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Te Sequor: A Study of Pope's Observations on The Iliad of Homer

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TE SEQUOR: A STUDY OF POPE'S OBSERVATIONS ON THE *ILLIAD* OF HOMER

by

DREW NATHANIEL KEANE

(Under the Direction of J. B. Griffin)

ABSTRACT

Although has been written on Pope's translation of the *Iliad*, little has been written directly on his commentary, which comprise more than half of Pope's work. This study seeks to correct this neglect and argues that Pope's commentary is a vital part of his *Iliad*. I examine Pope's place among English and French poets and commentators, the epic tradition, and Pope's understanding of the commentator's role.

INDEX WORDS: Pope, Alexander, *Iliad*, Homer, Epic, Eighteenth century, Translation, Commentary

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CHAPTER 1

PROLOGUE

Why would anyone today bother reading Pope's commentary on the *Iliad*? Even his translation, an acknowledged masterpiece, seems to justify Mark Twain's quip that a classic is one of those books nobody really wants to read. This neglect appears a true loss to me. The observations, as Pope calls them, are no small part of the work; they are more than twice the length of the translation. I offer this study as an explanation of Pope's observations and why we should not ignore them. The first volume of his *Iliad* opens with the pledge to follow in Homer's footsteps; I have borrowed that same Latin epigram for my title, for that is what I hope to do in these pages. I want to trace Pope's footsteps as he traces Homer's. By my doing so, I think my readers will discover Pope's commentary to be an integral part of his *Iliad*. More than that, I hope, as we "trace the Muses *upward* to their *Spring*" (so to speak), readers will find the path burgeoning with dainties not to be missed.

I divide the study into four chapters. The approach is one spiraling nearer to the heart of the commentary with each chapter. Beginning with the widest circle, I examine Pope's introduction to epic poetry. The next loop explores Pope's interactions with French neo-classical criticism (the dominant school of his day). Approaching nearer, chapter three considers false paths that Pope hoped to avoid. Finally, we narrow in on what he achieves with his commentary—and, consequently, what advantage reading it offers to us. Each time we circle round, Homer's importance should become more

apparent; Pope “sees Homer as guide, mentor, and model, not only in the mazes of poetry but... in the mazes of life itself” (Mack, *Twickenham*, clxiv).

Space will not allow a consideration of the notes on all twenty-four books of the *Iliad*. Three books will serve as sample texts. The observations on the first and last are essential, as they book-end the whole. To these I add Book XVI, as it gives us the sort of scene we most expect in an epic—that is, a battle--and because it is one of the books Pope praises the most. These samples will provide us a good indication of the nature of the whole.

CHAPTER 2

“DIPT IN INK”: POPE'S INTRODUCTION TO EPIC

Before the ambitious young poet set out to secure both reputation and wealth, before the nightmares of “a long journey” in which he felt “puzzled which way to take” (Pope, ed. Mack xxxviii), we find the eight-year-old boy, face hidden between the pages of the giant, illustrated edition of John Ogilby’s *Iliad* covering his little lap. In that “wild paradise” (as he would call Homer in his Preface to the *Iliad* [Pope, ed. Shankman 3]), Pope caught “the itch of poetry” (Mack 44-5), from which he would never be free. Before we turn to the commentary that promised to expound Homer as a *poet* (Pope, ed. Shankman 46), we ought to pause to consider the poet’s introduction to Homer--which simultaneously involves his introduction to epic and to poetry generally.

Pope’s spinster aunt taught him to read. He taught himself to write “by copying printed books,” and by the age of eight he had learned the basics of Latin and (some) Greek grammar from the family priest, Edward Taverner (Mack 47-8). It was at this time that Pope first discovered the song of Troy and (with boyish pretentiousness) devoted himself to the poetic Muse. Ogilby’s version of the *Iliad* (1660, 1669) seems to have played no small part in this development. The love of poetry and the love of Homer appeared inseparable to him. We need only consider some comments from his *Essay on Criticism* to see how nearly the two are linked in his mind:

Be *Homer’s* Works your *Study*, and *Delight*,
Read them by *Day*, and meditate by *Night*,
Thence form your *Judgement*, thence your *Maxims* bring,

And trace the Muses *upward* to their *Spring*. (124-129¹)

Turning then to “the *Mantuan Muse*”--Virgil, second only to Homer, in the traditional hierarchy of classical poets--Pope observes: “*Nature* and *Homer* were, he found, the *same*” (136).² The epigraph he chose for the frontispiece of Volume One of his version was no idle ornament--it was Pope’s credo:

Te Sequor, O Graiae gentis Decus! inque tuis nunc

Fixa [sic] pedum pono pressis vestigia signis:

Non ita certandi cupidus, quam propter amorem,

Quod te imitari aveo--

LUCRET.³

[I follow you, O glory of the Grecian race, and on the marks you have made I firmly plant my own footsteps, not because I feel driven to rival

¹Citations from Pope, other than his version of the *Iliad*, are quoted from *The Poems of Alexander Pope: A Reduced Version of the Twickenham Text*, ed. by John Butt.

²*cf.* Mason’s fascinating ruminations on this whole matter of following “nature” and Homer and following Homer following “nature” (42-44). Mason argues that the “Nature” that Pope saw in Homer and strove to preserve in his version shines in those bits that “transcend time” (44). Mason is certainly right to point out “timeless” elements in Homer and Pope. On the other hand, I think C. S. Lewis’s cautionary word about this tendency in his *Preface to Paradise Lost* (chapter ix) must not be forgotten. He warns that the tendency to focus our attention only on those aspects of a work that seem to us to be “timeless” can be made to obscure the author’s actual focus. I point out this word of caution because it bears on Pope’s own handling on the historical circumstance and perhaps “timeless” pearls in the *Iliad*, which we will consider in chapter four of this study.

³ Lucretius III. 1-13. Pope has appropriated and reapplied the words that originally referenced Lucretius’s master, Epicurus.

your pre-eminence, but rather because I yearn to resemble you.] (46;
Shankman's translation)⁴

Let us, then, trace how he began to follow the Prince of the Poets, and to pitch his tent beneath the great walls of Troy.

“A poor Englishman of my own Educating” (Pope, ed. Mack xxxviii), Pope described himself. We must first observe what his detractors could neither forget nor forgive--that he was not “bred at a University” (*Ib.*). How well he knew Greek we do not know, but he was certainly no master. Still, like Shakespeare, who sucked more life out of North's Plutarch than lesser minds have managed to distill from a hundred books, Pope made masterful, imaginative use of the learning he had and all the resources at his disposal. As Samuel Johnson explained, “It is not very likely that he overflowed with Greek. But, when he felt himself deficient, he sought assistance” (qtd. from Pope, *Twickenham* lxxxiii).

Old Homer

We must always remember that our Homer is not Pope's Homer. Pope's is what Maynard Mack has aptly termed the Old Homer. This Old Homer is both the Father and Prince of the Poets, the Horatian Homer, and also ὁ θεολόγος [the theologian], the Homer who holds court in Dante's Hell, and is pictured on the title page of Chapman's

⁴ Citations from Pope's *Iliad* are taken from the Penguin Classics edition, edited by Steven Shankman, unless noted as the Twickenham edition.

Odyssees. Ours is the Homer of modern scholarship, of tentative, dark speculation. We undoubtedly know far more of Homer's actual culture--yet we pretend to nothing like the familiarity with him that Pope's age (believed they) enjoyed. In fact, to imply a distinct, individual "him" is more than many modern scholars are willing to grant in their attempts to reconstruct how this poem came to be. A corollary of Pope's familiarity with the Old Homer is that Pope is "closer" to his Homer than we to Pope. Our great distance from Pope and his Homer has at least two reasons. First, our age seems intent on seeing itself in contrast with the past--especially certain bits of it, the eighteenth century in particular. Second, the myth of the Old Homer is far less familiar to us than to Pope, who intentionally steeped himself in it, which steeping served, simultaneously, as a large part of his poetic apprenticeship. We tend to envision accessing Homer as something akin to looking through a weak telescope to gaze at a far distant scene. All the material in between--or, at least most of it--then appears a distraction. We simply want all of that intermediate matter moved out of the way.

Now seems the best place to introduce one of the main channels from which Pope and, true Greek scholars like Joshua Barnes and Anne Dacier (on whom we will have much more to say in the next chapter), gathered Homeric learning. The Παρεκβολὰ ἐῖς τὴν Ὀμήρου Ἰλιάδα καὶ Ὀδύσσειαν [Commentary on Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*] of Eustathius, a 12th century Archbishop of Thessalonica, collects the comments of centuries of Homeric commentators, many of whose works are not extant today. Though, as Mack tells us, "one would look in vain in a standard modern edition of either the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*" (lxxvii) for his name, in the eighteenth century we would be hard pressed to find a work having anything to do with Homer that does not mention him. He is a

particular ally to Pope (and Anne Dacier) because of his “staunch championship of Homer” against many critics and kinds of criticism (Mack cvi).

J. E. Sandys calls him “the greatest among the scholars of the twelfth century” (Mack cv); he is the very model of medieval scholarship. His commentary is brimming with learning ranging over a vast array of topics. Medieval scholars, after all believed that Homer contained a compendium of all knowledge; therefore, a proper commentary on him would necessarily demand a similar copiousness. His work represents the culmination of the Byzantine Christianizing Homeric allegory (Lamberton 234). This tradition begins roughly with pseudo-Dionysius (*c.* fifth century; *Ib.*, 244), but has deep roots, stretching back through the allegorizing Philo of Alexandria (*Ib.* 44) and further back to the Pythagorean school (*Ib.* 31). By the Middle Ages it had synthesized (as well as could be done) the ancient grammarians, the Platonic commentaries, and the Church Fathers. This allegorical synthesis is a vital aspect of the Old Homer tradition, which space will not permit us to explore, except in this very cursory manner. Eustathius is for Pope’s Age, the one of the main gateways⁵ into this ancient tradition--that which we have called “intermediary matter.”

For Pope, the telescopic viewing does form some part of the method of access; equally important access, however, came through the intermediary matter--the tradition to which Homer’s epics gave birth. Not only the scene viewed through the telescope, but all

⁵ Though Pope argues that the best and most important gateways are the epic Poets who follow after Homer.

the paintings, sketches, maps, and memories of that distant land play a part, as do the works which were inspired by those. Pope saw himself within the same, still vital, tradition. Whatever the advantages of this more modest, historical assessment of Homer, the belief in a living Homeric tradition imparts a vivacity to Pope's commentary. What we may observe in Homer, Pope tells us, is not simply curious but relevant to contemporary ethics, politics, and aesthetics. Following his predecessors in the Homeric Tradition, he comments almost as much on his own age as on (what he thought constituted) Homer's. In the remaining pages of this chapter, we will examine some of the figures in this tradition most important to Pope's education in Homer and the poetic art generally. I propose to look briefly at the influence of Ogilby, Chapman, Dryden, and Milton. The effect of which survey will, I hope, indicate the truth of Mack's assertion that "Pope's two translations [and, commentary, we might add, are] echo chambers, wherein... one may hear reverberations from the whole literary culture of the West" (Pope, *Twickenham* lviii).

Ogilby and Chapman

The mature Pope found Ogilby's verse translation (1660, 1669) "too mean for criticism" (Pope 19). Of course, he had some vested interest in saying so--he needed to make room on the shelf for his new version by displacing others. The beautiful edition of Ogilby's text--published on large, seventeen-by-eleven pages with forty-eight full-page engravings (Mack 44)--set the imagination of the young Pope ablaze. The massive folio included a commentary which Mack helps us imagine as "weedy sea rising against [the single column of verse] from three sides" (*Ib.* 46). These learned notes, as Mack

suggests, must have appeared a treasure trove to the curious, intelligent boy. Yet, Ogilby's commentary lacked insight on the principal aspect that Pope sets out to describe in his own: Homer's excellence as a poet. When Pope first felt the loss, we do not know; but, Ogilby's commentary offered no insights on the particular combination of virtues that resulted in what Pope calls Homer's "fire." Still, despite its shortcomings, some sparkle of that fire remained visible in Ogilby, and the boy drew close to it, thriving in whatever warmth and light it yielded.

Despite the meanness of Ogilby's translation, Pope's own version has more points of similarity with it than with the other two complete translations: George Chapman's (1598-1611) and Thomas Hobbes's (1676). Pope's style is nearer to Ogilby's than to the others: both employ the heroic couplet and stay nearer the Greek text than either the embellishing Chapman or the economical Hobbes. These, however, are but surface qualities. At a deeper level, Pope's whole approach to the project more nearly matches Chapman's than any other. Mack highlights Chapman's "continuous moral concern," "his intense interest in particulars," (Pope *Twickenham* cxv; cxvi) as well as his poetic "refinement and power" (*Ib.* cxviii)--for which Pope might have used the terms "judgement" and "invention." All of these qualities are easily identified as the chief concerns of Pope's version and commentary; we will turn to them directly in chapter four. All of them are largely lacking in Ogilby. True, his version stays nearer the Greek, but his prosody is pedestrian. Dryden ridicules it in *MacFlecknoe*, as does Pope in *Dunciad*. The copious annotator of *Dunciad* (through which persona Pope ridicules the worst habits of commentators) tells us "the only good passage... in all Obilby writ" (from his translation of *Aesop*) is alluded to in these lines:

So when Jove's block descended from on high

(As sings thy great forefather Ogilby)

Loud thunder to its bottom shook the bog,

And the hoarse nation croaked, "God save King Log!" (327-330)

So Pope makes Ogilby the progenitor of a line of poet-princes. He makes a kind of Homer out of him, or, rather, an anti-Homer.

Ogilby's commentary focuses on the historical and geographical--learned details which Pope promised and provided his readers, but which are plainly of lesser interest in his observations. Moreover, even in textual design (with which Pope was always concerned), he found Ogilby lacking in aesthetic judgement, and he consciously differed in his own. Ogilby's commentary dwarfs the simple column of verse; it defaces the page, robbing it of elegance. Pope insisted that his own observations appear, not at the bottom of the page, but at the end of the books, so that the stately lines would shine on the page with unadulterated beauty (Mack 45; Pope xvii⁶). In later editions, Pope even succeeded in convincing the printer to dispense with the German convention of capitalization, which, he felt--along with some forward-looking printers of his day-- "disfigures the page" (Pope, ed. Shankman xiv-xvii). He did, however, follow Ogilby in the use of engravings, which seem to have had a strong effect on him in his boyhood (Mack 46),

⁶Shankman's consideration of this issue shows how Pope's aesthetic judgements--reflected in the first and later editions of his Homer--influenced the development of printing. Shankman's edition of the text preserves Pope's express preferences in format, using the 1743 edition as the base-text. The Twickenham edition is based on the first quarto (published in six volumes from 1715-1720), while changes in the last edition Pope oversaw (the 1743) are incorporated or noted. Thus, the Twickenham text follow the German method of capitalization and puts the notes at the bottom of each page of text.

perhaps even encouraging his tendency to think of Homer in visual terms. Pope is constantly concerned with the visual aspect of things, including the accentuation of the visual in poetry (Pope, ed. Mack liii-liv). His commentary frequently imagines the scenes of the *Iliad* as paintings and makes a point of showing his reverence for the visual arts (Pope, ed. Shankman 908).⁷

Milton and Dryden

Both in general and as “followers of Homer,” no two authors play more important roles in Pope’s poetic apprenticeship than John Dryden and John Milton. As poets whose sympathies, critical outlook, and style stand squarely within the Old Homeric tradition, they seem more than any others to have passed the “prophetic mantle” on to Pope. For no two non-classical poets does he show more regard (implicit in his verse, this regard is made explicit in his observations). As an interpreter (in the sense of translator and commentator) of Homer, Pope everywhere shows that he has studied at the feet of these giants. Much the same--though surely to a lesser degree--could be said of Pope’s original readers, as “the most widely read English epics of his generation [were] *Paradise Lost* and Dryden’s version of Virgil’s *Aeneid*” (Pope, ed. Mack cxxix). And, despite Pope’s famed vanity, these two appear to have remained giants to him; indeed, he hung their portraits in his bedroom, he tells us in a 1711 letter, to keep himself humble (Mack 78). Let us briefly consider three aspects of their influence. First, we must observe the

⁷Pope admits to his readers that, concerning the visual arts, “I love [them] so much better than I understand” (Pope 908). Cf. also *Twickenham* xcii on Pope’s tendency to find “visual appeal.”

principal element of both Milton and Dryden that Pope adopts (and, in so doing, departs from Homer). Second, we will observe where he left Milton to follow Dryden. And, finally, we will examine a critical judgement in which Pope rejects Dryden and sides with Milton.

