

PROFILES

HOMERIC STUDIES

In the century since Milman Parry argued that the Homeric poems arose from a long tradition of oral poetic performance, Homeric studies has been grappling in various ways with that argument. The most fundamental question has been the nature and function of the ‘formula’, famously defined by Parry as ‘an expression regularly used, under the same metrical conditions, to express an essential idea’ (M. Parry, *The Making of Homeric Verse* [1987], p. 13). In the fifty years between the end of World War II and the late 1990s debates about the implications of oral composition were the liveliest area of Homeric scholarship, a period whose vibrancy is best encapsulated in *A New Companion to Homer* (edd. I. Morris and B.B. Powell [1997]). After a comparatively unproductive interlude in the early 2000s, which was preoccupied with inconclusive debates about what a ‘formula’ is, the last ten to fifteen years have produced innovative studies of Homeric composition and aesthetics. Moreover, as has been the case for the last century, new approaches in other disciplines – including Embodied Cognition, New Materialism and Computational Linguistics – have been put to good use by Homerists. This essay discusses books published in the last decade that have made significant contributions to key scholarly developments both in Homeric scholarship and beyond, as well as new editions, commentaries and essay collections focussing on Homeric epic.

New tools and methodologies are addressing ongoing questions about formulas and oral poetry in fresh ways, with exciting results. C. Bozzone’s *Homer’s Living Language: Formularity, Dialect, and Creativity in Oral-Traditional Poetry* (2024) argues that formulas (Chapter 1), metre (Chapter 2) and dialect (Chapter 3) are ‘adaptive technologies’ that help the poet to support the cognitive load of oral poetic composition. Drawing on disciplines ranging from cognitive linguistics to hip-hop music to horse-racing announcers, Bozzone shows that the Homeric epics resemble other cognitively demanding forms of communication in which features that support the production of language also give it meaning for the speaker and their audiences. In *The Homeric Simile in Comparative Perspectives: Oral Traditions from Saudi Arabia to Indonesia* (2018) J.L. Ready considers the Homeric simile alongside other oral poetic traditions. In his reading similes are one element in a spectrum of oral art ranging from ‘shared’ motifs that are familiar to the community and help to reinforce its sense of belonging, to ‘idiolectal’ elements unique to a particular performer. Like Bozzone, Ready uses modern language phenomena to understand better how Homeric poets might have composed their poems and connected with their audiences.

The title of a two-volume conference volume on orality, *Rethinking Orality* (edd. A. Ercolani and L. Lulli [2022]), implies a reconsideration of orality in relation to the Homeric poems. These papers strive to situate oral poetry and the Homeric epics in current contexts of both Homeric studies and a ‘return to orality’ in contemporary culture (volume 2, p. ix). The contributions in Volume 1 offer broad and comparatively abstract approaches to orality, as indicated by the subtitle of the volume: ‘Codification, Transcodification and Transmission of “Messages”’. In contrast, the papers in Volume 2 focus primarily on orality in the Homeric epics. Six papers treat the Homeric epics in particular

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(E. Minchin, E.J. Bakker, A.C. Cassio, Bozzone, G. Scafoglio, J.S. Burgess) while four look at the orality of Homeric epic alongside various examples of later literature (Herodotus, ancient literary criticism, elegiac poetry, Middle High German epics). Another collection of papers, the Homeric essays of M. Finkelberg (*Homer and Early Greek Epic* [2019]), brings together several decades of scholarship by a notably prolific and influential Homerist. Of particular interest are the first ten papers, which deal with Homeric formulas. While some of these papers are easy to find in a typical academic library, others are less so, and the papers together are greater than the sum of their parts.

