Homer in the Renaissance:

The Troy Stories

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Brown University, 1988

Web edition 2004

I. The medieval heritage

During the Middle Ages, Homer is lost for the Western World. Instead of Homeric epic, we have Troy Stories. These stories are not just corruptions and derivations of the Homeric epic: they derive to a great extent from an alternative source, the Epic Cycle, which belonged to the traditional Greek literary canon just like the Homeric epics. The poems of the Epic Cycle, such as the *Cypriad* and the *Little Iliad*, are already defined by Aristotle in comparison to the Homeric epic: they do not concentrate on a particular event of the Troy story. They want to give the whole story, and they are a loose narration of facts without any principle of unity. All this they pack into a narrative much shorter than the Homeric poems, so it is not surprising that their style is much worse than Homer's. Nevertheless, they were enormously popular in the Antiquity, just as their offspring would be in the Middle Age and even the

Renaissance. They satisfied the curiosity of the reader of digests, who must be the average reader of all times. It is these stories, and not Homer, that were used by Shakespeare. Their popularity may account for the less than enthusiastic welcome which Homer received when he came back to the West in the Renaissance. It is in the narratives of the epic cycle that we find the preliminaries of the war and its outcome, the death of Achilles, the Trojan Horse and the destruction of Troy. The heritage of the Epic Cycle was to be combined not with Homer himself, but with Latin translations and digests of Homer.

One of the earliest is the *Ilias Latina* by one "Silius Italicus" (1st c. AD), which was very popular in the early Middle Ages, although its influence in the making of the Troy Story has been questioned. Already in this digest we find the key to later versions of Homer: the story is slightly romanticized: love, and not honour, is the main motive for the actions of Achilles. Also, Italicus is uneasy about some inconsistencies in Homer (the attitude of the Trojans towards Helen, for instance) and does his best to humanize and add logic to the story. Indeed, we might say that these changes are already evident in the *Aeneid*, which will be the model for later epic.

Excidium Trojae (4th-6th c.) played an important part in the making of the Troy Story. It tells the whole, from the golden apple to the founding of Rome, as it includes an abstract of the *Aeneid*. We also find many details which add to the main story, such as the love story of Achilles and Priam's daughter Polyxena, or the report that Paris wasn't able to tell which goddess was the most beautiful until Venus took off her clothes. From it derive such free translations as the Middle English anonymous poem

on *The Seege or Batayle of Troye* and Konrad von Würzburg's *Trojanische Krieg*.

There are other similar works from the late Antiquity. Such works seem to demonstrate that there is an unbroken tradition of Troy stories since the Antiquity, from the Epic Cycle to our times. The *Compendium historiae Trojanae-Romanae* is very similar to *Excidium Trojae*.

A somewhat different story is found in two influential narratives: *Ephemeris Belli Troiani*, by one "Dictys the Cretan" and *De Excidio Troiae Historia*, by "Dares the Phrygian." They are probably 4th to 6th-c. Latin translations of 1st-c. Greek originals. But the authors tell another story: Dictys says that he was a soldier of the Greek forces at the siege of Troy; back in Greece, the prologue tells us, he wrote this story and had it buried with him in a tin box, until an earthquake uncovered the tomb in 66 A.D. Dares the Phrygian was of course a Trojan defending the city. These claims passed for true history until the 18th century. Both narratives owe their success to the fact that they are "eyewitness accounts", instead of a blind man's fictions. The public was curious to know "the real thing" about Troy, without the apparels of the poets. So, both stories are successful because of their spareness, their matter-of-course narrative and their lack of poetic imagination and elaboration. They both do away with all the Homeric stories about the gods, and reduce the war to an earthly conflict. They improve on Homer's logic, they add circumstantial events, and follow a chronological order, instead of Homer's fanciful flash-backs. The pestilence the Greeks suffer is due to an irritation of the Gods "or some other cause"; the war is full of periods of truce and negotiation, and the Greeks grow crops in the winter to sustain their army.

The characters have also undergone a transformation: Odysseus is a contemptible schemer and Achilles is a distraught lover. The medieval Romance of Troy will issue directly from these sources. Even if Homer had been available during the Middle Ages, the readers would have preferred these digests. They turn Homer's epic into history on the one hand and romance on the other, and in this way they afford a kind of critique of Homeric epic.

