having been shared across the ages. A gallery of earlier readers accompany him through the 'Observations' – commentators like Eustrathius and Madame Dacier ('the Bishop and the Lady' in Pope's mischievous formulation), great figures of the past like Alexander the Great, Pythagoras, Plutarch, and above all the poets like Virgil, Tasso and Milton, where citation of parallel passages becomes, as in the example quoted above, less a matter of source study than one of dual critical appreciation. Pope's Homer has fallen victim to the strength of critical prejudice in favour of 'original' works, and there is room for much more investigation of the primary importance of his Homeric enterprise for eighteenth-century poetry and criticism. In what follows my emphasis is on the *Iliad* rather than the collaborative *Odyssey*, and on taking the whole production together – neither as a poem (pretty or otherwise) in itself, nor as a piece of criticism in itself, but as a composite reading and recreation of Homer.

Regardless of the acknowledged strength of Homer's powers of invention and poetic ornament, a necessary condition of his defence for Pope and his contemporaries was the identification of a proper and serious heroic purpose for the poems, one fit to withstand the burlesque or mock-heroic impulse which Pope was himself so excellently qualified to understand. For Pope, following a tradition expressed for him as for Dryden most influentially by the rather wooden neo-classicism of René le Bossu (1631–89), the *Iliad* is a nationalist and civic text, 'the principal design' of which (as Pope notes in considering the character of Diomedes as the spotlight falls on his prowess in the fifth book) is 'to shew, that the greatest personal qualities and

²⁰ Cf. Coleridge's view in *Biographia Literaria* that the Homer translations had laid the foundations of eighteenth-century poetic diction.

²¹ See Thomas (1990), Williams (1993).

²² Pope, Letter to Caryll, 19 March 1714. See also Foxon (1991).

forces are of no effect when union is wanting among the chief rulers, and that nothing can avail 'till they are reconciled so as to act in concert' (Book 5, n.1).²³ Dry as this might sound as a summary of the *raison d'être* of the poem, Pope made it much more than a ritual neo-classical gesture. Naturally, Achilles presents a problematic figure as hero in this respect. Instead of the communal loyalties which fuel the spirit of a Diomedes, Achilles' own native aggression is controlled uniquely by his sense of himself, and so far does he seem from sharing human sympathies that his closest friend Patroclus speculates (16.33–5) that rocks and tempestuous seas gave him birth rather than the tenderness of love. His solipsism becomes more emphatic in Pope. Early in Book 16 Pope's Achilles indulges in a rejection of the notion of higher external influences upon his behaviour (such as Jove, or oracles) in a supreme assertion of egotism, suggestive of such other individualists as Shakespeare's Edmund and Iago, or Milton's Satan:

My Wrongs, my Wrongs, my constant Thought engage,
Those, my sole Oracles, inspire my Rage. . .
I made him Tyrant; gave him Pow'r to wrong
Ev'n me . . .
'Tis time our Fury should relent at last:
I fix'd its Date; the day I wish'd appears.²⁴

And he finishes his speech with a wish for the universal destruction of the rest of the Greeks as well as the Trojans – a passage warmly defended against its would-be atherisers by Pope, who marks his interest by drawing a strong Shakespearean parallel with Northumberland's reaction to the death of Hotspur.²⁵ In terms of the conflict between individuality and co-operation seen by Le Bossu at the poem's heart, Achilles and his opposite number on the Trojan side, Hector, offer Pope a textbook contrast. In a poem exposing the ill effects of discord, Hector has all the qualities tending to a preservation of unity: he stands as a 'character of valour unruffled by rage and anger, uniting his people by his prudence and example'. 'The motive of all his actions' is love of his country, together with affection towards his parents and kindred, including his wife and son. He is perhaps the acme of successful interpersonality – though not quite in the modern sense of Pope's nice phrase, 'Hector appears in every Battel the Life and Soul of his Party'.²⁶

²³ Pope (1996) 259. Le Bossu's *Traité du poème épique* was published in Paris in 1675 and translated into English in 1695. Translated excerpts were printed (as 'A general view of the epic poem and of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*') with the first volume of Pope's *Odyssey* (Pope (1940–69) 9.3–24).

