



# ORAL TRADITION

## Festschrift for John Miles Foley

**This article belongs to a special issue of *Oral Tradition* published in honor of John Miles Foley's 65<sup>th</sup> birthday and 2011 retirement. The surprise Festschrift, guest-edited by Lori and Scott Garner entirely without his knowledge, celebrates John's tremendous impact on studies in oral tradition through a series of essays contributed by his students from the University of Missouri-Columbia (1979-present) and from NEH Summer Seminars that he has directed (1987-1996).**

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## Cicero the Homerist

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In six letters<sup>1</sup> written to Atticus over a span of fourteen years (59-45 BCE), Cicero quotes *Iliad* 6.442 in whole or in part: αἰδέομαι Τρῶας καὶ Τρωάδας ἐλκεσιπέπλους (“I hesitate before Trojan men and Trojan women with their trailing dresses”).<sup>2</sup> Cicero uses the line to express his hesitation to the reactions of others to a decision, political or literary, that he feels he must make. He clearly depends upon Atticus’ deep knowledge of Greek literature, as he never names the poet, cites the scene or book, or identifies the speaker. He assumes that Atticus will know the passage, in which Hector explains to Andromache why he must return to the fighting or be shamed in front of his fellow Trojans.

Cicero presents himself as Hector attempting to defend Troy against the Greeks, so he surely knows that the battle will be lost and Hector killed, despite all of his efforts on both the battlefield and in the city.<sup>3</sup> If Cicero is Hector, then Rome is Troy, but who might be the enemy? Perhaps in the earliest citation of the passage in a letter to Atticus in 59 BCE (25.1), Catiline could play the role of Achilles. In the later ones, which come in a five-year span at the end of Cicero’s letters to Atticus (50-45 BCE), he might have cast Julius Caesar or his assassins in the role. Whether we wish to make a specific link between the Homeric verse and either the Catilinarian conspiracy or the end of Caesar’s dictatorship, we can see Cicero identifying himself as part of the Trojan ancestry that lies behind Rome, even though he himself is a *novus homo*.<sup>4</sup>

After he quotes the sentence in full for the first time in a letter to Atticus (25.1), Cicero never again uses the whole remark, but rather borrows only a phrase or two, usually αἰδέομαι Τρῶας. The Homeric verse seems to have become a private aphorism, perhaps shared between Cicero and Atticus from their school days, and its use can stand as a token of their easy familiarity not only with the Homeric poems but also with the Alexandrian scholarship that regularized their form. Such knowledge would have been the natural result of the kind of

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<sup>2</sup> *Ad Att.* 25.1, 124.4, 135.3, 166.2, 321, 332. For the enumeration of Cicero’s letters, I have followed Shackleton Bailey 1978a and 1978b. See Steele 1900:387-410, espec. 394-95, on Cicero’s quotations of Homer.

<sup>3</sup> I am grateful to one of the anonymous readers for pointing this possible line of inquiry out to me.

<sup>4</sup> See Dugan 2005:7-13.

education that an upper-class Roman male could have received. Early in their schooling, little boys would have been given passages of Homer to rework or paraphrase; at every stage in their education, they would have read the epics. Most schoolboys would not have read much more of the *Iliad* than books 1-6 and fewer would have read any of the *Odyssey* (perhaps books 1, 4, 6, 9, 11, and 18), if the few surviving papyri are any guide.<sup>5</sup> Cicero, however, cites or quotes from eleven books of the *Iliad* and nine of the *Odyssey*, refers to many other Greek authors, and even composes in Greek (see *Ad Att.* 19, for example). He also makes casual reference to Aristarchus as an editor, revealing not only his knowledge of the texts that had been the subject of study in Alexandria through the second century BCE, but also some knowledge of the scholarship on those works. He is even eager to obtain a copy of a work by Tyrannio, probably his Περὶ τῆς Ὀμηρικῆς Προσφθιάς, devoted to Homeric accentuation (*Ad Att.* 306.2). In no extant work, however, despite his evident familiarity with Alexandrian scholarship, does Cicero refer to a passage in the Homeric poems by book number, even though the book divisions had been established by that time (Higbie 2010).