12th century

Joseph of Exeter dedicates to the Archbishop of Canterbury his *Iliad of Dares Phrygius* (1180s), 3673 lines of a Latin which is extravagantly rhetorical, improving upon Dares' style mainly with set pieces of rhetoric on conventional moral themes. Joseph provides a sermon on the instability of Fortune, the falsity of appearances, the dangers of the appetites and the vanity of women whenever the subject affords a chance to paste them in. It is from him that we get a description of Helen. It includes a view of her liver, which apparently was itchy and was therefore the cause of her lust and of the Trojan War.

Benoît de Sainte-Maure went far beyond Joseph of Exeter, but he used the same formula, Dares + style. His *Roman de Troie* (c. 1160) consists of 30,000 rhymed couplets in French, evidently adding extraneous matter to Dares' account. Sainte-Maure gives prominence to unhappy love affairs, starting with Jason and Medea. He

also elaborates on the story of Achilles and Polyxena and invents the story of Troilus and Cressida (Briseida). Briseida happens to be the daughter of Bishop Calchas, and this gives us some insight into Sainte-Maure's peculiar brand of Classical Antiquity. His Greeks and Trojans are medieval warriors on horseback, who fight on horseback with axes or shoot each other with crossbows. In the intervals they play backgammon and worship in Gothic churches; they also seem to have read the Bible. Some of Priam's many sons retain their Greek names, but the rest are christened with French names, including one "Ne D'Amors." Sainte-Maure is lavish in the use of gold and jewelry, and unloads wagonfuls of this on the interminable descriptions of the dresses of the ladies or of such irresistible scenes as Hector's funeral, which is given an absurd elaboration, from the embalming to his final setting in a funeral throne which is a complete mineralogical catalogue, surrounded with allegorical statues and with an elaborate system of gold pipes which keep pouring embalming liquids on his corpse. But the best thing for Sainte-Maure is Priam's Chamber of Beauty, worth more than one hundred thousand pounds, and which gets 300 lines of description. It has several channels of music and robots which sprinkle perfume on the visitor or do tricks. Contrasting with such refinements, the battle scenes are of a cartoon-like violence, and full of that anatomical description of wounds which is dear to French medieval epic.

13th century

Sainte-Maure's book enjoyed a well-deserved popularity, but due to its volume and its language its most popular circulation was in the form of a latin translation and digest. Guido delle Colone wrote *Historia destructionis Troiae* (1287), an abridgement in 35 books to about one third of the original. Of course, he does not acknowledge that it is a translation, he does not even mention Sainte-Maure. Guido is of a sterner cast. He is a misogynist, not an apostle of courtly love like Sainte-Maure. He also reads a moral in the story: Fortune topples the mighty, and prudence is necessary. Guido's version of the Troy story will become almost canonical in the later Middle Ages. He cites Dares as his source for the truth of the matter, and attacks the poets such as Homer, who distorted it with their fictions. There are four medieval translations of Guido's *Destructionis* into English; the most important ones are by Lydgate and Caxton.

14th century

The story lingers on; the main English representative, and arguably the best, is Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*.

15th century

John Lydgate's *Troy Book* is written in English. It was begun on Monday, 31 oct. 1412 at four o'clock in the afternoon, and finished eight years later. As Lydgate acknowledges, he was "prolyx in werkyng & not compendious." It consists of 30,000 lines of decasyllabic couplets, mainly padding, and the atmosphere is Sainte-Maure all over, only updated: Lydgate's Trojan War is fought with cannons. Lydgate defends women from Guido's attacks—he finds them so gentle and sweet. But the main interest of Lydgate's book is that it is a dynastic epic. Lydgate wants to write a "book of Princes", and dedicates it to the future Henry V. Accordingly, he traces the ancestry of the British people to Brutus, a great-grandson of Aeneas who adventured farther to the northwest. There is also a Christian message in Lydgate: this life is only a pilgrimage and a place of uncertainty, and we must care only for the other life, which is more substantial.