²⁴ Pope (1996) 750. ²⁵ *Henry IV Part II*, 1.1.153–60: Pope (1996) 781.

²⁶ Note on Book 3, 53: Pope (1996) 155–6.

Homer's account of Hector's last battle, and Achilles' pursuit of him round the walls of Troy is read by Pope as an emblem of this contrast: Hector is running away towards the walls, so that his friends may help him, while Achilles, constantly turning him from the city towards the plain, makes a sign to the Greek troops not to intervene, insisting on single combat.²⁷ The passage on which I shall focus here is Pope's version of the end of Hector's soliloquy before the Scaean gate as he weighs up the possibilities of retreat, parley or combat with Achilles. It comes early in the twenty-second book of the *Iliad*, a book which Pope identifies as one of the most 'over-mastering' in its dialectic of the sublime and the sentimental: 'And indeed thro' the whole Book this wonderful Contrast and Opposition of the *Moving* and the *Terrible*, is perpetually kept up, each heightening the other: I can't find Words to express how so great Beauties affect me.'²⁸ The passage (22.126–8) is obscure in the Greek, some proverbial usage probably hidden in its expression. Pope gives a literal version: 'There is no talking with Achilles, from an Oak, or from a Rock, as a young Man and a Maiden talk together', and also a paraphrase: 'There is no conversing with this implacable Enemy in the Rage of Battel; as when sauntering People talk at leisure to one another on the Road, or when young Men and Women meet in a Field.'²⁹ It is an extraordinarily moving 'beauty' of exactly the kind Pope has pointed to, Hector's mind, as he ('like a coiled serpent') awaits the gleaming rage of the onrushing Achilles, suddenly reverting to a pastoral peacetime scene. Fleeting, before the inevitable choice of glory over safety, Hector seems to be envisaging the possibility that he and Achilles might drop out of the domain of epic confrontation – not just formally or ritualistically, with exchange of gifts, as do Glaucus and Diomedes in Book 6, but into another world altogether where they might casually and simply be friends.

We greet not here, as Man conversing Man
Met at an Oak, or journeying o'er a Plain;
No Season now for calm familiar Talk,
Like Youths and Maidens in an Evening Walk:
War is our business.³⁰

²⁷ Note on Book 22, 269: Pope (1996) 1,037–8.

²⁸ Note on Book 22, 37: Pope (1996) 1,030.

²⁹ Note on Book 22, 167: Pope (1996) 1,032–3.

³⁰ Book 22, 167–72: Pope (1996) 1,016. The quality of Pope's achievement may be suggested by a comparison with John Ogilby's version of the same passage: 'He'll not be mov'd at all with Stories vain | Of Okes and Rocks, fond Tales which entertain | Credulous Virgins and admiring Youth | Who swallow things impossible for Truth.'

Behind Pope's Hector here – a man who might understand the social pleasures beautifully embedded in the word 'sauntering' in the paraphrase – stands Milton taking breath at the beginning of Book 9 of *Paradise Lost* for the cataclysmic scene (and Homer's Hector himself behind Milton, who goes on within the next ten lines to allude to this same Homeric episode):

No more of talk where Man or angel guest
With man, as with his friend, familiar used
To sit indulgent . . .

I now must change
These notes to tragic.

At moments like this the density of Pope's Homeric tapestry is completely satisfying, weaving together an interpretation of the concerns of the poem with its later influence and with Pope's own refractive creativity. It is an oddity of literary history that in giving voice so consummately in some ways to the 'group-consciousness of an age'³¹ Pope's version of Homer quickly becomes a trigger for its own stylistic rejection, and for a movement variously back to the Greek (for those who could manage it), to the literal, or to Chapman.³² Let Homer's readers think, urges Pope in his 'Preface', that 'they are growing acquainted with nations and people that are now no more; that they are stepping almost three thousand years back into the remotest antiquity': but in a sense Pope brought Homer too close, and that was not, ultimately, what the next age wanted, with its appetite for nostalgia and estrangement. Pope did more, of course, than turn Homer into a speaker of eighteenth-century poetic diction: his erasing of stylistic difference is only one aspect of a larger campaign to secure recognition for Homer as above all the greatest of fellow poets. In projecting forward acceptance of this premise he was ultimately far more successful, to the point where one might see his Homeric contribution as partially at least a powerful pre-emptive strike against the distancing effect of the new sense of historical difference. Thomas Parnell's 'Essay on the life, writings and learning of Homer', prefixed to Pope's *Iliad*, opens with a vision of literary influence as in itself a kind of friendship.