While Cicero may enjoy a shared literary reference in letters to Atticus or to other similarly educated colleagues, his use of Homeric citations depends on genre and audience expectations. The knowledge of the Homeric texts and scholarship on them that Cicero displays in his letters is not found in either his philosophical works or his orations. He seems to be well aware that the literary sophistication and knowledge of Greek that can be shared between equals would not be suitable for works with a wider circulation and acknowledges tacitly, at least, the complex Roman feelings of military superiority, if not literary, over some conquered peoples. This attitude may lie behind Cicero's advice in *De Officiis* 1.31.111: Romans should not sprinkle their native tongue with Greek words, which exposes them to mockery, just as they should not introduce foreign ways into their behavior in general.<sup>6</sup> Public speakers might thus put themselves at some political risk by exhibiting too much knowledge of Greek. Cicero, as a *novus homo*, perhaps felt this danger more acutely than the *nobiles* with a stronger family tradition of service to Rome behind them and so monitored his use of Greek carefully, especially since he was known to be such a philhellene.<sup>7</sup> In this essay, I survey Cicero's uses of the Homeric epics and scholarship on them, showing how he tailors his presentation of his knowledge to his audience and occasion. In doing so, he shapes—or hopes to—his audience's regard for himself.

In his letters, Cicero may cite Homer by name or simply use a passage from the epics without identifying the poet or book number, presumably expecting that either the narrative itself or the distinctive dialect forms and meter will be known to his recipient. In general, Cicero uses the Homeric epics as a decorative element, to add a literary elegance. Once, however, in response to Atticus' critique of *On the Republic* 3.25, he cites the Homeric catalogue of ships, among other authorities, to make a scholarly point and to explain what he had written (*Ad Att.* 116.3=6.2.3):

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<sup>5</sup> See Morgan 1998, especially Tables 11-12; Clarke 1968:18-22 discusses the evidence available for Cicero's education; cf. Corbeill 2002, Criboire 2001.

<sup>6</sup> Cicero puts a similar remark in Antonius' conversation with Catulus, *De Oratore* 2.36.153.

<sup>7</sup> I am grateful to one of the anonymous readers for suggesting this point to me. See Guite 1962; Corbeill 2002:23 quotes the remark that Cicero puts in his own grandfather's mouth (*De Oratore* 2.265): "Our people are like Syrian slaves: the better they know Greek, the worse they get."

Arcadiae censebat esse Lepreon quoddam maritimum; Tenea autem et Aliphera et Tritia νεόκτιστα ei videbantur, idque τῷ τῶν νεῶν καταλόγῳ confirmabat, ubi mentio non fit istorum. itaque istum ego locum totidem verbis a Dicaearcho transtuli.

[Dionysius] thought that Arcadia included a place on the coast called Lepreon, while Tenea, Aliphera, and Tritia were recent foundations in his opinion, which he supported by the Catalogue of Ships [τῷ τῶν νεῶν καταλόγῳ], where they are not mentioned. So I took the passage over from Dicaearchus just as it stood.<sup>8</sup>

Because Cicero, like other intellectuals of his time, regards the Homeric catalogue of ships as a reliable source of geographical and thus, on occasion, political information, he uses it to defend a point that he has made. He does not actually say that he has checked the passage in *Iliad* 2, but cites Dicaearchus, one of the intellectuals in Aristotle's world. By doing so, Cicero also presents his credentials as a scholar.<sup>9</sup>

In some lighthearted remarks in his letters, Cicero further displays his acquaintance with Alexandrian scholarship on Homer. Cicero writes to Atticus in 61 BCE, describing a meeting of the Senate at which both Pompey and Crassus spoke. Cicero describes Crassus' speech (*Ad Att.* 14.3):

quid multa? totum hunc locum, quem ego varie meis orationibus, quarum tu Aristarchus es, soleo pingere, de flamma, de ferro (nosti illas ληζύθους), valde graviter pertexuit.

In short, he [Crassus] worked up the whole theme which I am in the habit of embroidering in my speeches one way or another, all about fire, sword, etc. (you are their Aristarchus and know my colour-box), really most impressively.

With this seemingly casual remark, it is clear that if Atticus is cast in the role of Aristarchus, then Cicero sees himself playing Homer.

