
Gregory Nagy: Homer’s Text and Language. Urbana/Chicago: Illinois UP 2004. XVIII, 197 S. (Traditions.) 24.95 $.‘Homer’s Text and Language’ is a collection of reviews and essays published by Gregory Nagy in recent years. Although formally the book falls into two parts, Part I (pp. 3–128) dealing with the text and Part II (pp. 131–175) with the language of Homer, the main focus and indeed the very raison d’etre of the book is the impassioned exposition of Nagy’s views on the text of Homer as presented in Part I. A reader interested in the history of the textual criticism of Homer, both ancient and modern, and in editorial strategies over the last two centuries, from Villoison’s publication of Venetus A (1788) to the second volume of West’s Iliad (2000), will be amply rewarded. Nagy’s discussion of such cornerstone notions of the textual criticism of Homer as the vulgate, diorthôsis and numerus versuum, among others, is instructive and has much to commend it. Above all, however, this book is to be commended for the spirit of scholarly debate that permeates its pages. It is this spirit of debate that demonstrates, much more effectively than a dozen scholarly monographs, what a fascinating and dynamic field Homeric scholarship still is. Needless to say, ‘Homer’s Text and Language’ is itself a highly controversial book bound to arouse further debate over the text of Homer.

Chapter 1, dealing with the Homeric Scholia, is the only chapter in Part I that was not originally written as a piece of polemics. Chapter 2, a discussion of the problems of multiformity in Homer’s text, is a reaction to the views on the issue expressed on different occasions by Richard Janko and this reviewer. Chapters 3 and 4 originate in Nagy’s reviews of Martin West’s new Teubner edition of the Iliad and ‘Studies in the Text and Transmission of the Iliad’ (2001) which accompanied it. Finally, Chapter 5 is a response to Janko’s review of ‘A New Companion to Homer’ by Ian Morris and Barry Powell (1997). This is not to say that the collection lacks unity. Its two main themes are best highlighted by Nagy himself in the concluding sentence of Part I: «I close by signaling my intention to pursue further the rehabilitation of (1) the concept of an Aristarchean edition of Homer and (2) the importance of variant readings adduced by Aristarchus and other Alexandrian editors of the Homeric textual transmission» (128). Since these themes and variations on them emerge anew in each chapter, it seems to me more economical not to follow the chapters one by one but rather to engage with the issues raised in the book as a whole.

For Nagy, rather than being identical to the Homeric poems as we know them, Homer’s poetry is a system actualized in innumerable variations of which our Iliad and Odyssey are merely two particular instances. «From the standpoint of oral poetics, Homeric poetry is a system that generates the forms that survive in the texts that we know as the Homeric poems. Homeric poetry is not the same thing as the Homeric texts that survived in the medieval manuscripts, the ancient
quotations, and the papyrus fragments» (59; see also 14, 128). Accordingly, none of the extant variants generated by the system in question can be privileged as superior or, moreover, ‘original’: «If indeed Homeric poetry, as a system, derives from traditional oral epic diction, then we can expect such a system to be capable of generating multiform rather than uniform versions, and no single version can be privileged as superior in and of itself…» (61; see also 78–79). Each new copy of a given traditional poem would thus derive not from an earlier copy but from an oral performance of the poem in question and therefore would present a new original, not differing in any significant way from any other version: «So long as oral poetry persists in a given literate society, each written instance of a ‘version’ will be different from each succeeding instance… Variation is an essential feature of oral poetry, which is a process of composition-in-performance, and this feature is reflected – in varying degrees – by the written records of oral poetry» (76–77). This is true also of the text of Homer that Hellenistic scholars had at their disposal: «In general, the variant readings reported by the three most eminent editors of Homer at the Library of Alexandria – Zenodotus, Aristophanes, and Aristarchus – stem from such multiforms. The same goes for the variant readings reported by the most eminent editor of Homer at the Library of Pergamon, Crates» (38; see also 14–15, 43–44, 118). This is why the traditional methods of approaching the text of Homer should be reinterpreted in terms of oral poetics: «Thus the textual phenomena of (1) interpolation/omission and (2) varia lectio are comparable to the oral poetic phenomena of (1) expansion/compression and (2) intralinear formulaic variation» (62; see also 66, 114).

The main problem of Nagy’s approach as I see it is that it completely ignores the book culture of archaic and classical Greece. It is characteristic in this connection that Nagy avoids committing himself as to the date and circumstances at which the Homeric poems could have been fixed in writing. Both the dictation model as promulgated by Lord and Janko and West’s more conservative model of a poet who wrote out his own poems, accounting as they do for the fixation of Homer’s text in writing at an early date, are fiercely criticized, but no viable alternative is proposed. As a reviewer of Nagy’s earlier book put it, «Nagy lacks a good model of the relationship between written text and oral poem, or a clear picture of how written texts came into being».1 This seems to be the reason for Nagy’s unwillingness to embrace the idea that a book version of the Homeric poems, rather than merely a ‘script’ of oral performance, could have existed in Greece before the time of the Alexandrians. Thus the Alexandrians, and especially Aristarchus, become both the first collectors of the ‘scripts’ that reflected numerous oral versions of the Iliad and the Odyssey and the first editors of the poems. Again, this is to suppress the evidence pertaining to the production and circulation of books in pre-Hellenistic Greece. As Albio Cesare Cassio has recently pointed out, the very fact that in the second half of the sixth century B.C. Theagenes of Rhegium was capable of writing an allegorical commentary on the Battle of the Gods in Iliad 20–21 «automatically means that a fixed Homer, in

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1 Barry Powell, a review of G. Nagy, Poetry as Performance (Cambridge 1996), BMCR 97.3.21.
which those battles were inescapable, was already in existence». Protagoras’ comment, in the fifth century, that «the purpose of the episode immediately following the fight between the river Xanthus and mortal men is to divide the battle and make a transition to the Battle of the Gods, perhaps also to glorify Achilles» (DK 80 A 30) leads to much the same conclusion. Yet, these and similar pieces of evidence are nowhere to be found in the book under review.