There is something in the Mind of Man, which goes beyond bare Curiosity, and even carries us on to a Shadow of Friendship, with those great Genius's whom we have known to excell in former Ages. Nor will it appear less to any one, who considers how much it partakes of the Nature of Friendship; how it compounds itself of an Admiration rais'd by what we meet

³¹ The phrase is from Tillyard (1958) 15.

³² See Webb in this volume p. 302.

with concerning them; a Tendency to be further acquainted with them, by gathering every Circumstance of their Lives; a kind of Complacency in their Company.³³

In terms of the developments in Homeric scholarship and criticism outlined at the beginning of this chapter, what is striking about Pope's creative response to Homer is that, sophisticated (and far from complacent) as it is, it is predicated absolutely, through interpretation as well as annotation, on the notion of a single shaping poetic mind. Despite all Pope's indications of an unbridgeable gap between himself and Homer's greatness, we are more aware of a sense of relationship than of historical or cultural distance – a sense that is underlined in many of his letters about the processes of the translation as well as in the lovely image, in the note on the death of Patroclus (16.1032), whereby he figures himself as playing Sancho Panza to Homer's Don Quixote. Pope's transfusion of Homeric theme, characters, customs and events into English is matched in significance by a transfusion almost into the flesh of poetic quality and personality. Homer, I have suggested, had often before this been a more provisional and uncertain figure, and for Milton too he had been a generic rather than an individual prototype of post-lapsarian epic and its various interpreters. Before the end of the eighteenth century the development of new historical interests would bring about significant changes in the perception of Homer – through Anthony Blackwell's *Enquiry into the Life and Writings of Homer* (1735), analysing Homer's genius as a product of particular human circumstances; through the challenge of Ossian in the 1760s and 1770s as not only a national British bard but one at once more primitive and less barbaric than Homer; and perhaps most significantly through the conclusions about the oral nature of the poems on which Wolf was to build his analytical approach in the *Prolegomena*.³⁴ It would, however, be a mistake to assume a simple teleological narrative here. As Wolf himself pointed out, the question he had raised about Homer was not new. Comparable ideas had been expressed not only in France by Charles Perrault and by the abbé d'Aubignac, but also in England, and in English, by Richard Bentley.³⁵ Curiously, there is a contribution in July 1725 to *Applebee's Journal*, possibly by Daniel Defoe, in which an attack on Pope's subterfuge over the collaborative nature of his *Odyssey* is enlivened with just such an analogy with Homer himself – as an old blind ballad singer securing the collaboration

³³ Pope (1940–69) 7.26.

³⁴ See esp. Simonsuuri (1979) 99–142. For an extended discussion of Homer and Ossian, see the *Occasional Thoughts on the Study and Character of Classical Authors* by John Gordon, archdeacon of Lincoln, published anonymously in 1762.

³⁵ Wolf (1985) 116–18 n. 84. See Bentley (1713).

of less eminent wits in order to sell his ballads 'still in his own Name, as if they had been own'.³⁶ It is interesting to consider the degree to which Pope, in his commitment to a Homer characterised above all by the consistency of individual poetic spirit and fire, may or may not have been able to see the writing on the wall.

FURTHER READING

Wide-ranging accounts of the reception of Homer are to be found in Clarke (1981) and Stanford (1963). More detailed discussion of Homer's presence in particular periods is to be found in King (1987), Burrow (1993), Foerster (1947), Simonsuuri (1979), and Weinbrot (1993). See also the following: on Chapman's Homer, Lord (1956); on Milton, Blessington (1979) and Martindale (1986); and on Pope, Mason (1972) and C. Williams (1993).

³⁶ Lee (1869) 3.409–12.