Atticus is not the only correspondent with whom Cicero can allude to Aristarchus. In 50 BCE, he writes to Appius Pulcher and, in the conclusion of his letter, apologizes for an earlier letter that upset him (*Ad Fam.* 74.5):

sed si, ut scribis, eae litterae non fuerunt disertae, scito meas non fuisse, ut enim Aristarchus Homeri versum negat quem non probat, sic tu (libet enim mihi iocari), quod disertum non erit, ne putaris meum.

But if the letter was, as you say, not well-expressed, you may be sure I did not write it. Just as Aristarchus denies the authenticity of any Homeric line which he does not like, so I would request

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<sup>8</sup> Translations of Cicero's letters are by Shackleton Bailey 1978a and 1978b.

<sup>9</sup> Kim (2010:47-84) examines how ancient scholars like Strabo regarded the Homeric epics as a source of accurate geographical and historical information, but also believed them to be adorned with mythology. Smethurst (1952) discusses the evidence for Cicero's use of Dicaearchus in developing his theory of the mixed constitution.

you (being in jocular vein), if you find any piece of writing not well-expressed, not to believe I wrote it.

Cicero expects that Appius Pulcher will understand the reference and appreciate the humorous parallel that he is making: as in his letter to Atticus, he puts himself in the role of Homer.

Four years later, Cicero jokes about Aristarchus' use of the obelus in a story he tells to Dolabella about some sort of financial disagreement between two men in their circle (*Ad Fam.* 217.1=9.10.1):

profert alter, opinor, duobus versiculis expensum Niciae, alter Aristarchus hos ὀβελίζει; ego tamquam criticus antiquus iudicaturus sum utrum sint τοῦ ποιητοῦ ἢ παρεμβλημένοι.

[Vidius], I believe, is producing a couple of lines registering a payment to Nicias, who on his side Aristarchus-like obelizes these same. My job is to describe like a critic of old whether they are the poet's own or interpolated.

Again, Cicero applies the terms of literary scholarship, specifically obelizations, to another area of life—a dispute over a financial transaction—to make a small joke. This time, however, he portrays himself as a fellow critic of Aristarchus and not the poet. Cicero clearly knows the editorial work of the Alexandrian scholars on the text of Homer and expects that his correspondents will as well.<sup>10</sup> The literary joke may be even more appropriate if Syme's identification of one of the two men involved in the financial dispute is correct (1961:25-27): Nicias may be a well known literary man from the island of Kos who seems to have enjoyed a certain amount of high living among a literary set in Rome.<sup>11</sup>

Cicero's essays show a different use of Homer: his references to the poet are much less detailed and he makes no references to Homeric scholarship. He does not often cite either poem or specific passages in them, but instead uses Homer as a convenient literary allusion or as part of literary history (see, for example, *De Optimo Genere Oratorum* 2.6, *Topica* 55). Ennius' dream in which Homer appears to him is referred to three times in Cicero's works (*Academica* 2.51, 2.88; *Republic* 6.10), and Homeric gods and events are useful in discussions about the differences between poetry and history (*Republic* 1.18-19; compare *De Natura Deorum* 2.70-71). But, though there are numerous references to the Trojan War, they are not scholarly; instead the citations serve as evidence of Cicero's—or his characters'—range and depth of knowledge. These citations may also suggest what Cicero and his literary friends saw as a general, and therefore acceptable, knowledge of the Homeric epics.

The difference between being able to refer casually to a range of Greek texts and showing oneself to be too knowledgeable can be seen in Cicero's *De Oratore*. Written in 55-54 BCE, the work purports to be a record of a conversation among several Roman orators and politicians in 91 BCE. Throughout the lengthy dialogue, itself modeled on Plato's works, the various speakers

<sup>10</sup> See also Cicero's remarks to Papirius Paetus (*Ad Fam.* 190.4).

<sup>11</sup> Suetonius quotes this passage in his portrait of Nicias (*De Grammaticis* 14.2); see Kaster 1995: *ad loc.* for a discussion of the identification of Nicias.

reveal an ambivalent regard for Greek literature and its place in Roman life and education: although they freely refer to authors like Aristotle, Greek historians, and orators, they do not quote from any of these texts, but only summarize or mention them; nor do they give a specific reference to any particular Greek text, but merely refer casually to a work (for example, at 2.341).