Caxton's *Recueyll of the Historyes de Troye* (1475) is Guido through yet another work, Raoul Lefèvre's *Le recueil des Histoires de Troie* (1464). Caxton's translation is awful, full of gallicisms and bad syntax. Still, it is the first book to be printed in English. And it was a safe editorial investment: there were 12 editions of Lefèvre's work before 1544, and Caxton's had 15 printings, the last in 1738. The story is by now familiar: a romantic and bloody plot, and Classical names for a thoroughly medieval setting. However, Caxton's tone in presenting the story is no longer Guido's or Lydgate's: he

offers it not in a spirit of admonition, but in one of emulation, and as a way of learning high virtues. It is the difference between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

The Troy stories will have other Renaissance offspring, such as Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*, which is of course inspired in the tradition of Benoît de Sainte-Maure and not in Homer's. During the Renaissance it is these stories and not Homer which provided the standard version of the story of Troy. Homer had failed as a historian, because he did not exploit the sensational possibilities of his source, and had relied too much on his imagination. Homer's doings with the gods, which had been criticized by Plato and many classical scholars, have been wiped out, and Homer will have a popular reputation, insofar as he has one, of being a liar, and a heathen liar. He had also failed as a romancer: there was no romantic interest in his epics, and the medieval poets will have to provide that. The stories themselves no doubt had caught the imagination of the audience. During the Middle Ages they had been refashioned to the taste of the age; the echoes from the Crusades no doubt were an important element in this popularity. Also, the Troy stories follow the pattern of the *Iliad* in that they provide an illustrious classical ancestry for the emerging Western nations, supposedly founded by the Trojans scattered throughout Europe.

II. Homer

14th century

Petrarch chanced upon a Greek text of Homer in 1354 (Clarke 10). It was sold to him by Nicholas Sigerus, a Greek who visited Italy to discuss the differences between the Eastern and Western churches. But then Petrarch didn't know any Greek. He had a poor translation into Latin made by one Leonzio Pilato, an ignorant and bad-tempered person whom Boccaccio had to lodge during his work. So, Petrarch and Boccaccio were about the only persons in the Western world acquainted with Homer in the fourteenth century.

15th century

New Greek texts were discovered in the first half of the 15th century, for instance by Giacomo d'Angelo da Scarparia, who also brought to public attention other texts by Aristotle, Plato, Ptolemy, etc. (Bingham 128).

Homeric *Opera* were printed in Greek for the first time at Florence in 1488 / 1489; the *Iliad* had been printed in Brescia in 1474, and would appear in a different edition in 1497 (Bingham 3-4). The commonest Greek editions of the Renaissance were bilingual texts, set side by side with a Latin translation. The role of these translations was auxiliary, and they were fairly literal. This was in one sense an advantage for Homer, because in this way the Latin translations were kept free of the elegant neo-Latin rhetoric fashionable at the time, which was definitely un-Homeric. The translation by Andrea Divo was praised by Pound, and used in his *Cantos* (Braden 88).

16th century

It is during this century that translations of Homer appear for the first time in Italian, Spanish, French, German and English.

New relevant Greek texts come into Western Europe, this time by allegorical commentators of Homer: Heraclitus (1505, lat. trans. 1544), Porphyry (1518, lat. trans. 1542), Eustathius (1542, lat. trans. 1551). The Stoics, the Neoplatonists, and even some Christian Fathers of the Church, had used Homeric epic as an allegory of Stoic, Neoplatonic or Christian doctrine. Homer's modern readers will follow this tradition. In

Eastern Europe there may have been an uninterrupted tradition of allegory. Johannes Tezetz, a Byzantine of the 12th century, wrote versified allegorical commentaries to the epics. In the West, it was Boccaccio who began the allegorizing interpretations of Homer in his *Genealogy of the Pagan Gods* (1364). Homeric epics will be frequently allegorized during the Renaissance. They seem to be an easy prey for allegorists, since their main themes (a battle and a journey) can easily be taken as allegories of human life as a whole. Also, there are concrete elements in the poems which lend themselves to allegorization, such as the interventions of the gods (Athena restraining Achilles), the names of the characters, the frequent parables in their speech, etc. Arthur Golding's translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is completely allegorizing, and it will become the standard Renaissance handbook for mythology and a guide for allegorical interpretation. The interpretation of Homer will be affected by this Renaissance bias. In 1573 Lodovico Dolce published an abridged Latin translation of the *Odyssey* in which he prefaced each book with an allegorical interpretation. Allegorical messages will also be read into Homer by the Swiss humanist Conrad Gesner.