Milton, Dryden, and Pope's "Heroic"

Milton and Dryden learned from Virgil to expect a vastness in epics, which they unhesitatingly read back into Homer. C. S. Lewis explains that Virgil's momentous alteration of the Homeric model

was to take one single national legend and treat it in such a way that we feel the vaster theme to be somehow implicit in it.... making us feel as if national, or almost cosmic, issues are involved. (Lewis 34).

The epic, then, calls for a majestic quality and is expected to contain a sort of compendium of universal truths. Pope achieves these expectations partly through echoes of Milton and Dryden (who, himself, uses echoes of Milton to the same effect)--poets whose styles were synonymous with "heroic" to Pope's readers. Likewise, in his observations, Pope frequently points out the parallels between Homer (as he rendered him) and these poets. He comments on other epic poets as well, of course, but these two always appear the most prominent and revered among modern authors.

Following Dryden against Milton

As Shankman has aptly noted: "the high heroic manner [is] exemplified in English epic by Milton" (Pope xxxiii). Yet, Pope rejects Milton's argument in favor of

blank verse⁸; embracing, rather, Dryden's assertion that "Heroick Rhime is nearest Nature, as being the noblest kind of modern verse" (*Essay of Dramatic Poesie* 110). Shankman observes that this choice renders Pope's pace and style more Drydenian than Miltonic (Pope cxxxvi). Although he learned much from Milton, Mack has rightly noted that "the echoes [of Milton] remain on the fringes of his own practice as a poet" (Pope cxxxiii).

Following Milton against Dryden

Dr. Johnson tells us that "Pope professed to have learned his poetry from Dryden" (Johnson 735), and that Dryden's previous translations of *Aeneid* and Book I and part of VI of *Iliad* were Pope's "chief help" (*Ib.* 745). Pope's affection and admiration for Dryden beam particularly in his Preface:

It is a great loss to the poetical world that Mr. Dryden did not live to translate the *Iliad*.... Had he translated the whole work, I would no more have attempted Homer after him than Virgil, his version of whom... is the most noble and spirited translation I know in any language. (Pope 20)

Yet, despite this affection, readers are likely to conclude from Pope's own notes that he would have found Dryden disappointing as a translator of Homer. Indeed, in the two places in his observations on Book I where Pope mentions Dryden, it is to point out his

⁸Milton, confounding his readers' expectations, lectured his readers: "The measure is *English Heroic Verse without Rime*, as that of *Homer in Greek*, and of *Virgil in Latin*; Rime being no necessary Adjunct or true Ornament of Poem" (Milton 210).

version's difference from Dryden's--with the cautious politeness of a student who feels compelled to correct his master (*vide* Pope 69, 71).

The episode of Thetis's appeal, followed by the quarrel between Jove and Juno (lines 669-767 in Dryden; 640-737 in Pope) shows up the significant difference. Dryden follows a long-standing tradition to make a burlesque of the scene. He has made the goddesses seem more like shrews. To paint the scene, Dryden presents the Heavenly procession:

Jove at their head ascending from the sea,

A shoal of puny pow'rs attend his way.

Already the comic tone manifests itself--Dryden has made the Olympians into a school of little fish swimming in the shallows. Thetis, hearing no reply to her pleas,

Resolved to win, renewed her suit,

Nor loosed her hold, but forced him to reply. (690-1)

No dignity--none of the awful reserve characteristic of Milton's God and angels. Then, Dryden's Juno:

...took her place,

But Sullen discontent sat low'ring on her face (719-20)

He paints her with jealous eyes and makes the petition of Thetis a mere "Whisp'ring" (722) that Juno overhears. The whole scene ends with the impetuous Queen of Heaven "mute with fear" (769). The tradition which Dryden embraces here reads Homer as "crude and primitive compared to Virgil" (Pope *Twickenham* cxxv). Pope rejects the farcical reading with all the seriousness and piety of Milton and Anne Dacier (whose considerable influence on Pope's commentary will be considered in chapters II and III).

Milton and Dacier represent the older tradition of the Virgilization of Homer. They consciously reject the notion that Homer is “rustic.”⁹--the judgement that Antoine Houdar de la Motte exemplifies (his French translation is considered in chapter two). Pope distinguishes Homer’s style from rusticity and chides the versions which would have him so (16). He, on the contrary, calls Homer’s style “noble simplicity” (17), nearer to the Hebrew Scripture than anything else--another sign of the influence of Dacier.

This departure from Dryden warrants a long note from Pope (71), in which he leans on Dacier to explain the passage in higher, spiritual terms--sans the rough frivolity. The passage means, he explains, to warn against prying too deeply into the ways of Providence. In this reading, the passage teaches a Boethian moral--one which would surely have warmed Milton’s heart. In this respect, Pope is much more Miltonic than Drydenian.¹⁰ It is perhaps part of the reason that, as Shankman observes, Pope could not achieve Homer’s perfect combination of “sublimity and and perspicuity” (Pope xxiv). Pope criticized Milton for excelling in the former but falling far short of the latter; yet, as he admitted, he himself seems unable to to avoid the same imbalance. Pope seems to have learned how to combine moral reflection with playfulness, however, from Dryden (for we will look far and wide to find the combination in Milton). This playful sententiousness manifests, ironically enough, in the very note that criticizes Dryden’s

⁹Dryden’s *Essay of Dramatic Poesie* 90 also manifests this understanding of Homer--comparing Homer to Shakespeare and Virgil to Jonson. And, Pope is not unaware of a roughness in Homer contrasting to Virgil’s refinement: “*Homer* was the greater genius, *Virgil* the better artist” (11).

¹⁰Moral seriousness is, of course, as much a quality of Dryden as of Milton (and, Dryden, no doubt, learned much of the art from the poet he thought combined the virtues of Homer and Virgil). But, I think it fair to say, not in the same sense--and especially not in his handling of this passage.

rendering for falling short of a proper seriousness. Pope claims to side with Dacier over Dryden because it would be “more respectful to the Ladies” (71).

Classifying Pope’s *Iliad*

We have seen that Pope’s love of the *Iliad* developed early and launched him on his poetic career. We have looked at his predecessors in translation and heroic verse, situating his work in its context. The sample passage just considered not only shows us where Pope stands in relation to these predecessors, but also shows up how much the translation and commentary mutually support each other. Before we proceed, then, I think we ought to consider mutually dependent relationship more directly, or else risk confusion over what exactly we’re setting out to study.

Although finding an edition of Pope’s *Iliad* proves difficult enough today, finding one that includes his commentary proves harder still.¹¹ Where notes are included at all, they are usually the Rev. Theodore Alois Buckley’s, which provides quite a different sort of commentary than the one Pope intended. This reality is not only frustrating, but a great pity. Pope’s efforts as translator and commentator form a unified work. They both convey essential aspects of Homer’s achievement and Pope’s. To have the translation without the observations means missing a large portion of the masterpiece. But defining the achievement proves perhaps even trickier than finding a good edition of it. Yet, as C. S. Lewis so aptly put it, “The first qualification for judging any piece of workmanship from

¹¹The 1996 Penguin Classics edition, edited by Steven Shankman includes the translator’s observations for the very first time in a paperback edition; sadly, however, the edition is no longer in print.

a corkscrew to a cathedral is to know *what* it is” (1). Though an acknowledged masterpiece, pinning down “what it was intended to do and how it is meant to be used” has challenged the best of critics and scholars. And, if Pope’s *Iliad* means both his version and commentary, then a true study of the commentary cannot avoid trying to define the whole, unified achievement, of which it is a vital, working part.

Many readers likely know that famous remark of Richard Bentley, the father of historical philology and, therefore, one of the progenitors of modern Homeric scholarship¹²: “It is a pretty poem, Mr. Pope, you must not call it Homer” (Mack 348). Must we not? Bentley himself actually acknowledged “respect [for] both its vigor and its serious purpose as translation” (Knight 1). Yet, the classicist’s reaction (reported in various versions and perhaps apocryphal) has seemingly become “a final... all-inclusive judgement of Pope’s work” (*Ib.*). Is it only a “pretty poem” on the same subject as Homer’s--something more like, say, Robert Graves’s *The Siege and Fall of Troy*? Or, is it an imitation after the fashion of la Motte’s? Morton, on the contrary classifies it with Dacier’s work as a close transmission of (not merely imitative of) its original (we will look at these French authors directly in the next chapter). Johnson, too, considered it “the

¹²Bentley had discerned, for example,

poor Homer, in those circumstances and those early times, had never such aspiring thoughts. He wrote a sequel of songs and rhapsodies, to be sung by himself for small earnings and good cheer, at festivals and other days of merriment. ...These loose songs were not collected together in the form of an epic till Pisistratus’s time. (Mack lxxvi)

But, however insightful these remarks may or may not be (and I cannot but wonder how he guesses at Homer’s aspirations) they are, in fact, only Bentley’s learned speculations. He was as “untouched” as Pope by “the findings of nineteenth- and twentieth-century archaeology and anthropology” (Mack 348).

greatest version [translation] of poetry which the world has ever seen” (qtd. from Pope, Shankman ed. xi). Yet, Knight notes that Pope’s “Homer has long been recognized, often by those most critical of it, as an original poem in many respects” (vii). George Steiner, in *The Times Literary Supplement*, concluded, “Informed literacy is far from allowing the fact--yet surely it is obvious--that Pope’s *Iliad* is a masterpiece in its own right and an epic which, as far as English goes, comes second only to Milton” (Pope xi). And, Pope told his confidant Joseph Spence, “If I had not undertaken [the translation of Homer] I should certainly have writ an epic” (Knight vii); which remark suggests not only the time spent on the Homeric project, but “the expenditure of an important kind of poetic activity,” *i.e.*, the level of exertion, concentration, and devotion of his mature talents that writing an original epic would call forth. In some sense it is an an English epic, and one of the most successful ones ever published. The difficulties, then, of identifying Pope’s achievement are clear. At the least, whatever we may call it, we must acknowledge both its difference and dependence from the Greek epic--its originality and its accurate transmission of the Homeric.

The problem grows thornier when we recall that a long history of reading stands between Homer and Pope. We find that history conspicuous on every page of the translation and observations. For, Pope perceives the Homeric principally through the light the Virgilian and Miltonic shed on it (to mention only the most luminous sources). In other words, he has no “view from nowhere.” But, then, neither do we. Is Lattimore or Fagles more Homeric because “plain and direct” (Shankman xxix), or simply more representative of twentieth-century taste? Mason complained, “I am certainly nauseated by those translations into modern English that part with everything that could have

commended Homer to the great men of the past” (7). Since the “great men” of the past adored and--in the case of many of the poets, at least--learned from Homer, can we completely leave behind the aspects of the poem our ancestors claimed to have loved--the particular style, themes, images, and allegories that inspired their own labors--without great loss? Are these elements not present because our age has difficulty sympathizing with them? I am reminded of a quote from T. S. Eliot with which Jasper Griffin prefaces his *Mirror of Myth*: “there never was a time so completely parochial, so shut off from the past” (Griffin 10); readers pleased with their isolation will never appreciate Pope.

Knight, far from seeing the “baggage” of the Old Homer tradition as blinding Pope to the “truly” Homeric (in our sense), considers it a vital aspect of both the passive/transmission aspect and the active/original aspect of Pope’s *Iliad*. Knight draws from Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent” to elucidate the strength of writing “with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence” (Knight 8), which Pope certainly does. Because he has imbibed the Homeric tradition, not only as a scholar, but as *poet*, among the translations of *Iliad* preceding his, “Only Pope’s can be called great poetry” and “[i]n that sense, it is the only faithful translation of the four” (Mack xcv).¹³ A bad poem, in other words, cannot give a true sense of a great one. Pope’s commentary, among other things, helps the reader, who cannot be expected to be a

¹³Mack, in this section of his introduction to Pope’s translation, is comparing Pope’s method as Homeric translator to three other approaches, all of them widely known in Pope’s day: Chapman’s, Dacier’s, and the Latin gloss of Barnes.

masterful poet (or even a critic) herself, to see all the Homeric “fire” the translation channels by various means.

C. S. Lewis gave us the useful “critical commonplace” (as Mack calls it [lxxvi]) of primary and secondary epic. The distinctions concern, primarily, the distance from the “serious court poetry” of the heroic age--the ancient ritual in which “[t]he poet has a chair placed for him and an instrument put into his hands” (Lewis 14). Primary epic includes descriptions of this ancient “oral court poetry” and attempts to capture its ethos and effects. With primary epic the ancient circumstances are only partly lost--remnants of the ancient ritual remain, such as the public recitation of the poem. Secondary epic is much further removed from the heroic age and it

aims at an even higher solemnity than the Primary; but it has lost all those external aids to solemnity which the Primary enjoyed. There is no robed and garlanded *aoidos* [*i.e.*, a bard], no altar, not even a feast in a hall--only a private person reading a book in an armchair. (*Ib.* 40)¹⁴

Hence, all the heightened style, which substitutes for a lost, grander context. Part of the technique involves echoing something contained in primary epic. The imitation establishes a sense of vital connection with humanity’s past, a sense of communal significance sans the public recitation and ceremony. Because of the greater distance from the heroic age, secondary epic to a certain extent idealizes the heroic age far more

¹⁴ This “armchair” setting is much more descriptive of Milton’s audience than Virgil’s. And both of these are more likely to have been read (well and dramatically) aloud to a group listeners than anything in our own time. The difference in circumstance between Virgil and Milton is not as great as their distance from Homer, but enough that I often find myself reluctant to place them side by side in the same category of secondary epic.

than primary epic. At the same time, due to awareness of the long-lost ideal, secondary epic takes on a new concern for humanity's future. At that farther point, epic raises the inevitable question, is human greatness forever lost. None of these techniques, of course, would work if the readers of secondary epic were not familiar with the primary--there is a great dependency. But, though essentially dependant on the older epics, a successful secondary epic also *changes* how a people interpret their primary epics.