In the third book of the dialogue, Cicero gives Crassus two opportunities to cite Homer. When he wants to make a point about teachers and their subjects, Crassus trots out a surely expected reference to Phoenix (3.15.57):

ut ille apud Homerum Phoenix qui se a Peleo patre Achilli iuveni comitem esse datum dicit ad bellum ut illum efficeret “oratorem verborum actoremque rerum.”

just as in Homer, Phoenix says that he was given to the young Achilles by his father Peleus to be a companion for war, so that he might make of him “both a speaker of words and a doer of deeds.”

By his casual mention of the passage somewhere in the Homeric epics—“apud Homerum”—and by paraphrasing the famous line in Latin and not quoting the Homeric original (*Il.* 9.443), Crassus strikes a balance between showing his knowledge of the Greek epic and not appearing to be too much of a Graeculus.

Later, when Cicero has Crassus refer to Pisistratus and the “Homeri libros confusos,” it is in the context of a conversation about the decline in public figures: previous generations of Roman leaders are presented as knowledgeable about many things in various fields, while current leaders either lack any expertise at all or specialize in one particular area only (3.132-36). Crassus turns from Roman public figures to Greeks for “doctrinae exempla,” and begins by citing those Greek figures known as “sapientes,” the wise men: six of the seven were also political leaders. Without naming all seven, Crassus singles out Pisistratus for particular praise (3.34.137):

Quis doctior eisdem illis temporibus aut cuius eloquentia litteris instructor fuisse traditur quam Pisistrati? qui primus Homeri libros confusos antea sic disposuisse dicitur ut nunc habemus. Non fuit ille quidem civibus suis utilis, sed ita eloquentia floruit ut litteris doctrinaque praestaret.

Who is described as having been more learned in those times or whose eloquence was better trained by literature than Pisistratus? He is said to have been the first to organize the previously confused books of Homer in the way we have them now. Certainly, he was not useful to his own citizens, but he was so remarkable in his eloquence that he excelled in literature and learning.

From this praise of Pisistratus, Crassus then turns to briefer mentions of later Greek figures, but instead of citing a literary accomplishment for each, he names their teachers (3.34.138-41): Pericles, taught by Anaxagoras; Critias and Alcibiades, who talked with Socrates; Dio of Syracuse, taught by Plato; Timotheus, son of Conon, taught by Isocrates; Epaminondas, by the Pythagorean Lysis; Agesilaus, by Xenophon; Archytas of Taranto, by Philolaus; Alexander the Great, by Aristotle. Crassus argues for the importance of broad literary training, especially of

skill in oratory, for a public figure to be successful. Pisistratus, although he heads Crassus' list, does not follow the pattern that he has outlined, since Crassus identifies no teacher for the Athenian leader and says that, although he did not serve his fellow citizens in any way, he did organize the books of Homer. Perhaps because of the place which the poems of Homer held for subsequent generations not only of Greeks but also of Romans, Crassus is moved to put the Athenian tyrant at the head of his list for what he believed he did for education.<sup>12</sup>

Cicero, in his extant speeches, does not quote any Greek and refers only infrequently to Greek poets.<sup>13</sup> When he supports the poet Archias' claim to Roman citizenship, throughout the speech he expresses his love for the study of literature, but also claims a practical value for that love: literature has provided relief for him from the stresses of public life, in the way that others relax at banquets, or gambling, or sports (see *Pro Archia Poeta* 1-2, 12-16). Cicero also points out the service that literary men such as Archias can provide to military and civilian leaders, since they can immortalize their deeds for later generations to learn about (*Pro Archia Poeta* 5, 11, 14, 19-22, 24, 31).

In only one surviving speech, *In Pisonem*, does Cicero refer to the critic Aristarchus and he does so as part of his refutation of Piso's attack on him.<sup>14</sup> From Cicero's diatribe, it seems that Piso had accused Cicero of everything from governmental mismanagement to bad poetry, and so Cicero attempts to answer the literary criticism with this image (73):

Verum tamen, quoniam te non Aristarchum, sed Phalarin grammaticum habemus, qui non notam apponas ad malum versum, sed poetam armis persequere, scire cupio quid tandem in isto versu reprehendas: cedant arma togae.