The allegorists read whatever they like to read in Homer, usually the tritest commonplaces of morality and worldly wisdom. For instance, the Scylla and Charibdis passage is usually transformed in the Aristotelian advice to avoid extremes and steer a safe middle course. What the Homeric text says, in fact, is that it is better for Odysseus to pass in front of Scylla and lose some of his sailors than risk the loss of the whole ship to Charibdis by trying to avoid Scylla. Usually, however, "In the

Odyssey the allegorists belaboured the obvious, in the *Iliad* they ignored it" (Clarke 107).

17th century

In 1611 George Chapman publishes an English translation of the *Iliad*. The *Odyssey* was to follow in 1614. It was the first time that the two epics appeared in a modern language as the work of a single translator. Chapman defends the use of long verse (fourteener) in his translation. The very fact of his defense is telling: this long verse is a problematic rhythmical unit. In order to maintain its identity, it tends to be read quickly and produces an effect of undignified monotony. Chapman does his best to fight this tendency with enjambement and caesura (Braden 22). He introduced into English curious compounds, stimulated by the Homeric epithets (Braden 216).

Keats felt like Balboa looking on the Pacific when he opened Chapman's translation, but other readers tend to describe it as "gnarled Elizabethan rhetoric" (Clarke). Chapman endorsed the tradition of Homer the Philosopher, who hides wisdom under his fables. In his preface, Chapman compares the story of the poem to man's body, and the allegorical meaning to man's soul. Homer's message is startlingly original: the loveliness of virtue and the ugliness of vice. In order to make this clearer, Chapman often uses "needful periphrasis" to expand on the original and make his point. He tries to make a stoic hero out of Homer's angry Achilles; Odysseus he transforms into

a wise and prudent man, and the *Odyssey* becomes a kind of Christian Bildungsroman (Clarke). The results do not seem to be completely convincing. The *Iliad* has always been a difficult prey for allegorists, because its concerns are social (cf. the names); the *Odyssey* is a private adventure and it can be made to boil down to a kind of primitive *Pilgrim's Progress*. "Allegory thrives on the clash of opposites, and the *Iliad* is a poem of clashes but not of opposites" (Clarke 71). Some thinkers will oppose the whole idea of allegorization, such as Montaigne and Fontenelle in the 17th century.

In 1561, Julius Caesar Scaliger had attacked Homer in his *Poetices Libri Septem*, as being inferior to Virgil: less refined, more primitive and ignorant of the makings of a good epic. In fact, Luis Vives had made much the same charge in 1531, in his *De tradendis disciplinis*. Again, this is not new; Homer had been accused of neglecting both logic and morals since Plato and the Alexandrine commentators. Now, however, he has to stand an unfavourable comparison with Virgil's epic. They had already been compared in Roman criticism, but the Romans would not have thought of using one against the other. Now Virgil is used to disparage Homer. Homer is inventive, but he lacks judgement. Virgil is patriotic, his hero is virtuous, the parts of his poem are well proportioned, his epithets are not childish, illogical and repetitive, like Homer's. Aeneas kills seven deer and brings them back to his sad companions comforting them with a patriotic speech; in the corresponding passage in the *Odyssey*, Odysseus manages to kill just one deer, and says to his comrades, "don't worry, let's eat." Homer is found to be irrelevant. Scaliger complains that Homer should call Achilles swift-

footed when he describes his sleep. Homer's comparison of the Greeks to flies around a piece of meat will be found to be disgusting. The translators usually add variety to his epithets or substitute wasps, hornets and bees for his flies.

In the last decades of the century there is an increasing disparagement of Homer following Scaliger's reasoning, this time coming from France, during the Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns, which will soon reach England. Vida, Perrault, Boileau, Le Bossu... many prefer Virgil. La Motte will write *La Nouvelle Iliade* in 1714, improved and adapted to the refined taste of the new age. However, it is noteworthy that Dryden and Pope prefer Homer, in spite of their qualifications.

18th century

The Troy stories disappear at last, but now Homer finds a new competitor: Ossian, who (not surprisingly) was more appealing to that "age of passion." In the nineteenth century it is with the conventions of the realist novel that he will have to compete. The eighteenth century sees not only the translations of Pope, an unlikely combination of talents, but the opening of the Homeric question at about the same age with Vico's *New Science*. In it Vico not only opposed the current allegorical interpretations of the epics: he asserted their primitive and mythical nature, and denied that they were the

work of a single author. This matter will be pursued farther with Wolff's *Prolegomena in Homerum* in the second half of the century, which is usually considered to inaugurate modern Homeric scholarship.

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