Many critics agree that Virgil, not Homer, established what we regard as the proper "epic subject"--*i.e.*, a world-changing event. In Homer, as Lewis explains, the "greatness lies in the human and personal tragedy built up against this background of meaningless flux. It is all the more tragic because there hangs over the heroic world a certain futility" (34). The optimistic, teleological assumption that so clearly spells heroic to us, does not appear to come from Homer. Virgil's achievement, as Lewis describes,

was to take one single national legend and treat it in such a way that we feel the vaster theme to be somehow implicit in it. ... [making] us feel as if national, or almost cosmic, issues are involved. (34)

Virgil's succeeded so well that, until the birth of modern Homeric scholarship in the middle of the eighteenth century, readers assumed that Homer must have been up to the same thing in his epics, a belief Le Bossu gave its definitive form, which we will consider in the next chapter.¹⁵ Virgil, however, is so steeped in Homer that what he changes seems

¹⁵The popular notion of the proper epic lingers long after historical-critical scholarship demonstrated its absence from primary epic--perhaps down to the present. Le Bossu (considered in the next chapter; his definition of the epic is assumed by most eighteenth century critics) may be long forgotten, but remnants of his definition remain.

almost a natural, inevitable outgrowth of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Secondary epic, then, creates a kind of epic “ideal,” or an “epicness” that exists quite apart from the primary epics (i.e., the author of primary epic has no notion of following its conventions) and, yet, is born out of and cannot exist apart from them.

For Pope, then, following Homer means fidelity to both to the “immediate poetic achievement” of Homer and “his epicness” (Knight 9). Asserting the relevance of either also demands acute awareness of his own time and its needs. He must create a great English poem--something analogous to what Homer does in his own language and for his own culture. But he must also embody the conventions that have their well-spring in Homer--conventions modified over centuries by secondary epics, which both respond to and alter cultural circumstances and expectations. The task itself would seem to require the wisdom of Nestor, the eloquence of Ulysses, the perseverance of Ajax, and--trickiest of all--the fire of Achilles. The resultant work is, in some ways as original as secondary epic; yet, in others, far more dependant on a single original poem. Yet, Pope is further removed from the *Iliad* than Virgil is. If he wants to assert the *Iliad*'s relevance for all ages--including his own--he must approach the Greek on roads built by Romans, Italians, the French, and especially (because of his particular context) the English.

Perhaps, then, we may call Pope's *Iliad* tertiary epic. Tertiary epic would be a “transposed” epic. It involves making a great poem from a long past language and culture into a great poem of a different language and culture. Tertiary epic is not a bare rendering of the words into a new language with the syntax suitably adjusted (perhaps even adjusted into meter)--though it must accurately transmit as much of the content of the

original as it possibly can. With such a complex task, it appears obvious why tertiary epic requires or, at least, is vastly enhanced by comments from the poet. These comments would, necessarily, give us more than the insights of a gifted critic, more still than is to be had when “a good poet... talk[s] about the kinds of poetry he has himself written well and read with delight” (to borrow Lewis’s description from another context [12]), it opens to us the mind and methods of an poetic master who has immersed himself in the work of another master and the tradition which he originated, in order to, as far as possible, re-create the master’s work and effect it ought to have had on its first hearers. Though it seems a rare achievement, I think we can identify at least two clear English predecessors for Pope’s tertiary epic: Chapman’s Homer and Dryden’s Virgil.¹⁶ In both of these cases, though, there is a greater tendency to add to and subtract from the content of the original, and far less explicit comment from the poet-translator than we have in Pope. Pope’s commentary makes a contribution to the English heroic tradition not to be found in Spenser, Chapman, Milton, or Dryden.

¹⁶ What translations we might classify as successors in tertiary epic is an interesting question, though one which would take us far afield. A new verse translation by Stephen Mitchell has been published (by Free Press) in October of this year. Mitchell’s is the first translation using M. L. West’s speculative “reconstruction” of an “original” *Iliad* for its base text. Daniel Mendelsohn of *The New Yorker* calls it “the most swift-footed in recent memory” and “very idiosyncratic” (81; 76) I am most curious to see what sense he has “followed” Homer--and (if in any sense) Pope.

CHAPTER 3

“WITS REKNOWN’D”: POPE AMONG THE FRENCH CRITICS

We cannot proceed far in a study of Pope as a commentator (or a poet, for that matter) without observing the influence of French poetic theory and practice. J. W. H. Atkins tells us that Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux’s 1674 *Art Poétique* established “the new orthodoxy” (7). He was its chief pontiff. By 1711, Boileau had become entirely, as Clark puts it, “naturalized in England” (191). In that same year, Pope published his *Essay on Criticism*, which bore the distinct influence of the French master. During the so-called Age of Pope, “no modern foreign author was so often mentioned by men of letters or so well known to the average reader” as Boileau (*Ib.* ix). As for Pope’s own estimation of him, Spence records that Pope called him “the first poet of the French in the same manner as Virgil of the Latin” (Clark 31). During the height of Pope’s fame among his fellow-countrymen, they took to calling him “the English Boileau” (*Ib.*)

Boileau invents no critical novelties--and surely would have been ashamed to discover any in himself--but rather combines, organizes, and renders more generally “practical” (Atkins 11) a critical tradition which he received from other hands, particularly those of Italian humanists. The principle of reception is vital to his school of criticism; its “first and all-embracing rule was imitation of the ancients... and Aristotle in particular” (*Ib.*). But, lest we oversimplify, we must quickly add that “he accepted [the ancients] as guides, not because of their antiquity, but because they conformed with... nature or reason” (*Ib.* 8). Although space will not permit anything like a full treatment of Boileau, we will now consider the general shape of his doctrine before turning to the

disciple whose sway over eighteenth century epic theory was virtually universal--i.e., René le Bossu.

First, Boileau teaches that poetry's chief aim consists in the edification of society. Its moral purpose has primacy, but it works through delighting, as Horace taught. The qualities necessary for the creation of poetry include both learning the art and a "genius," which, though necessary, proves ever difficult to define (*Ib.* 11). Its elusiveness must not mask its importance; as Pope wrote, "the French have... laid down many mechanical rules for the composition of [epic poetry], but at the same time they cut off almost all undertakers from the possibility of ever performing them; for the first qualification they unanimously require in a poet, is a genius" (qtd. from Douglas 694). Among the rules a poet must study, verisimilitude and decorum rank highest (Atkins 12). The former calls for the elusive balance of "pleas[ing] the fancy without shocking the reason" (*Ib.*). The latter excludes all that is "unfit" from the action, characters, and poetic style. Determining what exactly constitutes "fitness," as we shall soon see, is a very tricky business over which the best wits often disagree. Boileau gives to epic poetry the undisputed "first place" (*Ib.*) among the kinds of verse (second and third place going to tragedy and comedy, respectively). The disciples of Boileau all studied epic; but, among them, le Bossu undoubtedly takes the laurels.

Père René le Bossu ranks with those "less gifted writers" whose method, concerns, and fame are closely "associated with" Boileau's. Despite his supposed

inferiority,¹⁷ le Bossu possesses the distinction of being “the most quoted in England of all the French critics” (Clark 243). His reputation rests on his 1675 *Traité du Poème épique*, which surpassed all previous studies of the subject. It already held sway in England before “W. J.” presented it to his countrymen in their own language in 1695 (followed by a second edition of this same version in 1719, from which I will quote). Mason calls the treatise “the century’s god-send” (140). And, though all but forgotten today (and often belittled where he is known), le Bossu received unqualified praise from no less a genius than Dryden, who calls him “the best of modern critics” (qtd. from Clark 251). Dryden advised the would-be epic poet to study “Homer and Virgil as his patterns, Aristotle and Horace as his guides, and Vida¹⁸ and Bossu as... commentators” (*Ib.*). In this, as in virtually all else, Pope was Dryden’s best disciple. Pope’s *Preface* to the *Iliad* is saturated with le Bossu. The French critic’s *Treatise of the Epick Poem* is foundation to Pope’s commentary, as it is to every French and English critic or poet writing about epic until the close of the eighteenth century. Mason hardly exaggerates when he says le Bossu taught his age “how to set about criticizing an epic” (Mason 140).

¹⁷By the end of the eighteenth century, English literary criticism and taste had experienced a “complete... turning away from ‘the Learned Bossu’” (Douglas 690). Gayley and Kurtz are fairly representative of the modern consensus in pontificating: “With Le Bossu we reach the *reductio ad absurdum* of formalism, didacticism, and recipe-making” (qtd. from Douglas 691). Universal scorn for le Bossu (for which reading him is no pre-requisite [Douglas 693]) is so strong to that Clark observes some critics go so far as “to accuse a whole generation of aesthetic insincerity” rather than admit that they genuinely admired him (249).

¹⁸Marco Girolamo Vida (1485-1566), Bishop of Alba, is one of the Italian humanists on whose shoulders the French neo-classical critics stood. His *De arte poetica* (1517) continues in the tradition of Horace’s *Ars Poetica* (18 BC), of which Boileau’s 1674 *Arte poetica* and Pope’s 1711 *Essay on Criticism* are later examples.

Le Bossu expertly packs the whole essence of his *Treatise* into his definition of epic:

The EPOPEA is a Discourse invented by Art, to form Manners by such Instructions as are disguis'd under the Allegories of some one important Action, which is related in Verse, after a probable, diverting, and surprising Manner. (11)

We can hear the similarity of approach in this definition in Pope's explanation of the design of the *Iliad* (in his observations on Book I):

The plan of this poem is form'd upon anger and its ill effects, the plan of Virgil's upon pious resignation and its rewards: and thus every passion or virtue may be the foundation of the scheme of an Epic poem. (48)

The plan proceeds from the moral. The "fable" is essential but secondary; it is specifically designed to convey the desired lesson. Pope embraces this critical approach to the epic.

His preface recommends le Bossu to "any one who translates Homer" (20). The text itself ought to have priority of place in the translator's attention--far more than "commentaries, how learned so ever." After the Greek text, the next place goes to comparison "with Virgil above all the ancients, and with Milton above all the Moderns." Then the potential translator ought to study "Bossu's admirable treatise of the Epic poem the justest notion of [Homer's] design and conduct" (*Ib.*). This is high praise indeed, and

I think we may safely suppose Pope's prescription does not differ too widely from his own practice.¹⁹

While much more could be said about Pope's direct interaction with le Bossu, we turn now to another angle from which to consider his relations with the French Homeric translators and commentators to whom he often looks for direction. Le Bossu's *Treatise* is foundational to "the two rival French texts of the *Iliad*" (Morton 2) that precede Pope's English version: Anne Dacier's three-volume *L'Iliade d'Homère, traduite en François avec des remarques* (1711) and Houdar de la Motte's 1714 imitation of the *Iliad*, in twelve books. Pope, la Motte, and Dacier all worked with le Bossu's treatise at hand. We may well imagine that all three authors had quite worn editions of the *Treatise*--the tell-tale sign of a text not only admired but very frequently *used*. Thus, set along side each other, the three versions not only provide a very interesting contrast in themselves, they also indicate the wide range of possibilities for interpreting Homer within the framework established by le Bossu. Let us begin with the most radical of the three--la Motte--whom Pope numbers among the "injurious critics of Homer" (15).

¹⁹Although the assumption that Pope holds le Bossu to ridicule in his *Peri Bathous* (1727; ch. xv, which first appeared as No. 78 of *The Guardian*) and his preface to the *Dunciad* has been widely repeated, the claim has been decisively disproved. E. Audra's 1931 volume *L'Influence Française dans l'Œuvre de Pope* and Loyd Douglas's 1947 article "A Severe Animadversion on Bossu" have demonstrated that the object of Pope's ridicule is not le Bossu but shallow English students of the acclaimed critic, "like Blackmore who, having only moderate poetic abilities, had the temerity to attempt the highest flights" (Douglas 694). On the contrary, "Far from satirizing Le Bossu, Pope is... ridiculing somebody for not following Le Bossu in the one theory for which he was most generally condemned!" (700)--i.e., "the theory that the epic poet chooses a moral first, then arranges suitable fable, characters, and other matters to illustrate it" (698). Pope's satirical *recipe* calls for the poet to "extract [the moral] out of the fable afterwards at your leisure" (700).

La Motte

In la Motte, we find a disciple of le Bossu who, ironically enough, turns the doctrines of the devotee into weapons to raise against the old Prince of the Poets, illustrating Pope's remark:

Methinks the French Critics play double with us, when they sometimes represent the rules of Poetry to be form'd upon the practice of Homer, and at other times arraign their master as if he transgress'd them. (49)

The poet Houdar de la Motte, a partisan of "the Moderns" who "railed... bitterly against Homer" (Clark 299) accepted Le Bossu's definition of epic. He did not, however, think Homer had written a proper one. La Motte found "that Homer lacks... unity of purpose, and especially... social utility" (Morton 28). In his *Discours sur la poesie*, he wrote: "Pour moi j'avoue que je ne regarde pas les Poèmes d'Homère comme des Ouvrages de morales" [For myself, I acknowledge that I do not regard the poems of Homer as works of morality]²⁰ (qtd. from Morton 19). His imitation, then, attempts to re-cast the *Iliad* as an epic done "by the book"--i.e., Boileau's *Art* and le Bossu's *Treatise*--advancing the proper moral and social order. Of Greek, it seems he knew less than Pope (Morton 1; 15), and, like Pope, he relied on literal translations like Dacier's to make his way through the dark forest. What he does find in Homer--which *les Modernes se font encore*

²⁰ Many thanks to J. B. Griffin for providing me with translations of these French passages.

honneur d'imiter--is a lively, pleasing imagination. A modern imitator, offering his work to a less savage, more perfected world, ought, then, to prune and tame the wild garden, supplying the judgement Homer wanted.

With that assessment of Homer's daedal imagination, Pope would agree. He says as much in his *Preface* in countless ways: "Homer is universally allow'd to have the greatest *Invention* of any writer whatever" (3); "Our author's work is a wild paradise" (3); "What he writes, is of the most animated nature imaginable.... The reader is hurried out of himself by the Poet's imagination" (4); "this poetical fire, this *Vivida vis animi* [lively strength of spirit] [is found] in a very few" (4); *et al.* But, the charge that Homer lacks judgement, Pope will not countenance:

No author or man excell'd all the world in more than one faculty, and as *Homer* has done this in *invention*, *Virgil* has in *judgement*. Not that we are to think *Homer* wanted judgement, because *Virgil* had it in a more eminent degree.... Each of these great authors had more of both than perhaps any man besides, and are only said to have less in comparison with one another. (11)

La Motte finds the Greek poet barbaric not only in the poetical arts, but also in manners. Homer offends decency when he uses homely similes. As Morton explains, "the details which make Homer's images so immediate, even tactile, are dismissed by La Motte as trite and low" (26). But, worse still, he offends in the manner in which he paints his heroes and kings. Accordingly, La Motte re-dresses Agamemnon in the robes of a proper Bourbon monarch (Morton 35). He works in more justification for Achilles's behavior--not enough to remove blame altogether, but to remove the risk that he might

seem utterly distasteful to La Motte's contemporaries (Morton 32). The effect is to move the central conflict of the epic out of the realm of personal passions into that of political disagreement (*Ib.* 30).