Nevertheless, because we regard you not as an Aristarchus, but as a Phalaris as a critic, you who do not place a mark beside a bad line of poetry, but assault the poet with weapons, I long to know, finally, what you object to in this verse: "let weapons yield to the toga."

Cicero's remark depends on his audience of Roman senators knowing a certain amount of Greek literary and political history. He casts Piso as Phalaris, the sixth-century tyrant of Acragas, who had acquired a reputation for brutality and was said to have used violence on the poet Stesichorus,<sup>15</sup> rather than as Aristarchus, who merely marked any verse of the Homeric epics that he found objectionable. Cicero further asserts that Piso has misunderstood the line, obliquely attacking Piso's literary acumen.

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<sup>12</sup> Because so little evidence survives for the transmission of the Homeric poems, this remark in the *De Oratore* has been given more prominence in modern scholarship than it deserves and has not been placed in its context. An exception is Boyd 1995. Fantham (2004) does not discuss this passage in any detail, but see 248-49 and 261 for brief observations about Romans and Greek literary culture.

<sup>13</sup> On Cicero's citations of Latin authors as well as Greek, see Shackleton Bailey 1983 and Radin 1911:209-17.

<sup>14</sup> See Dugan 2005:21-74, in which he uses both the *Pro Archia Poeta* and *In Pisonem* to study how Cicero combines the worlds of literature and politics in his presentation of himself.

<sup>15</sup> But for his political opposition, rather than his poetry.

All of this suggests that Cicero knows his Homer and Greek scholarship on the epics, but is also well aware of his audience's expectations and biases. He uses Homer and the epics, even Alexandrian scholarship on the poems, throughout his work, though in his public persona he maintains a façade of only passing acquaintanceship, choosing to refer only vaguely to this material. He can employ Aristarchus and the obelus in jokes in letters to friends, but nowhere does he betray any knowledge of Homeric book divisions, used at least as early as the Alexandrians as a convenient way of referring to a place in the poems (Higbie 2010). Cicero clearly knows about book divisions in general, since he routinely refers to his own works in such terms,<sup>16</sup> but he does not refer to any part of the Homeric texts by book number, preferring instead the traditional reference to a scene or section—the catalogue of ships—if he cites anything specific at all.

From Cicero's practice, it may be fair to say that among educated, upper-class Romans there is an etiquette for the citation of Greek poets like Homer: the form of the citation and even the knowledge of Greek revealed in such a citation itself depended both on genre and on audience. Cicero does not cite the Homeric poems by book number in his extant works of any genre, despite his knowledge of their work and his own use of book divisions in his works and citation of them in others. It is also significant that Cicero never mentions any scholar of Homer other than Aristarchus. Not once does he refer to Zenodotus, Aristophanes of Byzantium, or Crates. It is as though Aristarchus, the last of the generations to work on the texts of ancient Greek literature before the breakup of the library in Alexandria, came to symbolize those scholars who came before him. To refer to Aristarchus, therefore, is to refer to literary critics and scholars. Cicero's failure to cite Crates is perhaps, in contrast, the greater oddity, if we accept both Crates' general importance to the history of literary scholarship in Rome and his particular value as a Stoic philosopher to Cicero himself.<sup>17</sup>

Cicero uses Homer in different ways and refers to the poet in varying degrees of specificity, depending on his purpose in making the reference and on the conventions of the genre in which he is writing. To friends and associates in his letters, an audience that shared his background and education, if not his extraordinary ability with language, Cicero displays the range and depth of his knowledge of Greek, especially Homer. When he composes his rhetorical and philosophical works, although he may be presumed to be addressing much the same audience as those who receive his letters, a different convention seems to govern his presentation of his knowledge of Greek: he does not quote Homer or other Greek authors very often or in any detail. In his speeches, Cicero makes the least use of his Greek learning, perhaps because he fears to seem to be not Roman enough. Cicero knows his audiences well, presenting himself in his letters, essays, and speeches as one who knows Greek, but also knows when to use it—and when not.

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<sup>16</sup>From his remarks in letters, we can see that Cicero constructs his longer works in book-length units (see, for instance, *Ad Att.* 321 and *De Oratore* 3.1.1) and sets up individual books with prefaces (for example, *Ad Att.* 89.2; 414.6).

<sup>17</sup>I am grateful to one of the anonymous readers for pointing this out to me.

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