Throughout the book, Nagy is consistent in maintaining that the variant readings adduced by the Hellenistic editors of Homer are ‘multiforms’ originating in the formulaic system of Homeric poetry. His reaction to the objection raised by an anonymous referee is characteristic in this respect: «There remains the theoretical possibility that a variant adduced by the Alexandrian scholars cannot be validated on the basis of what we know about the formulaic system inherited by Homeric poetry. Even if we found such a case, it would not prove that the given variant had to be a conjecture. It could mean simply that we do not have enough data about the formulaic system» (128). This conclusion is not only based on the shaky presumption that one hundred percent of Homer consists of traditional formulae but is also at variance with the editorial practices of the Hellenistic scholars as they come to light in our sources.

To begin with, Homer is far from being the only poet these scholars edited. Aristophanes of Byzantium, for one, worked extensively on lyric and dramatic poetry as well as on Homer. Are we invited to entertain the possibility that the philological methods he applied in the case of Homer differed from those applied to other Greek poetry? For it is obvious that, at least as far as the dramatic poetry is concerned, there is no way to treat each of the textual variants attested in the manuscripts as an ‘intralinear formulaic variation’ rather than merely a varia lectio, which was after all the inevitable concomitant of scribal practices all over the ancient world. Second, at least some Hellenistic scholars were widely known for their intervention in the text of the Homeric poems for moralistic or apologetic reasons. Crates of Mallos, notorious for tampering with the text of Homer for the purpose of bringing it into correspondence with the more advanced scientific ideas of his own age, immediately comes to mind in this connection. The example of Crates (who is explicitly associated with the Alexandrians on p. 38, see above) demonstrates beyond doubt that Nagy’s unqualified treatment of all the variant readings proposed by ancient scholars as oral multiforms is unwarranted.

This is not to say that the ancient editors of Homer did not use formulaic variants in their editorial work. The value of such ‘multiforms’, however, is far from being unambiguous.

Plato’s inexact quotation in Apology 28d of ἀλλ’ ἡμεῖς παρὰ νημιὸν ἐπίσων ἄγθος ἀροῦσης (‘but I sit here by the ships, a useless burden on the earth’), Achilles’ words in Iliad 18:104, is highly illuminating in this respect. On the one hand, Plato’s version, παρὰ νημιὸν χορὸνον ἄγθος ἀροῦσης (‘by the curved ships, a burden on the earth’), replacing the non-formulaic ἐπίσων with the formulaic χορὸν, introduces a variant which, from the point of view of the formulaic system, is more ‘original’ than the verse we find in the standard text of Homer. On the other hand, it banalizes the unique expression ἐπίσων ἄγθος ἀροῦσης, which is both poetically powerful and highly appropriate in the context of Iliad 18. When employed by an editor, such a multiform would be equivalent to a lectio facilior and as such would not differ in any significant way from a regular conjecture.

It follows, then, that the formulaic character of a given variant reading does not automatically guarantee its ‘originality’ (‘authenticity’ seems to be a more suitable term). This is due to the fact that no system, oral formulaic or other, can be treated as identical to an individual text that derives from it: the distinction between ‘langue’ and ‘parole’ would certainly be in place here. In other words, what is authentic in terms of oral tradition would not be authentic in terms of the individual text that derives from it, and vice versa. It seems that Nagy comes close to addressing this problem when he says, in his review of West’s Iliad: «I would never want to say it that way – that there was no original text of Homer. Obviously, at some point in history, there had to be a first time for textually re-ording what we know as the Iliad and the Odyssey. But the basic problem remains: such an Iliad and Odyssey were not the same texts that we know as our Iliad and Odyssey» (60–61; Nagy’s italics). Yet everything we know about the circulation of the Homeric poems since the archaic period indicates that they were fixed as individual texts at a much earlier point in history than Nagy would wish us to believe, whereas the fact that they were universally privileged as authoritative texts possessed of canonical status leaves little room for doubt that the history of their transmission belongs with the written rather than the oral tradition of ancient Greece.

Part II consists of four essays, the first three of which elaborate on the discussions of several linguistic issues originating in Nagy’s earlier publications. These are (a) the etymology and ‘folk-etymology’ of the name of Achilles (the latter should be respected, because there is no such thing as the only ‘genuine’ etymology); (b) the etymology of the name of Apollo (in so far as it is possible to connect it is with ἀπελλαί, Apollo should be recognized as the god of authoritative speech); and (c) the definition of the dactylic hexameter (both the metric and and the formulaic parameters should be taken into consideration). Finally, the last chapter is a self-contained study of ellipsis in Homeric poetry. Compared to Part I, the second part of the book is somewhat of an anticlimax, and I wonder whether it would not have been wiser on the part of the author and the editors to close the collection on page 128, at the end of the discussion of the text of Homer.