Le Bossu had already interpreted the moral of the *Iliad* along political lines--a demonstration of the folly of political disunion (Clark 246). La Motte simply alters the epic to make this already widely accepted moral the clearer. Pope does not completely agree with this explanation of the moral, nor does he feel compelled to correct Homer's manners so often as la Motte. Pope interprets the moral more broadly as "anger and its ill effects" (48).²¹ The political reading, by this reckoning, is only part of a more generally applicable lesson.

We frequently need reminders that, as C. S. Lewis put it,

Every age has its own outlook. It is specially good at seeing certain truths and specially liable to make certain mistakes. We all, therefore, need the books that will correct the characteristic mistakes of our own period... Not, of course, that there is any magic about the past. People were no cleverer then than they are now; they made as many mistakes as we. But not the same mistakes. They will not flatter us in the errors we are already committing; and their own errors, being now open and palpable, will not endanger us. Two heads are better than one, not because either is

²¹At least, in his commentary; in his "Poetical Index," however, Pope employs the narrower moral of Le Bossu: "The great *Moral* of the *Iliad*, that *Concord, among Governours, is the preservation of States, and Discord the ruin of them: pursued thro' the whole Fable*" (1162).

infallible, but because they are unlikely to go wrong in the same direction.

(Lewis, *Athanasius* 6-7)

This insight (from another context) captures Pope's interest in and approach to the setting of Homer's epics and the time in which he wrote them. We will turn directly to this approach in the last chapter of this study; we need only recognize it now as it bears upon Pope's interaction with Dacier and la Motte. He will not follow Dacier in her unqualified praise of the Heroic Age, nor will he follow la Motte in finding modern civilization everywhere superior. Pope epitomizes the thorny issue thus:

It must be a strange partiality to antiquity, to think with *Madame Dacier*, 'that those times and manners are so much the more excellent, as they are more contrary to ours.' Who can be so prejudiced in their favor as to magnify the felicity of those ages, when a spirit of revenge and cruelty, joined with the practice of *Rapine* and *Robbery*, reign'd thro' the world; when no mercy was shown but for the sake of lucre, when the greatest Princes were put to the sword, and wives and daughters made slaves and concubines? (13)

Here he shows his difference from his usual ally, Dacier. On the other hand, he is far from placing himself in La Motte's camp, as his next remarks show:

On the other side, I would not be so delicate as those modern critics, who are shock'd at the *servile offices* and *mean employments* in which we sometimes see the Heroes of *Homer* engag'd. There is a pleasure in taking a view of that simplicity in opposition to the luxury of the succeeding

ages, in beholding *Monarchs* without their guards, *Princes* tending their flocks, and *Princesses* drawing water from the springs. (*Ib.*)

Pope also carefully navigates a critical Scylla and Charybdis in his observations on XVI.1032. Though does not mention La Motte by name, Pope undoubtedly has him and his ilk in mind:

I really think almost all of those parts in *Homer* which have been objected against with the most clamour and fury, are honestly defensible and none of them (to confess my private sentiment) seem to me to be faults of any consideration, except this conduct in the death of *Patroclus*²².... I hope, after so free a confession, no reasonable modern will think me touch'd with the *μηρομανία* of *Madam Dacier* and others. I am sensible of the extremes which mankind run into, in extolling and depreciating authors.

(803)

The observations on Book XVI provide another fine example of Pope's interaction with la Motte. Near the beginning of Book XVI, Achilles voices this hyperbolic wish to his beloved Patroclus:

Oh! would to all th'immortal pow'rs above...
That not one *Trojan* might be left alive
And not a *Greek* of all the race survive;
Might only we the vast destruction shun,

²²Though, as we shall soon see, Pope does give consideration to other passages which he seems to find ultimately indefensible faults. Either rhetorical fire or poor memory must be at work here; or, perhaps he finds the other bits so much less noticeable in contrast with this one that he needs not mention them.

And only we destroy th' accursed town.²³

La Motte cannot stomach it. He finds it a breach of all probability and teases it apart to show the logical nonsense of the prayer. He shows himself, I think, carried away in his tendency to criticize Homer. Decorum in the Horacian sense--not "proper" but exactly apt for the person and situation--required such behavior. The appropriateness of foolish wish in its specific context appears obvious. Pope points out la Motte's silliness in failing to see it:

Homer intends to paint a man in passion; the wishes and schemes of such an one are seldom conformable to reason; and the manners are preserved the better, the less they are represented to be so. (781)

Pope, not content to let the justification of Homer's judgement rest on his authority alone, follows with an example from Shakespeare, "that admirable master of nature" (*Ib.*), showing a similarly hyperbolic wish issuing from a flood of passion in *2 King Henry IV* I.1.²⁴ There, Northumberland prays for the violent end of all life, an imprecatory prayer

²³I will supplement all long citations from Pope's translation with the same passage in Lattimore's rendering, for readers to compare. Here is his version of Achilles' violent wish:

Father Zeus, Athene and Apollo, if only
not one of all the Trojans could escape destruction, not one
of the Argives, but you and I could emerge from the slaughter
so that we two alone could break Troy's hallowed coronal. (97-100)

²⁴Now let not Nature's hand
Keep the wild flood-confin'd! let order die!
And let this world no longer be a stage
To feed contention in a lingering act;
But let one spirit of the first-born Cain
Reign in all bosoms, that, each heart being set
On bloody courses, the rude scene may end,

he surely did not literally mean. We may well wonder whether la Motte would have thought much more of Shakespeare's judgement than Homer's, but Pope wrote primarily for Englishmen and not Frenchmen. La Motte does not give so much attention or latitude to human nature as either Homer, Shakespeare, or Pope. Many causes likely motivate that refusal, but one of them no doubt involves his reading of the moral of the poem. If the poem is meant to teach politics rather than regulation of the passions then the many examples of uncontrolled foolish passion in Achilles prove rather in the way. To Pope they are hardly beside the point; on the contrary, they are the point.

Dacier

Anne Dacier's version and annotations, so Morton explains, advance the conviction that "The great power of Homer's works depends on the total moral thrust of his allegories, the simple dignity of his heroes, and the grandeur and nobility of his language" (109). Pope would have applauded to hear it put so. They share a general outlook on the *Iliad* and a love for Homer. Dacier also possessed the learning that Pope knew he lacked; he, therefore, relies heavily on her scholarship in his commentary.

Dacier, la Motte, and Pope all find it necessary to "tidy-up" Homer from time to time--in the interest either of taste or of morals. They differ significantly, however, in the identification and explanation of these (seemingly) offensive bits. La Motte, without question, finds far more of Homer shocking and indefensible than either Dacier or Pope; indeed, as we have seen, he manages to shave the epic down by half. We have already

And darkness be the burier of the dead!

noted, too, Pope's greater affinity with Dacier in both approbation and alteration of Homer. It is true that he stands much nearer la Motte in seeking to render *Iliad* pleasing and proper verse in his own language. Yet, in la Motte, that very often means not following Homer, whereas Pope insists it almost always means quite the opposite. For, as we have already seen, "*Nature and Homer were*" Pope found "the *same*" (*Essay on Criticism* 136). Both Pope and Dacier, therefore, often rise to Homer's defense against the likes of la Motte. Yet, even they sometimes find Homer indefensible--though they do not always see eye to eye on what to defend or condemn.

Pope's observation on *Iliad* I. 41-44 contains the first instance of direct disagreement with Dacier in his commentary. In the passage, Agamemnon, drunk with victory, replies ruthlessly to the priest Chryses who has come to ransom his captive daughter. He will not permit her father to ransom her; on the contrary, he will make of her a trophy slave in his household. And, as Pope has rendered it:

'Til time shall rifle ev'ry youthful grace
And age dismiss her from my cold embrace;
In daily labours of the loom employ'd,
Or doom'd to deck the bed she once enjoy'd.²⁵

Pope's note explains that Eustathius and Dacier have intentionally misread Homer's $\nu\tau\acute{\iota}\omega\sigma\alpha\nu$ --to mean making, rather than sleeping in a bed-- "for fear of presenting a

²⁵In Lattimore's rendering:

sooner will old age come upon her
in my own house, in Argos, far from her own land, going
up and down by the loom and being in my bed as my companion. (30-2)

loose idea to the reader” (52). This reading--a wrong one in Pope’s estimation and that of all modern translators²⁶--reflects Dacier’s scruples, not Homer’s. Such a reading seems part and parcel of her praise of the heroic age as

ces heureux temps où l’on connoissoit ni le luxe ni la molesse, & où l’on ne faisoit consister la gloire que dans le travail & dans la vertu; & la honte dans la paresse & dans le vice. (qtd. from Morton 3)

[Those happy times when neither luxury nor flabbiness was known; when glory was held to consist only in work and in virtue, shame in sloth and in vice.]

Pope would not generally disagree with that assessment; however, that the *Iliad* contains nothing which moderns would find “low” appears to him very obviously false.

Criticizing²⁷ his two most illustrious critical predecessors, Eustathius and Dacier--the two from whom he quotes more than any others--he remarks: “This observation may very well become a Bishop and a Lady” (Shankman Ed. 52). Agamemnon is neither. Nor is Pope; he faces the “royal passion” of the son of Atreus squarely, recognizing that the warrior “was not studying here for civility of expression” (52). The observation not only more closely corresponds to Agamemnon’s character, but also to the situation at hand and the “whole tenour of his speech” (52). The king will not come to prefer his slave to his own wife, for instance, simply because she shows a greater skill in *making* his bed.

²⁶E.g. Lattimore puts it very plainly: “being in my bed as my companion” (31). Fagles has it: “forced to share my bed” (36).

²⁷We cannot but notice that there is no apparent reluctance on Pope’s part to disagree with Dacier we find each time he criticizes Dryden in his notes. Though Dacier is as vital to Pope’s work as translator and commentator as Dryden is, Pope never shows the same “filial piety” towards her.

Dacier has latched onto the reading which gives the passage its least offensive turn--and has the highest authority to justify it (Eustathius). Pope has followed the most obvious reading and points out its decorum to justify his reading. The difference exemplifies Pope's insistence that his observations be should be first and foremost "Critical and Poetical" (46).

We find an interesting contrast to this interaction in Pope's observations on XXIV. 168. Rather than quietly re-working or carefully glossing over Thetis's advice to her sulking son to console himself by "mak[ing] love with a woman" (so Fagles renders it, 24. 158), or simply rejecting the passage out of hand as Eustathius does (Pope, Shankman Ed. 1133), Dacier defends the advice as "honest" and "decent" for its time (1134). Pope cannot countenance it. "I am of the opinion," he tells us, "that this passage outrages decency" (*Ib.*). Here he censures Homer's vulgarity and unleashes his sharp wit on Dacier:

The married ladies are oblig'd to her for this observation, and I hope all tender mothers, when their sons are afflicted, will advise them to comfort themselves in this manner. (*Ib.*)

Though reverencing Homer more than La Motte, Pope will both acknowledge and criticize what he considers immoral in Homer more freely than Dacier.

Commenting on I. 458, Pope includes Dacier's explanation of why Agamemnon sheds no tear when parted from his captive, while Achilles cries. The contrast in Pope's and Dacier's justifications of Achilles's tears highlights another general difference between them as commentators. We have clearly seen their shared concern for ethics and social order; Pope, however, shows a deeper appreciation for the psychological.

His commentary on I. 458 includes an extended citation from Dacier's: "[Achilles] is parted [from his captive] unwillingly and... his general takes her by force [which] reflects a dishonour upon him" (Pope, Shankman Ed. 65). A reasonable explanation, to be sure, but it hardly shows any appreciation for the unique characteristics of Achilles. We could as easily apply the justification to any of the heroes of the *Iliad* had they been caught in a similarly vexing circumstance. Pope's own explanation accounts for the essential difference between Agamemnon and Achilles--indeed, between Achilles and any other man. Achilles, Pope observes, possesses a "great and fiery temper," which makes him "more susceptible" to "tears of anger and disdain" (65). Later, in defending Achilles's tears for Patroclus against Plato's censure, Pope remarks: "All the passions of Achilles are in the extreme; his nature is violent.... These tears would have ill become Plato but they are graceful in Achilles" (1132; I return to Plato's criticisms in chapter three).

Thus, not only the dishonor to Achilles of being forced out of his just deserts, but his own volatile emotions are considered. Of course, Pope follows the universal tradition in recognizing that particular quality of Achilles as the theme of the epic--i.e., "anger and its ill effects" (48). What sets his commentary apart from a vast ocean of commentators who recognize this moral is his particular concern for the person of Achilles. Not anger in the abstract--not the anger of an "everyman"--but the particular anger of this particular individual figures vitally into Pope's reading. This more specified attention on *Achilles'* anger--not just any man's anger--is a departure from Dacier's approach, and the tendencies of the Old Homer tradition as a whole. Pope does not deny the general

application of the moral, but he approaches it through close attention to particular people in specific situations.

Let us turn to Pope's observations on the conclusion of the epic to see a final and yet clearer example of this concern. Pope marvels at the artistic power by which Homer compels readers to sympathize with Achilles even in his interview with the grieving Priam. That scene--eminently suitable, Pope remarks in passing, for a painter's brush--our poet renders:

...the King his entry made;
And prostrate now before Achilles laid,
Sudden, (a venerable sight!) appears;
Embrac'd his knees, and bath'd his hands in tears;
Those direful hands his kisses press'd, embru'd
Ev'n with the best, the dearest of his blood! (584-589)²⁸

²⁸In Lattimore's rendering:

Tall Priam
came in unseen by the other men and stood close beside him
and caught the knees of Achilleus in his arms, and kissed the hands
that were dangerous and manslaughtering and had killed so many
of his sons. (476-480)
But now Priam spoke to him the the words of a suppliant:
"Achilleus like the gods, remember your father, one who
is of years like mine, and on the door-sill of sorrowful old age.
And they who dwell nearby encompass him and afflict him,
nor is there any to defend him against the wrath, the destruction.
Yet surely he, when he hears of you and that you are still living,
is gladdened within his heart and all his days he is hopeful
that he will see his beloved son come home from the Troad.
But for me, my destiny was evil. I have lost the noblest
of sons in Troy, when the sons of the Achaians came here....
Honour then the gods, Achilleus, and take pity upon me

The grieving king then applies the lever of his supplication in the way best calculated to move the wrathful hero:

Think of thy father, and this face behold!
See him in me, as happless and as old!
Though not so wretched: there he yields to me,
The first of men in sovereign misery!
Thus forced to kneel, thus grovelling to embrace
The scourge and ruin of my realm and race;
Suppliant my children's murderer to implore,
And kiss those hands yet reeking with their gore! (626-633)

Applying the insight that perhaps only a fellow poet can easily exercise (Dacier, for instance, does not), Pope observes:

By these two words [i.e., *μνησσαι Πατρὸς*, “remember your father”] the poet recalls to our mind all the noble actions performed by Achilles in the whole *Ilias*; and at the same time strikes us with the utmost compassion for this unhappy King. (1142)

With great attention to the consistent character of the hero, Pope points out the remarkable balance necessary to “sustain the violent character... and yet... soften him into compassion” (1143). Dacier made no remark on the rhetorical force of *μνησσαι Πατρὸς*.

remembering your father, yet I am still more pitiful;
I have gone through what no other mortal on earth has gone through
I put my lips to the hands of the man who has killed my children.” (486-506)

No, nor Eustathius. Yet, it is with these words, Pope tells us, that Homer imparts to Priam the power to soften the previously immovable Achilles without diminishing the great hero or doing violence to his character. Homer has most judiciously prepared the rage of Achilles for its abatement (which signals the proper ending of the epic, if we recall le Bossu's rule that an epic concerns "one important Action"). Thetis, by Homer's careful design, prepares her son for the arrival of the Trojan King; without this preparation his "violent temper" would likely have erupted at "the unexpected sight of his enemy" (1143). But, Pope says, "Homer has avoided these absurdities" (*i.e.*, of unexplained, unnatural emotional reactions) and "this venerable prince naturally melts [Achilles] into compassion" (*Ib.*). The process is gradual; the reader should find it believable. Homer will do nothing against Nature; indeed, it is to his fidelity to her that he owes his title, "Prince of the Poets." Dacier's observations are not of this sort. Pope follows and admires her in many ways, but he follows Homer first and foremost. In this case, by showing up Homer's psychological and poetical acuity.

Of the response of Achilles to Priam (653ff), Pope assures us "There is not a more beautiful passage in the whole *Ilias*" (1144). In it the poet encapsulates the particular qualities of Achilles which render him worthy of reader's "applause" (*Ib.*). "Plato himself," Pope insists, could not have spoken with more "excellent sense and sound reason" (*Ib.*). And that Homer has saved up this aspect of Achilles's nature "shews the art of the poet" since it "fixes an idea of greatness upon our minds" just before the close of the poem. Achilles, of course, nearly erupts into rage again when Priam tries to press his persuasive power beyond the bounds of justice. Pope accounts for this final flare with greater attention than Dacier because he brings to the text a closer attention to the

personality of Achilles, of which we will see more in chapter four. After this “last sally of resentment,” which Pope remarks has been “judiciously described,” the “design of the poem is fully executed” (1146).

Though Pope, like Dacier and La Motte, assents to the conception of epic described in le Bossu’s *Treatise*, and believes that the *Iliad* exemplifies it, we find in him an attention to fine details lacking in the generalizing tendencies of these French critics. Because of this quality, Pope notices Homer’s poetical qualities more than Dacier and approves of Homer’s poetic judgement more than la Motte. It is no wonder, then, that his version differs widely from the re-designed imitation of la Motte and the bare prose rendering of Dacier.

CHAPTER 4

“ERRING JUDGEMENT”: POPE'S CRITICISM OF OTHER COMMENTATORS

Having looked over some vital aspects of the context of Pope's Homeric work, we should now focus our gaze on his observations themselves. Pope begins by explaining what sort of commentary his will not be, and so shall we. What advantages does this course offer? Two appear particularly obvious upon studying the observations on Book I. First, Pope must distinguish his commentary in a vast ocean of such works. No text apart from the Christian scriptures has been commented on so frequently and at such length as the *Iliad*. And, an eighteenth century reader knows this far better than a twenty-first century one. What would readers want with yet another commentary? That is the first question Pope addresses: “Of all the commentators upon *Homer*, there is hardly one whose principal design is to illustrate the poetical beauties of the author” (46). His audience could easily find commentary on the “philosophical, historical, geographical, allegorical” (*Ib.*) aspects of the epic, but would have to look far and wide for one “critical and poetical” (*Ib.*). Pope proposes to give readers commentary of this rare sort. It is the sort which a poet is particularly suited to write. And, since it is on his verse that Homer's reputation is built--our admiration excited--it seems exactly the sort of commentary readers would most desire. We will examine the shortcomings of previous commentaries that Pope enumerates. Before we turn to that examination, though, I suggest one more reason Pope begins by criticizing other popular commentaries.

Pope agrees with his great master, Dryden, that

A heroick poem, truly such, is undoubtedly the greatest Work which the Soul of Man is capable to perform. The Design of it, is to form the Mind to Heroick Virtue by Example; 'tis convey'd in Verse, that it may delight, while it instructs: The Action of it is always one, entire and great. (Dryden 267)

I think much of the motivation to begin by naming the flaws in previous commentaries lies in the strength of this conviction about the “heroick poem.” If epic plays such a profound role in human civilization, by these particular poetic means, and the *Iliad* is the foundation and fountain of all subsequent heroic poetry (as Pope points out again and again [e.g., 5, 9, *et al.*]), then the commentator has a truly great task. The commentator must guide the reader (especially the inexperienced one) to appreciate the *Iliad* as (to borrow Dryden’s language again) the “greatest Work which the Soul of Man is capable to perform” (267). Pope’s work as translator is not, then, that different from his work as commentator. He must distill the true Homeric “spirit” or “fire” in its simultaneously delightful and instructive aspects and make these qualities obvious to a new audience in a far distant place and time. The commentary supplements the translation; it is almost a key to appreciating the verse.

This task appear even more arduous when we consider it in light of the gradual loss of the high view of epic verse which Dryden presents to us above. The great prophetic-instructive task of the epic poet--epitomized in the Old Homer image we have already considered--had already begun to fade by Pope’s time. We must remember that Pope’s is the last commercially successful work in the Old Homer tradition--the birth of modern Homeric scholarship begins virtually at the same time. As Mack observes,

“Pope’s translation is the end of an Old Homer and F. A. Wolf’s *Prolegomena ad Homerum* (1795) the beginning of a new” (lxxi). Though, the death of Old Homer might be said to begin earlier in the century--Thomas Blackwell’s *Enquiry into the Life and Writings of Homer* (1735) and Robert Wood’s *Essay upon the Original Genius and Writing of Homer* (1769) “attempt at a scientific study” (*Ib.* lxxiv). A “new conception of academic scholarship” had sprouted “even in Pope’s day, with men like Thomas Hearne, and continued to grow throughout the century” (Mack lxxiii). By the end of the eighteenth century, the likes of le Bossu were only ridiculed, where remembered at all. So also poetry on the whole stood on the cusp of a great shift. Milton and Dryden represent the old view of poetry. To this way of thinking Poetry has, as Dryden said, the power “to form the Mind.” This is the idea of poetry advanced in Sidney’s *Defence*,

when, with the force of a divine breath [the creature made in the likeness of “the Heavenly Maker”] brings things forth far surpassing [Nature’s] doings (with no small argument to the incredulous of that first accursed fall of Adam, since our erected wit makes us know what perfection is).

(10)

The view is wrapped up in much else that was passing away in Pope’s century. By the end of the century, the common view of poetry has clearly taken a turn--we mark it as the birth of Romanticism. Wordsworth’s calling poetry “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” in 1798 implies some very different assumptions. Wordsworth’s assumption stand much nearer those of our age; Randall Jarrell observes “Most of the romantic qualities that poetry has specialized in for the last 150 years seem to the average

reader ‘normal’ or ‘poetic,’ what poetry inescapably is” (223).²⁹ Pope’s *Iliad* comes at the beginning edge of this major shift; Douglas Knight tells us:

As the last non-satiric product of the European heroic tradition [Pope’s *Iliad*] maintains against growing opposition the idea that one can look to poetry for an expression of human significance and value. (Knight 107)

In this way, Knight proposes, “Pope is repaying a debt to Homer” (*Ib.*). I not only think this precisely so, but the very idea Pope expressed in appropriating the passage “*Te sequor*” [“I follow you”] for the front-piece of his *Iliad*. Knight continues, elucidating the principle aim of Pope’s Homeric work:

The place of poetry, and all art, as the meeting point of phenomenon and significance is one which must be fought for at any time. Pope’s fight is of particular importance because he is dealing with the early stages of the same opposition to poetry with which we are dealing today. (Knight 109)

We will return to this idea in the final chapter of this study. I only introduce it here as indicative of why Pope takes such a hard line against other commentaries (and versions) widely used and admired in his age. When Pope defends the “father of poetry” or, on the

²⁹Jarrell’s insightful little essay “The End of the Line,” which posits that we’ve never left the Romantic Age, only pressed it to its farthest extreme, also notes the dynamic relationship between poetry and society. “For a long time” Jarrell argues,

society and poetry have been developing in the same direction, have exploited certain tendencies to their limits: how can anyone fail to realize that the individualist excesses of modernist poetry are the necessary concomitants of the individualist excesses of late-capitalist society?

Pope certainly believed in this dynamic relationship--a conviction we cannot overlook if we are to understand him--his commentary as much as any other of his works.

other hand, charges others for not recognizing their father's shortcomings, or chides obtuse commentators for focusing on all the wrong things or failing to understand Achilles' character and the fullness of the moral it advances, Pope takes a stand for the sort of poetry Homer and his *Iliad* represent.

Let us turn now to the "dead ends" which Pope believes distracted other commentators from truly "following" Homer. We will examine a sample of each and find that Pope not only shows his difference from these commentators but does so as part of his positive goal of adequately representing the "Homer" he believes in. The failures he identifies fall into two sorts: ignorance and extremism. Under these headings we can further classify two specific failures. The errors of ignorance involve, first, ignoring the verse; and, second, "showing off." Those of extremism we have already considered in passing: Ὁμερομανία [Homeromania] and a refusal to learn from Homer.

Ignoring the Poetry

Many are the volumes, Pope tells his readers, "[e]xplaining those sciences which [Homer] made but subservient to his Poetry, and sparing only upon that art which constitutes his character" (46). Even in that "treasure of the *Greek* learning," the volumes of Eustathius, "those remarks that in any way concern the Poetry or art of the Poet, are much fewer than is imagin'd" (47). Throughout his observations, Pope never lets readers forget that Homer is first and foremost a poet, that our perpetual admiration of him begins and is ever tied up with love of his "numbers," and that the commentary should enhance, not distract from, the enjoyment of the verse. Critics who ignore that "which constitutes [Homer's] character" do Homer and their readers a great disservice. Moreover, because

Homer has “ever been acknowledg’d the greatest of poets, who most excell’d in that which is the very foundation of poetry” (3), to ignore or obscure his artistic accomplishment renders a great disservice to poetry itself. Pope experienced the “rapture” (Mack 45) of Homer’s music around eight years of age (*Ib.* 44); it was the *Iliad* that caused him to “catch the itch of poetry” (*Ib.*). And, as often as Pope read Homer he experienced “Rapture and Fire, which carries you away with him, with that wonderful Force, that no man who has a true Poetic spirit is Master of himself, while he reads him” (*Ib.* 47). We see, therefore, why Pope evidences surprise over the lack of critical observation on this most essential aspect of the epic. For, if his poetry has such an overwhelming effect, who can imagine its being ignored?

Pope offers little speculation concerning the cause of this neglect, except that it evidences “the ostentation of men who had more reading than taste” (46). The “Rapture and Fire” comments cited above also provide some indication of the cause--these critics must lack something of “a true Poetic spirit,” for how else could they avoid being enthralled by it? I think we cannot but suppose that these ignorant Homeric critics must have weighed heavily on Pope’s mind as he composed his *Essay on Criticism*, which is brimming with admiration for Homer. Pope, we should remember, was already working on translating the *Iliad* by the time he wrote the *Essay* in 1709 (Mack 47; 266); in that same year the year the first bit of his translation was published (the speech of Sarpedon to Glaucus, from Book XII). The *Essay on Criticism* was published just four years before the first volume of his *Iliad* appeared in print. The young poet sings “In *Poets* as true *Genius* is but rare, / True *Taste* as seldom is the *Critick’s* Share” (*lines* 11, 12; Butt’s ed., 144). In his own turn as critic, Pope attempts to follow his own advice:

The gen'rous Critick *fann'd* the *Poet's Fire*,
And taught the World, *with Reason* to *Admire*.
Then Criticism the Muse's Handmaid prov'd,
To dress her Charms, and make her more below'd. (100-103)

We will turn again to the *Essay on Criticism* in the next chapter, for it contains almost an epitome of Pope's commentary. At the very least, it is mixed with much he had distilled from years of close study of Homer and the heroic tradition generally. And, like the commentary, it had the twin aims of hailing the "prince of the poets" and defending good poetry. Mention of that "*Poet's Fire*" crops up throughout Pope's observations. In his *Preface*, he calls it "what a translator should principally regard" (16). In introducing his observations, he explains "The chief design of the following notes is to comment upon *Homer* as a poet" (48). I think we may take that as nothing other than a prose rendering of "*fann'd* the *Poet's Fire*." We may, then, make two very certain remarks at this point. First, Pope begins by railing against those who ignore Homer's poetry because they have neglected the most essential aspect of the *Iliad*. And, second, Pope's translation and commentary both have the same aim: to effectively transmit this "*Fire*" to Pope's own people and age.

Showing Off

While ignoring the poetry, these other commentators have not wanted matter on which to ruminate. Indeed, neglecting the glow and warmth of Homer, they have rather concerned themselves with showing off their own powers. This error involves a greater crime than the first, as we shall soon see.

Pope lacks all tolerance for the smell of duplicity, at least, in others. For instance, Dacier, he tells readers, fails in acknowledging the extent of her debt to Eustathius. Pope condemns this failure to attribute sources. He laments how widespread (48) this form of robbery among commentators is, and pledges that, in his work, “whatever... is extracted from others is constantly own’d” (48). Pope everywhere pounces on critics who wish to appear cleverer than they truly are.

Before proceeding, we ought to pause a moment to look at the obvious dints in Pope’s righteous breastplate. The promise may not have been wholly duplicitous--Pope does scrupulously note his *ancient* sources, and his indebtedness to English poets in the epic tradition--but he frequently masks his own debt to Dacier. Indeed, whether intentionally or not, Pope fails to show his readers how much he relies on her learning to supply the lack in his. Not that he fails to credit her--he does so often--and frequently criticises her, as we have already seen. Still her influence is present more often than her much mentioned name. He rarely quotes Eustathius except where she does (Mack lxxvii). He gives us some hint at the debt he owes her--he introduces her Homeric scholarship to his readers as “the most judicious collection extant of the scatter’d observations of the ancients and moderns, as her preface is excellent, and her translation equally careful and elegant” (47-48). But he is far from making apparent the extent to which he relies on this scholarship. For all Pope’s disapproval of those who seek fame by dissembling their sources, we cannot fail to notice a certain hypocrisy in the charge.

However, in his insistence that none of Homer’s rightful glory be obscured by small wits

seeking to build their own reputations, we will find (I think) no duplicity at all. Indeed, rendering to Homer his proper deserts appears one of the great purposes of Pope's observations. Pope promises his readers a pure drink from the "Pierian Spring" (*Essay on Criticism* 216). He will have none of the sort who "leave the Sense, their Learning to display" (*Ib.* 114) or, on the other hand "explain the Meaning quite away" (*Ib.* 116). The second failing of the ignorant critic, then, involves "The... passion... to discover *new meanings* in an author, whom they will cause to appear mysterious purely for the vanity of being thought to unravel him" (47). He describes their habits with delightful disdain:

If they can but find a word that has once been strain'd by some dark writer to signify any thing different from its usual acceptation, it is frequent with them to apply it constantly to that uncommon meaning, whenever they meet it in a clear writer: For reading is so much dearer to them than sense, that they will discard it at any time to make way for a criticism. (47)

His strong disapproval derives from his devotion to Homer, the *princeps poetarum*, who, when properly appreciated, will reveal more of the truth of reality--particularly human nature--than a whole host of philosophers (cf. Mason's similar claim, 19-20). Pope states this conviction in the strongest possible terms in his *Essay on Criticism*, "*Nature and Homer were... the same*" (135). His disdain for those who cast a shadow on the meaning of the *Iliad* by standing in the way of Homer's light involves much more than the desire to make his own commentary appear superior.

Neo-Platonic allegorizing often falls under Pope's ire. "This Disposition of finding out different significations in one thing," Pope argues

may be the effect of either too much, or too little wit: For Men of right understanding generally see at once all that an Author can reasonably mean, but others are apt to fancy two meanings for want of knowing one.

(47)

Not that Pope rejects this allegorizing tradition; on the contrary, he little doubts that Homer's poem is a great allegory. He does not question that in epics, as Milton put it, "more is meant than meets the ear" (*Il Penseroso* 120); but he eschews the medieval delight in "polyphonic" allegories. His comments on Minerva's descent to calm Achilles' rage provide us a perfect example of the kind of allegorizing Pope embraces. His translation has it:

Just as in anguish of suspense he stay'd,

While half unsheath'd appear'd the glitt'ring blade,

Minerva swift descended from above,

Sent by the sister and the wife of *Jove*

(For both the Princes claim'd her equal Care);

Behind she stood, and by the golden hair

Achilles seiz'd. (*Iliad* I.259-265)³⁰

³⁰In Lattimore's rendering:

And the anger came on Peleus' son, and within
his shaggy breast the heart was divided two ways, pondering
whether to draw from his thigh the sharp sword, driving
away all those who stood between and kill the son of Atreus,
or else to check the spleen within and keep down his anger.

The interpretation:

The *allegory* here may be allow'd by every reader to be unforc'd: The prudence of *Achilles* checks him in the rashest moment of his anger, it works upon him unseen by others, but does not entirely prevail upon him to desist. (59)

Thus, according to the commonly received reading, Minerva represents “prudence,” and the “fable” of her tugging at his hair means that his higher faculties compelled him to forbear. While it is sometimes difficult to discern why Pope will countenance some allegories and not others, I think we can discern certain criteria he applies throughout. His phrase “allow'd by every reader to be unforc'd” conveys two important aspects of Pope’s allegorical reading. First, he expects the allegory to appear more-or-less obvious to the careful reader. As his observation on XVI.354 has it: “It is *Homer’s* design in his comparisons to apply them to the most obvious and sensible image of the thing to be illustrated” (793). Second, that Homer aims his moral at “every reader,” not the initiates of a mysterious *gnosis*. Furthermore, in opening his observations on Book VIII, he gives us another indicator. If the passage “in the literal meaning appear[s] too trivial or irrational” (401), it must convey an allegory. A comment on line 663 of Book XXIV provides us with a final criterion that I believe Pope used to measure the validity of

Now as he weighed in mind and spirit these two courses
and was drawing from its scabbard the great sword, Athene descended
from the sky. For Hera the goddess of the white arms sent her,
who loved both men equally in her heart and cared for them.
The goddess standing behind Peleus’ son caught him by the fair hair.
(I.188-197)

allegorical readings. There he describes the figure of the two urns--one of blessings, one of curses--that sit “by *Jove*’s high throne” as “very beautifully imagin’d by the poet” (1144). We will return to this passage when we consider the moral thrust of the commentary; for now, we observe that the comment focuses on the allegory as a function of the poetry, and expects the symbols to contribute to the enjoyment of it. It is not only well-expressed but also an engaging way to imagine the cold, hard truth that providence dispenses both delights and terrors. Not this only, but the parts of the analogy are clear and exact--qualities which Pope never fails to praise.

By contrast, Pope rejects the dark allegorical caves that only a critical mole can “discover.” He can hardly contain his laughter at some of “the dreams of *Eustathius*” (1139). The observations on Mercury’s address to Priam in book twenty-four epitomize this over-allegorizing error. Pope records Eustathius’ contention that the disguised god’s self-description was true, if read properly:

[H]is father is old; for *Jupiter* is King of the whole universe, was from eternity, and created both men and Gods: In like manner, when *Mercury* says he is the seventh child of his father... he meant that there were six planets besides *Mercury*. (*Ib.*)

Pope will have none of it. “Sure,” he mockingly agrees, “it requires great pains and thought to be so learnedly absurd” (*Ib.*). This interpretation cannot be said to be very obvious, can it? The medieval bishop may have found it so. But, “[m]edieval allegory,” as D. W. Robertson explains “is a vehicle for the expression of traditional ideas” which are expected to be embedded throughout poetry (286). Pope, we may guess from his writings, probably agreed with this *to an extent*--indeed, how else could he so venerate

Chaucer, Spenser, and Milton?--but will not pay heed to readings that do not advance the moral and beauty of the epic. Yes, traditional ideas are sprinkled throughout the poem; but if one is so deeply embedded that we need a critical Hercules to rescue it from the dark recesses of hell, where it sits trapped in a charmed chair, then it cannot edify or please the general, intelligent reader. This supposed symbol seems in that category--it does not convey something clear and significant to the reader. That Homer may or may not have believed the suggested "meaning" to be true does not make it worth embedding into Mercury's "cover story." The literal meaning poses no difficulty. And, to apply the last test, if it is an allegory, it hardly adds to the beauty of the poem.

But, we may then wish to ask, what of other rather obscure allegories that Pope accepts? When he explains the "the wars of the Gods" in his note on line I.514, he embraces the natural allegory. Jupiter is the ether--the element of the heavens--Juno the air, the sublunary element. As the higher, purer element combines with the lower, thicker element the earth blooms in celebration. The analogy is a variation on that most ancient of myths, of the marriage of heaven and earth. Is this not obscure? Perhaps now, but Pope describes the natural allegory as "almost generally agreed" upon (67). He embraces it because the allegory is so well known; indeed, it is a convention common to poetry of Pope's age and those before it. Spenser alludes to it, to describe the weather in *Faerie Queene* I.i.6: "And angry *Ioue* an hideous storme of raine / Did poure into his Lemans³¹ lap." The association is obscure to us, but would be easily recognized by any intelligent

³¹ I.e., his lover's

person of the antique, medieval, or early modern times. Moreover, it very obviously elevates the language from mere, inanimate nature to a world “charged with the grandeur of God,” so to speak.

Extremism

Along with those who ignore the poetry (both its expression and true meaning) of the *Iliad*, Pope also battles those who, while far from ignoring the poetry, plunge into the opposite extremes of condoning or condemning everything in Homer. We have already seen an example of each of these extremes in examining Pope’s relation to his French contemporaries Dacier and la Motte. We will not recount the instances of their respective blindnesses-- μηρομανία [Homeromania] and modernist arrogance. Let us turn to other instances that we have not yet had the chance to consider. Two others who frequently warrant mention in the commentary are of particular interest in that Pope (and, he may well assume, much of his audience) holds these two others in the highest admiration: Milton and Plato.

Milton’s Mistakes

As Pope did much of his writing in bed of a morning (Mack lxxvii), we may well imagine the portrait of Milton that he hung in his bedroom (to keep himself humble [Mack 78]) scowling down at him as he charged his master with a fondness for Homer that falls into error. No modern author receives more unreserved praise from Pope, but in defence of poetic excellence, our commentator was no respecter of persons.

It may be objected that Milton is no Homeric commentator. Indeed, when Pope comments on him, are the remarks not directed towards his “original” poetry? These objections are of the same kind that have rendered Pope’s translation and (far more so) his commentary so little appreciated today. Indeed, interacting with Milton’s implicit commentary on Homer, as observable in his “original” epic, figures as one of Pope’s primary concerns in his commentary. As Knight has so insightfully observed, “Homer’s profound effect on Virgil and Milton really means that he has a part of his life in their poems” (9). This interaction with the poets--particularly English poets--who have followed after Homer, contributed to his continued fame, and shaped the way in which his epics were read, sets Pope’s commentary apart from the countless other commentaries on Homer. And, as Pope has insisted that proper appreciation of the *Iliad* must keep its form--poetry--always in view, the influence of Homer on later poets and their implied commentary on him is essential to Pope’s commentary. Knight has, again, put the matter perfectly: “The nature of the *Iliad* is only fully comprehensible to *Pope as poet*... in light of the *Aeneid* and *Paradise Lost* as well as a dozen other less significant modifications of the tradition” (*Ib.*).

That being so, we are again left with the oddity of Pope charging Milton, on whom his own understanding of the *Iliad* depends, with a misapprehension of Homer. But, if Pope “subscribed to the opinion of *Horace*, that *Homer* sometimes nods” and “own’d what seem my author’s faults” (Pope, Shankman ed. 803), then we cannot imagine he would spare Milton his candid observation. The commentary on Patroclus’s jests, beginning with line 904 of Book XVI, provides such an instance. Pope considered the lines embellished by some ancient critic. For, as he objected, had not Patroclus only

just charged Meriones for undue raillery? Moreover, we know from his comments elsewhere (on XIII.471) that he shared the opinion of Eustathius: “the Iliad being an heroick Poem, is of too serious a nature to admit of raillery” (Pope 641), and he will not invent excuses for Homer at this (or any) spot, as Eustathius and Dacier do. On the contrary, Pope praises Virgil--than whom there is no greater disciple of Homer³²--for being “too judicious to imitate *Homer* in these licences” and being “more reserv’d in his sarcasms and insults” (642). Neither will he make excuses for Milton’s imitation of Homeric railleries. “[H]owever mean or ill placed these railleries may appear,” Pope explains,

there have not been wanting such fond lovers of *Homer* as have admired and imitated them. *Milton* himself is of this number, as may be seen from those very low jests, which he has put into the mouth of *Satan* and his angels. (801)

The mouth out of which these “low jests” proceed might sufficiently excuse them, but not their disruption of the seriousness of the epic. In chapter one, did we not find that Milton taught Pope to dismiss “vain deluding joys” (*Il Penseroso* 1) as inconsistent with heroic verse? Indeed, and for one so skilled in jest as Pope, it may prove difficult to understand why he would not permit Milton some, even in Hell. In this case, we seem to confront the tricky situation of Pope defending something Homeric and Miltonic against both Homer

³²Remember the instruction given in Pope’s *Preface* that, for the study of Homer we can do no better than turn to “Virgil above all the ancients” (20). This assessment of Virgil is still shared by modern scholarship. Jasper Griffin calls him “the most intent and perceptive of all readers of Homer” (119).

and Milton. The “heroick” art they bequeathed to the ages exists outside of them as (to use Knight’s phrase) a “permanent ideal.” And, though he only knows of it through them, they are but frail beings, unable to achieve perfect consistency. Pope will point out their little faults, but can you not hear the caution in his voice? He add the emphatic “himself” as if there were no greater surprise than to see Milton falling into error. Moreover, the critic points out that the fault came from too great an “admiration” for Homer, not envy, pride, or ignorance--and, to love inordinately what is good surely ranks among the least of sins. Neither is the error damning here--these missteps do not diminish the rightful glory of the greater poets. After all, “to err is human; to forgive, divine” (*Essay on Criticism* 325). Pope quotes from Longinus’s essay *On the Sublime* to conclude his observations on Book XVI:

If any one should collect from *Homer*, *Demosthenes*, *Plato*, and other celebrated heroes of antiquity, the little errors that have escap’d them; they would not bear the least proportion to the infinite beauties to be met with in every page of their writings. (804)

Pope would, I little doubt, have added Milton to these ranks.

Plato’s Perversity

Another whose glory was not tainted by misapprehension of Homer--though in the opposite direction--falls under Pope’s criticism, namely, Plato. It is widely known that Plato leveled the most severe charges against Homer. The fascinating story of centuries of neo-Platonic allegorizing of Homer, unfortunately, lies outside the scope of this study. Suffice it to say that, in the Old Homer tradition that Pope inherited, it was

taken for granted that “Homer and Plato have both the one meaning, looke both to one end” (Roger Ascham, qtd from Hughes, 387). That Plato himself denounced Homer was also well known. Therefore, from Pope’s perspective, it appears as if antagonism (perhaps borne of envy) blinded the philosopher to the merits of his natural ally.

Plato condemned (to use Pope’s language) a passage than which, Pope claimed “There is not a more beautiful [one] in the whole *Ilias*” (1144). Pope remarked that Achilles’s address to Priam, when he had come to beg for the body of his son in Book XXIV, shows the hero “a person of excellent sense and sound reason.” To highlight the folly of Plato while still showing due reverence, Pope added “*Plato* himself... could not speak more like a true philosopher” (*Ib.*). With this cautious language, he defends Achilles while granting Plato his deserved preeminence among philosophers.

Not many verses later appears the allegory of Jove’s “Two urns ” that we saw in chapter three (line 663 in the translation). Pope hailed this passage as “an admirable allegory... very beautifully imagin’d by the poet” (*Ib.*). The same passage warranted Plato’s harshest censure, and the one he most often brought against poets: impiety. In this passage, the poet describes two jars sitting before Jupiter--one filled with good, the other with evil. From the contents of each, the great god treats with humanity. Plato, whom Griffin calls “the greatest religious genius of Greece” (72), called the attribution of evil to the gods blasphemy. But, does not Plato himself teach that all comes to pass only by the permission of highest heaven? Pope believed that he did, and that all who had any awareness of philosophy or theology recognized this truth. Though Pope gives us no Platonic texts to compare, the doctrine is not without parallels in Plato; compare, for example, this passage from the *Phaedrus*:

Zeus, the great chieftain in heaven, driving a winged car, travels first, arranging and presiding over all things; and after him comes a host of gods and inferior deities. (Plato 48)

How, with such a poetic and allegorical turn of mind, could Plato not give Homer's achievement in this passage its proper due? Pope does not speculate on that. From our vantage point, we see that Plato knew nothing of the complex allegorical methods of interpretation that developed after his death. Through these transpositions, Homer was made to sing in Plato's key. But Plato himself only knew that the primitive myths conflicted with his own rational, monistic doctrine. Pope, for his part, lacks the benefit of modern methods of investigation. He believed, as we have already seen, the allegories were obvious and cannot guess why Plato did not recognize them. Instead, throughout his commentary he counters Plato's "erroneous judgement" and presents Homer as consistent with a monistic world view (*vide*, e.g., Pope 403). Not simply out of loyalty (for we have already seen Pope willing to condemn Homer), but because he truly believes that Homer has given the sublimest expression to truths which Plato also discerned. As far as Pope can see, Plato's antagonism shows that he utterly failed to grasp Homer:

If the Reader does not observe the morality of the *Ilias*, he loses half, and the nobler part of its beauty: He reads it as a common romance, and mistakes the chief aim of it, which is to instruct. (1141)

Such was Plato's perversity--to fail to recognize Homer as one of his own, a true lover of wisdom. Milton's mistake was to follow Homer's own inconsistencies--to mix the stuff of "common romance" into a work "sage and holy" (*Il Penseroso* 11). These are

the near-sighted and far-sighted extremes. But, Pope chides their missteps gently, for he sees them as lover's errors. Plato loved pure truth so, that he failed to recognize her as Homer draped her in allegories. Milton loved his father so, that he failed to recognize his rare follies. The other errors Pope identified are more grievous--the errors of the ignorant and prideful. These could not follow Homer, Pope believed, for they ignored the beauty of his art and, instead, used it as a platform on which to display their own inventiveness. That these sort of authors would take up the mantle of commentators disturbed Pope; for, as the conveyors of Homer's work, their mistakes had the potential to put out the light of Homer's fire forever.

CHAPTER 5

“FANNING THE FIRE”: THE AIM AND ACHIEVEMENT OF POPE'S HOMERIC

H. A. Mason admitted, “I shall have to struggle much harder to get fair play for Pope than to get recognition for the best parts of Homer” (10). I feel compelled to confess the truth of this difficulty before making my final and most direct observations on Pope as a transmitter of Homer’s *Iliad*, and indeed, one worthy of our continued attention today. But, like Mason,

I am quite confident that to try to see why and how Pope took Homer as he did will help us when we are trying to see how *we* ought to take Homer.

For Pope seems to me to have been looking in the right direction. (*Ib.*)

If Pope’s true aim was to “follow” Homer--not in hopes to surpass, but with a desire to resemble the “Glory of the Grecian Race”--then the great measure of his success (and continued relevance) consists in his ability to make us “look in the right direction.” The commentary and translation work together in this aim. As we look at specific bits in the commentary, then, I will provide excerpts from the translation so that their unified aim may be more clearly seen.

Shankman points out the treasure of having “one poetic genius commenting at length on the work of another” (xix). Such a valuable gem should certainly not be overlooked; I cannot help thinking, however, that it would trouble Pope if the commentary were thought only to showcase his gifts, rather than “fanning the flame” of Homer’s poetic fire. As Mack observes,

to do justice to Pope's concern with Homer we must see it in part as a poet's homage to the father of all poetry, and perhaps especially to the power of the poetic imagination, which here, in works already nearly three millennia old, could still draw children from their play and old men from the chimney corner. (xlix)

I think Mack's "perhaps" here too hesitant. If we remember the eight-year-old boy wandering amazed through as much of Homer's wild paradise as Ogilby could open to him, the "perhaps" will all but fade away. Recall too the vigorous young poet who boldly asserted "Nature and Homer were... the same" (*Essay on Criticism* 135) or the war-weary satirist to whom bad poets were the very servants of "Chaos and eternal Night" (*Dunciad* 12), and the "perhaps" flies completely. Homer, poetry, and the potential of humankind are, together, honored and defended in Pope's commentary.

Defending Homer's Heroism

We have already said much, especially in the last chapter, about Pope's desire to defend Homer. We have also observed that Pope does not hesitate to criticise Homer where, in Pope's estimation, he has failed to live up to the ideals he represents, stumbling into barbarity. "Homer and nature" are not *exactly* the same; but, Pope would tell us, he serves the ideal so fully and strays from it so rarely as to warrant the hyperbole. Pope explicitly tells us as much in his *preface*: "No author or man ever excell'd all the world in more than one faculty, and as *Homer* has done this in *invention*, *Virgil* has in *judgement*." A little further down, he explains "it is with great parts as with great virtues, they naturally border on some imperfection; and it is often hard to distinguish exactly where

the virtue ends, or the fault begins.... so may a great invention [decline] to redundancy or wildness” (11). In this same passage, Pope makes a comparison that has received too little attention and with which we can discern the most clearly how Pope honors and defends Homer (while not denying some transgressions in him against the higher causes of poetry and humanity):

methinks the two Poets [Homer and Virgil] resemble the heroes they celebrate: *Homer*, boundless and irresistible as *Achilles*, bears all before him, and shines more and more as the tumult increases.

This passage is a key to the commentary. Throughout it, Pope almost conflates the two--honors them with almost the same language. In some passages, when Pope rises to fend off some false charge, I find it hard to tell whether it is Homer or Achilles he is defending. On the other hand, their faults seem of the same kind also. Since we have already seen much of this aspect of the commentary we will not dwell here long, but the analogy is too important not to receive some illustration.

Among the “cavils [that] have been rais’d against *Homer*” (14) many, like the great French neo-classical critic Rapin, complained that “*Achilles* is not as good and perfect a prince as *Aeneas*,” (*Ib.*) he is, therefore, not as worthy a subject for epic, making Homer as much the object of criticism as his chief character. Pope’s does not take up the defence that the Romantics and we who are still influenced by their variety of heroism might expect--in the post-Romantic mind, Achilles is better than Aeneas precisely because he defies a tyrant like Agamemnon, inspired by a passion for the captive girl. No, Pope reminds us that “the very moral of the poem requir’d” (*Ib.*) Achilles’ flaw--not to extol intractable anger motivated by irresistible love, but to show the destructive force of

anger. Still, can Achilles be said to have any sense at all if he cannot see the horrors his rage causes and will not relent? Surely Homer is left with a wholly bad hero by sustaining his anger thus far. And, in failing to give us a hero we can admire at all, he has failed in conveying his moral--the whole *Iliad* would have to be counted largely a failure. Pope rises to defend both hero and poet.

First, as we have already seen “great virtues... naturally border on some imperfection” (11). Achilles possess a far greater portion of the virtue of courage than any ordinary man; but, that also makes him “furious and intractable” (7) when angered. Homer is being true to the great character he has designed and to the workings of human nature. Pope observes several instances of the sound judgement of Homer in his handling of Achilles in Book I. In lines 394-5 Pope discovers a biting remark from Achilles which no previous commentator had ever noted. “No more *Achilles* draws / His conqu’ring sword in any woman’s cause,” vows the hero to the assembled chiefs, who all know quite well the entire war began for a single woman’s cause. Pope, in this one small passage, demonstrates the sharp mind of Achilles, and “how well it is fancy’d of the Poet” (64). If we think the anger of Achilles sustained for an unreasonable length, how can we countenance the whole ten year siege?

Not more than about seventy lines down, at 458, Homer shows us his great hero, alone and “bath’d in tears.” Pope responds to the false but common notion that a great hero ought never to succumb to crying in three ways--citing Eustathius, who finds it proof of a “generous temper,” and Dacier, who observes that he cries not only for the loss of a mistress but because the loss sullies his honor. In other words, the hero is robbed of his just deserts; while, Agamemnon, who does not cry over the loss of his captive,

surrenders her for the welfare of his subjects. Eustathius bids us admire a warrior with enough heart to cry; Dacier warns us not to compare apples to oranges. In between these two authorities, Pope adds his own explanation. Achilles's nature, being "great and fiery" (65; note the "fire"--the word Pope uses more than any other in describing Homer's greatness), "is more susceptible" to "tears of anger and disdain" than most other men, or even other heroes (with different distinguishing strengths) ought to be. So, Homer, if he follows nature (as a true poet should), is justified--even duty bound--to present this probable reaction in his hero. But, not failing to observe the proper dignity of a hero, Pope reminds readers that "*Homer* has taken care to preserve the high character, by making him retire to vent his tears out of sight" (*Ib.*). Again, Pope defends them with one shield. Homer observes the decorum appropriate to both Achilles' character and his status as a great lord. Achilles has shown his incomparable "fire" and, at the same time, his good sense in knowing that all emotional reactions are not meant for public consumption--especially not those of a nobleman. A final instance, perhaps the clearest of all. In the commentary on Book XXIV, where the sun god compares Achilles to a violent animal (beginning at line 52 in Pope's translation), Pope opines:

This is a very formal condemnation of the morals of *Achilles*, which *Homer* puts into the mouth of a God. One may see from this alone that he was far from designing his hero a virtuous character, yet the poet artfully introduces *Apollo* in the midst of his reproaches, intermingling the hero's praises with his blemishes.... Thus what is the real Merit of *Achilles* is distinguished from what is blameable in his character, and we see *Apollo*,

or the God of wisdom, is no less impartial than just in his representation of *Achilles*.

He might have added, “Therefore, neither ought we to be partial or unjust in assessing the hero or his poet.” The poet’s hero is perfectly suited to epic grandeur and the poem’s specific moral; Homer has painted him with exactness--and the portrait is not unheroic.

Defending Poetry

In honoring Homer, Pope has the chance to comment on what makes for good poetry and what effects it can have. In fact, we see that Pope reverences Homer because Homer is faithful to something higher than himself--Calliope, if you will, the ideal of poetry. Indeed, Pope told his readers that the focus on poetry--Homer’s exemplary practice of it--would make his commentary worthy of their attention.

“We get the chance,” Shankman tells us, “to view Homer’s influence upon the Western epic tradition that he initiated, as Pope continually observes the ways in which poets such as Virgil, Statius, Lucan, Tasso, Ariosto, Spenser, and Milton have imitated particular passages from the *Iliad*” (xix-xx). For Pope, “the paramount ‘commentaries’ were the poems of those who had performed greatly in the same mode, chiefly Vergil [sic], Tasso, and Milton” (Mack 348). They are the best commentaries because they show more than any other how and where Homer has best listened to Calliope’s dictates. The choices of Homer’s greatest successors concerning what to imitate and what to alter--their successes, their improvements, and their failures--provide us with an insight into the enduring nature and power of poetry that the study of one poet’s practice or one age’s

taste never could. And, perhaps most importantly for Pope, shows us the permanent virtues of poetry, argues for its continued relevance.

Book XVI contains both some of “the most beautiful,” (775; 781) “most savage” (785), and “meanest” (i.e., low, humble; 792), as well as the most exact passages in the whole of the *Iliad* (*Ib.*-793) The rich variety makes it an excellent place to examine Pope’s commentary interacting with the tradition of heroic verse. Line 130 begins a passage of “exquisite life and beauty” expressing a sentiment the nobility of which exceeds the excellency of “the description itself” (781). Pope has rendered it:

Ajax no more the sounding storm sustain’d,
So thick, the darts an iron tempest rain’d:
On his tir’d arm the weighty buckler hung;
His hollow helm with falling jav’lins rung;
His breath, in quick, short pantings, comes, and goes,
And painful sweat from all his members flows.
Spent and o’erpow’r’d, he barely breaths at most;
Yet scarce an army stirs him from his post. (130-137)³³

³³In Lattimore’s rendering:

meanwhile
the volleys were too much for Aias, who could hold no longer his place. The will of Zeus beat him back, and the proud Trojans with their spears, and around his temples the shining helmet clashed horribly under the shower of strokes; he was hit constantly on the strong-wrought cheek-pieces, and his left shoulder was tiring from always holding up the big glittering shield; yet they could not beat him out of his place, though they piled their missiles upon him His breath came ever hard and painful, the sweat ran pouring down his body from every limb, he could find no means

Pope shows his poetic powers in this translation--trying to capture the “life” and “beauty” he found in the Greek. We can almost hear the shallow, staccato breathing of the exhausted hero, with the monosyllabic words and several commas Pope packs into line 134. Pope, however, tells us that the “short catching up of the numbers, the quick, short panting, represented in the image” are “improvements upon *Homer*” made by Virgil, who “copied the description very exactly” in Book IX of his *Aeneid*. Pope has learned from them both and gives the reader Virgil’s passage for comparison, as well as Tasso’s imitation of the passage, in canto nine of his *La Gerusalemme liberata*.

Turn next to the description Pope calls the most “savage and terrible” in the epic--the description of the Myrmidons preparing for battle:

Achilles speeds from tent to tent, and warms
His hardy *Myrmidons* to blood and arms.
All breathing death, around their chief they stand,
A grim, terrific, formidable band:
Grim as voracious wolves that seek the springs
When scalding thirst their burning bowels wrings
(When some tall stag, fresh-slaughter’d in the wood,
Has drench’d their wide, insatiate throats with blood)
To the black fount they rush, a hideous throng,
With paunch distended, and with lolling tongue,
Fire fills their eye, their black jaws belch the gore,

to catch his breath, but evil was piled on evil about him. (101-111)

And gorg'd with slaughter, still they thirst for more. (190-201)³⁴

A terrifying image, indeed. Pope expounds at some length upon the poet's exactness in creating this "picture" (785). "Each circumstance" he tells us, "is made up of images very strongly coloured, and horridly lively" (*Ib.*). But, he discerns "some farther views" in the "particulars of the comparison"-- "eager desire for fight," is expressed in the thirst of the wolves, "vigour" in their being well-fed or "gorg'd with slaughter" (201). Moreover, Homer pits the tired, gaunt state of the soldiers against their liveliness and strength. Pope found echoes of this striking simile in Milton, describing Death in Book X of *Paradise Lost*:

So saying with delight he snuffed the smell
Of mortal change on Earth. As when a flock
Of rav'nous fowls, tho' many a league remote,
Against the day of battle, to a field
Where armies lie encap'd, come flying, lur'd
With scent of living carcasses, design'd

³⁴In Lattimore's rendering:

But Achilles went meanwhile to the Myrmidons, and arrayed them all in their war gear along the shelters. And they, as wolves who tear flesh raw, in whose hearts the battle fury is tireless, who have brought down a great horned stag in the mountains, and then feed on him, till the jowls of every wolf run blood, and then go all in a pack to drink from a spring of dark-running water, lapping with their lean tongues along the black edge of the surface and belching up the clotted blood; in the heart of each one is a spirit untremulous, but their bellies are full and groaning. (155-163)

For Death the following day, in bloody fight.
So scented the grim feature, and upturn'd
His nostril wide into the murky air,
Sagacious of his quarry from afar. (272-281)

The passage is not a direct imitation, but the imagery and effect is strikingly similar--"a picture much of this kind" (785). For the same passage, he also cites a parallel from Tasso, *GL* 10, in which "the furious *Soldan* covered with blood [thirsts] for fresh slaughter" (786). Pope attunes his readers to notice more subtle borrowing, to observe the pervasive influence of Homer even when not exactly alluded to. This acute hearing is essential to his poetic practice. His commentary tries to develop this sense in the reader. This skill forms part of a broader concern, which the love of poetry demands; namely, developing the higher faculties. The reader is learning not only to listen more closely to the particulars, but to connect and synthesize things appearing quite distant.

The concern for exactness requires that the poet to expose human potential at its noblest and most godlike--as in the passage about Ajax--but also in all its viciousness and most beastly qualities. The whole range of poetic power is on display here--exciting our admiration, on the one hand, and our fears on the other. Pope shows Homer the master of describing both ends of human potential and how his disciples have learned this art from him.

But humanity is not all greatness or terror--and neither are epics. The verse must also encompass the homely and simple. A simile like that of comparing the Myrmidon cohort to wasps:

As wasps, provok'd by children in their play,

Pour from their mansions by the broad high-way,
In swarms the guiltless traveller engage,
Whet all their stings, and call forth all their rage;
All rise in arms, and with a gen'ral cry
Assert their waxen domes, and buzzing progeny. (314-319)³⁵

Pope observes that not all Homer's comparisons for his heroes are to what we might consider appropriately great things. Homer will use "the meanest and smallest things in nature" so long as the comparison is exact. Here the poet does not need to emphasize the valor or vigor of the army--which he has already done above--but rather "their heat and resentment." Virgil has not feared to follow Homer in these humble comparisons, despite the heightened, more majestic diction that he employs--he compares the builders of Carthage to efficient honey bees, after all. These observations are taken from Eustathius, whom Pope often cites verbatim. And, it may not be without calculation here, for these humble comparisons were widely thought beneath heroic verse, but few would wish to contest the authority of the venerable Eustathius.

But Pope adds to this comparison another which Eustathius could not have known--a passage from Spenser compares his hero to a shepherd swarmed by gnats,

³⁵In Lattimore's rendering:

The Myrmidons came streaming out like wasps at the wayside
when little boys have got into the habit of making them angry
by always teasing them as they live in their house by the roadside;
silly boys, they do something that hurts many people;
and if some man who travels on the road happens to pass them
and stirs them unintentionally, they in heart of fury
come swarming out each one from his place to fight for their children.
(259-265)

“which is very much in the simplicity of the old father of poetry” (792): “As a gentle shepherd.../ A cloud of cumb’rous gnats do him molest, / All striving to infix their feeble stings, / That from their noyance he no whit can rest” (qtd. from Pope 792). The poet then has no cause to shy from comparing the great to the meager, so long as the comparison is true. And, it would seem, we can then see a greatness in nature’s smallest wonders that we may have otherwise overlooked--it is a false notion that all nobility is very noticeable. The poet must be alive to nature’s subtler things--his eyes and ears acute, his mind able to connect what others overlook.

Pope ends his observations on this rich, multifaceted book with the long citation from Longinus which we have already seen once; it is an homage to the best of poetry (of which Homer is “the standard” [803]) and its incomparable utility: “the sublime ennobleth our nature, and makes near approaches to divinity” (804). For, what other purpose could there be for studying Calliope’s (or any) art than to serve the edification of humanity.

Defending Humanity

Milton believed the “office” of the epic poet was conferred by divine ordination and, thus, very akin to that of the priest. The epic poet ranks in “power beside the office of the pulpit, to inbreed and cherish in a great people the seeds of vertu, and publick civility, to allay the perturbations of the mind, and set the affections in right tune” (Forsyth 76). Like Milton, Pope clearly saw himself in a line of epic poets, all sharing a common form designed to serve a common end, the edification of mankind. This is the conviction that Pope expressed in comparing Dryden (Pope’s beloved master in what we

have called tertiary epic) to Timotheus, the poet-musician who inspired the mighty Alexander³⁶:

Hear how Timotheus' vary'd Lays surprize,
And bid Alternate Passions fall and rise!
While, at each Change, the Son of Lybian Jove
Now burns with Glory, and then melts with Love;
Now his fierce Eyes with sparkling Fury glow;
Now Sighs steal out, and Tears begin to flow:
Persians and Greeks like Turns of Nature found,
And the World's Victor stood subdu'd by Sound!
The Pow'rs of Musick all our Hearts allow;
And what Timotheus was, is Dryden now. (374-383)

The analogy here is no idle fancy. Music is, of course, a metonymy for heroic verse--originally accompanied by the lyre. The scene is that of the ancient ritual that precedes primary epic. And the power attributed to the epic poet surpass even those of the sort of heroes of which he sings--a power that civilizes. Its charms both liberate and regulate the nature, passions, and aspirations of humanity. So, as we would expect, "Pride, Malice, Folly, against Dryden rose" (458)--for these are the enemies of the felicity verse conveys.

We have already seen that "The preoccupations of Pope's day with ancient literature were predominantly ethical and social" (Mack lxxvii; cf. Mack [1985] 87). Mason, however far his literary and cultural expectations differ from those common to

³⁶So, too, the subject of Dryden's *Alexander's Feast, or the Power of Music*.

the eighteenth century, values Homer for the same reason: “I am committed to Pope’s view that Homer is interesting because he has something to tell us about Man” (10). Thus the continued relevance of Pope’s Homeric work--and, though Mason doesn’t say so, his commentary in particular--is made the most explicit.

The “technical achievement” of poetry, as Knight has it, “has a chief justification in the cosmos made” especially in heroic poetry--i.e., the enduring superstructure, in which particular events and continuous human suffering have meaning and can be faced with hope. Heroic poetry, for Pope, must reveal, explore, and help direct human potential--the potential to ascend angelic or descend bestial. Humankind may be forced to toil beneath the heavens, but

...not prone

And Brute as other Creatures, but endu’d

With Sanctity of Reason, might erect

His Stature, and upright with Front serene

Govern the rest. (*Paradise Lost* VII.505-511)

In order to demonstrate the relevance of the *Iliad* to the permanent, general concerns of humanity, but also to its significance in relation to the transitory, specific contexts of particular places and peoples, Pope’s commentary has to navigate three currents: the historical, original setting, the long, developing tradition of interpreting and adapting the poem, and the concerns of his contemporary world. If any of these three are ignored then the importance of the *Iliad*, and of the view of poetry it had come to epitomize, are open to serious challenge. The tradition of interpretation may be the most significant of these three--it is certainly that to which Pope devotes the most space--for from it, a poet or

reader learns from the accumulated knowledge of ages how to draw together the transcendent and unseen with the particular and seen.

Dr. Johnson expresses the significance of the first of these currents: “To judge rightly of an author we must transport ourselves to his time and examine what were the wants of contemporaries and what were his means of supplying them” (qtd. from Atkins 274). Pope would certainly show a concern for the original circumstance--one of his criticisms of Chapman is too little attention to the original circumstance. But, the history of the war (the subject of the epic) and Homer’s own time--in so far as these were known prior to the advent of modern historical methods--is only the beginning of explicating the meaning of the poem. “The purpose of reascending to origins,” as T. S. Eliot wrote in another (though similar) context, “is that we should be able to return, with greater spiritual knowledge, to our own situation” (49). The starting point has to be clearly established for any meaningful comparisons or other measurements to be made. How the poem’s content and the poet’s techniques were re-applied to new circumstances, discovering which interpretations were most widely held and shaped the heroic tradition, these are essential to bridging the far distant, long-dead culture of Homer--to which the poem speaks most directly--and Pope’s own culture. And, to really follow Homer, it is necessary that the English *Iliad* speak to contemporary England in a way analogous to how the original spoke to the Greeks. By drawing these streams together, Pope hopes to reproduce the effect of Homer’s poem--particularly the moral effect--on a new audience.

Many critics, Pope notes, had questioned the antiquity of seven lines of *Iliad* XXIV in the original Greek (beginning on line 36 of Pope’s translation) and whether Homer actually knew the “judgement of *Paris*.” In the Neo-Platonic reading, the

judgement of Paris is a key to understanding the matter of Troy. When the foolish Trojan prince chose Venus (representing cupidity) over Minerva and Juno (prudence and social order) he seals the fate of his people. Pope inherits this traditional reading--it had become a cornerstone of the heroic tradition as a whole; therefore, he has every incentive to believe Homer knew it. By the rules of modern textual criticism, of course, the shorter reading and the one with the most inconsistencies are more likely to be original. A learned scribe--invested in a particular understanding of the epic--is more likely to add explanation and smooth out inconsistencies. Pope defends the lines and the moral on poetic grounds:

The silence of *Homer* in the foregoing part of the poem, as to the judgement of *Paris*, is no argument that he was ignorant of that story: Perhaps he might think it most proper to unfold the cause of the destruction of *Troy* in the conclusion of the *Ilias*; that the reader seeing the wrong done, and the punishment of what wrong immediately following, might acknowledge the justice of it (1131).

Here we see the united interest of poetry and morality. The commentary shows time and again that moral *sentence* is an essential part of poetry--the key to the *Iliad's* pre-eminence.

As Book XXIV shows the softening of Achilles' wrath, it provides many clear instances of this chief concern of heroic verse. Look at Jove's remarks as he looks down upon the interview of Achilles with the devastated Priam: "Some thought there must be, in a soul so brave, / Some sense of duty, some desire to save" (XXIV.193-4). Pope notes, "*Achilles* is still so angry that *Jupiter* cannot say he is wise, judicious, and merciful"

(1135). Rage, of course, prevents the practice of these higher qualities. In the tradition of interpretation three specific words in the Greek became a summation of errors. So Pope explains, “It is the observation of the ancients, says *Eustathius*, that all the causes of the sins of man are included in those three words: Man offends either out of ignorance... thro’ inadvertency... or wilfully and maliciously” (*Ib.*).

We may also look at Pope’s comment on XXIV.377-386--that beautiful prayer of Priam. “*Jove* heard his pray’r, and from the throne on high / Dispatch’d his bird” (387-8). Pope again draws from the long line of readings by which the old pagan epic was brought in line with a Christian worldview. Pope once again sites the archbishop of Thessalonike:

Eustathius observes, that there is not one instance in the whole *Ilias* of any prayer that was justly prefer’d that fail’d of success. This proceeding of *Homer*’s is very judicious, and answers exactly to the true end of poetry, which is to please and instruct. (1138)

This sort of comment--while it may seem utterly beside Homer’s point to us, and our poets might scoff at this view of poetry--is of the utmost importance to Pope and his approach to poetry. Epic, the highest form of poetry, is not a mere emotional outlet or a pretty diversion, as a “common romance” (1141), but aims to uphold and advance social and spiritual order. This complex ordering of even the smallest of parts is the highest pleasure of the poetry. Space cannot be spared here to sketch out this picture of the cosmos and man’s place in it; however, an appreciation of it is essential to understanding

the heroic tradition.³⁷ The concern for unity--for piecing together of many diverse parts into one working, practical whole--is essential to it. This unified world view helps explain why Pope opines on so many areas of knowledge in his commentary and why past commentators wanted to find in Homer an epitome of all human knowledge.³⁸

Whether or not we still find the cosmos Pope depends on compelling should, I think, not obscure the nobility of his unified vision and the related conceptions of poetic beauty, social order, and spirituality. It is an engaging picture and an instructive enterprise even if it is not altogether convincing to modern readers. "The older world view" Knight explains, "is almost demanded of Pope if he is to maintain... the objective significance of poetry" (99).

Pope wants us to see that the poetic achievement of Homer is wedded to the moral value of the epic:

nothing is more admirable than the conduct of *Homer* throughout his whole poem, in respect to morality. He justifies the character of *Horace*,

--*Quid pulchrum, quid turpe, quid utile, quid non,*

³⁷I point my readers to C. S. Lewis's *The Discarded Image* and *Preface to Paradise Lost*, E. M. W. Tillyard's *The Elizabethan World Picture*, A. O. Lovejoy's *The Great Chain of Being*, and D. W. Robertson's *A Preface to Chaucer* for further explanation of this unified world view and its wider significance.

³⁸ The extreme oddity of this aspect of Old Homeric criticism to modern ears leaves us quick to dismiss the approach as unfocused, unscientific, and cursory in its treatment of most subjects. We may, however, do well to look at their intellectual habits from a less superior angle. Does the tuning of our ears not have very much to do with the fragmentation of our age? And should we not find this disconcerting? As Eliot observed, "a society is in danger of disintegration when there is a lack of contact between people of different areas of activity--between the political, the scientific, the artistic, the philosophical and the religious minds" (160). Pope's commentary works precisely against this disintegration--insisting that these disciplines must be brought to the same table.

Plenius & melius Chrysippo & Crantore dicit.

[Homer states--more fully and better than (the philosophers)
Chrysippus and Crantor--what is beautiful, what is base, what is
useful and what is not.] (1140; Shankman's translation)

He is a better teacher than these eminent philosophers because he is a poet. As the Bacchus of Aristophanes' *Frogs* believes, only a poet can save the city. It has the power to create and draw us into another universe--out of our particular place and time--where we can experience the potentials of nature more fully than in reality. When we return home we return wiser--not simply with more knowledge, but with greater experience.

Let us take up a final example from the conclusion of the epic. At XXIV.706, the rage of the hero is excited for the last time, then finally subsides. At this point "his reason now prevails over his anger, and the design of the poem is fully executed" (1146). To show the "direful" consequences of "*Achilles' Wrath*" was the principle aim of the poem, and when it has passed, the poem draws to an end. Homer, though, gives us a glimpse of the hero in his right mind: "He softens the terrible idea we have conceiv'd of him, as a warrior, with several virtues of humanity" and "*Achilles* is admirable both for the endowments of mind and body" (*Ib.*) In this last picture, Pope believes Homer wants us to see the great hero possessing not only physical prowess and passion but a mind matching his godlike body. These qualities are made to go together, it was once thought. "[Nature] has blest [Man] with a versatile physique in keeping with the human mind," so Cicero tells us in *De Legibus*, "For whereas nature made other animals stoop down to feed, she made man alone erect, encouraging him to gaze at the heavens as being, so to

“speak, akin to him and his original home” (106). The shape and beauty of the human form directs us to the beauties that exceed our limited vision. To cite Cicero again:

The virtue of the mind outranks that of the body, and the voluntary virtues of the mind vanquish the involuntary virtues, because the former are born of reason, than which man can possess nothing more divine. (from *De Finibus*; qtd. from Hughes 387)

True poetry, for Pope, is animated by this concern for humanity and its relations, both internal and cosmic. And, there is no truer example of poetry than Homer’s *Iliad*. If he has made his readers to see these visible, audible beauties of the verse, which convey the higher, rational beauty of the moral, then he has paid his debt to Homer. He has truly followed him.

Pope concludes by paying his debts of gratitude. Though a standard convention of the day, I cannot but think it one most properly kept in this case, for it reminds us, to cite Cicero once more, “Gratitude is not only the greatest of virtues, but the parent of all the others.” If that is the thought with which we close his volume, I doubt if Pope could be more pleased.

CHAPTER 6

EPILOGUE

I hope I have gone some way towards answering the question with which we set off, “Why would anyone bother with Pope’s commentary?” The real measure of whether or not I have done justice to my subject would be whether, after reading these pages, someone tracked down an edition of Pope’s *Iliad* that contained observations and read them along with the poem. I do not think the gems they contain ought to be kept only in the hands of specialists--they certainly were not written for them. The rapture Pope felt upon first discovering Homer as a boy of eight can still, I think, be seen in them.

We have circled round four times, and, I hope, settled ourselves at last on the central aim of the annotations. We have looked at the Old Homer tradition as Pope inherited it, and as it flourished in England through Milton’s *Paradise Lost* and Dryden’s *Aeneid*. We have explored the palace of French Neo-Classical criticism and how it shaped the transmission and reading of Homer in the early eighteenth century. It resulted in two sharply opposed approaches to the *Iliad*, epitomized by La Motte and Dacier. Pope’s certainly stands within Dacier’s tradition--his annotations are modeled after her own. But he is a Poet whereas she is not. This places him nearer La Motte, but he approaches the whole enterprise with a humility that La Motte lacks. Pope’s humility--and I do not mean this as a jest, despite his reputation to the contrary--came from three inter-related loyalties which animate his commentary throughout. His loyalty to Homer as the “father of poetry,” his loyalty to poetry as he had learned it from Milton and Dryden,

and his loyalty to what he believed to be the true aim of poetry, helping humanity understand and rise to her potential.

These are the concerns I believe Pope had in mind when he vowed “*Te Sequor, O Graiae gentis Decus!*” [You I follow, O Grecian race’s glory]. If I am not too far off the mark, then they are the animating principles of his tertiary epic, as we have ventured to call it. In his observations we see these designs unfolded, unpacked, and reiterated by the poet, so that the reader may enjoy them as fully as possible. It is as if we can sit down with the poet and, after he reads a book of the epic, he opens up his mind to us, elucidating on its riches, and how he has tried to convey them. In this case, we have the opportunity to sit and listen to the garlanded *aoidos*, the bard who created the last masterpiece of the Western epic tradition--a tradition that inspired and shaped great minds and societies for centuries. Though our culture finds this tradition difficult to sympathize with, I think we will not soon exhaust its value. Standing at the transition point, when the world we recognize truly begins to take shape, Pope’s return to the origin of this ancient tradition is uniquely situated to speak to us of its continuing value.

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