Cognitive, emotional, psychological and embodied approaches to Classics have gained enormous popularity in recent years, and Homer is no exception. This finds succinct expression in the fact that seven chapters (out of twenty-four) in the *Routledge Handbook of Classics and Cognitive Theory* (edd. P. Meineck, W.M. Short and J. Devereaux [2019]) are focused on Homer. The subject areas for these essays reflect general trends in Homeric scholarship: three are focused on cognitive linguistics (A. Kahane, A.S.W. Forte, R.J. Allan), three on cognitive literary theory (Minchin, A. Bonifazi, J.P. Christensen) and one on artificial intelligence (A. Lather). Ready's *Immersion, Identification, and the Iliad* (2023) is devoted to the question of why Homer has maintained popularity over the millennia, and, like Allan's essay in the *Routledge Handbook*, explores how Homeric texts are able to immerse their readers and prompt them to identify with the characters therein. What is innovative about this study is its application of a multidisciplinary array of theory to illuminate the different strategies through which Homeric epic engages its audiences.

A similar attention to the empathetic quality of Homer defines Christensen's *The Many-Minded Man: The Odyssey, Psychology, and the Therapy of Epic* (2020). Through the lens of modern psychological theories, therapeutic functions emerge for characters both within the poem and for its readers (for instance, the effects of isolation and how it can be overcome). E. Austin's *Grief and the Hero: The Futility of Longing in the Iliad* (2021) takes Achilles' grief as its focus and explores how the terminology of *pothē* in the *Iliad* encompasses emotions and behaviours unique to Achilles. A. Purves, meanwhile, in *Homer and the Poetics of Gesture* (2019), combines narrative study with a focus on embodiment by homing in on different types of formulaic actions within Homeric epic (e.g. falling, leaping). Doing so demonstrates how these specific movements can create distinctive connections between individual human characters and the narrative structure of the poems.

As L.G. Canevaro has shown, the framework of New Materialisms provides an additional toolkit for Homeric studies. In *Women of Substance in Homeric Epic* (2018) Canevaro explores how Homeric women express their agency in and through objects. By centring objects, rather than subjects, Canevaro's study inaugurates a novel way of reading Homer. Lather's *Materiality and Aesthetics in Archaic and Classical Greek Poetry* (2021) adopts a similar theoretical framework in applying the New Materialisms as well as cognitive theory to literary representations of *poikilia*. C. Stocking's *Homer's Iliad and the Problem of Force* (2023) also productively combines theoretical models with philology by revisiting the representation of force(s) through the lens of French structuralism. Purves's 2024 article, 'Homer and the Simile at Sea' (*Classical Antiquity* 43 [2024], 97–123), in its exploration of the relationship(s) between water, poetics and bodies, represents one of the first examples of Homeric scholarship informed by the Blue Humanities. Her in-progress book, *Blue Homer: Reading the Sea in and beyond the Odyssey*, will likewise be the first monograph in this subject area. Similarly attentive to the natural world in Homer is E. Hall's forthcoming book, *Epic of the Earth: Reading Homer's Iliad in the Fight for a Dying World* (2025). This work finds the origins of

contemporary ecological disaster within the epic and its portrayals of the exploitation of natural resources.

Due in no small part to I. de Jong, the Homeric poems have been, and continue to be, fertile ground for narratological readings in particular and for narrative studies more generally. In a Festschrift for de Jong (M.P. de Bakker, B. van den Berg and J. Klooster [edd.], *Emotions and Narrative in Ancient Literature and Beyond* [2022]) Part 1 takes archaic epic as its focus, and eight of its nine chapters are devoted to Homer. Together, these contributions illustrate the remarkable variety of ways in which different elements of narrative structures (e.g. analepsis, focalisation) affect the presentation of emotions and emotional states. J. Grethlein is another prominent voice in the field of ancient narrative studies, and his *Die Odyssee: Homer und die Kunst des Erzählens* (2017) aims to uncover, for an audience of specialists and generalists alike, the particular appeal of the *Odyssey*. For Grethlein the answer lies in the possibility that narratives afford for conveying the vividness and immediacy of lived experiences.

While a section on (ancient and modern) reception of Homer would require its own essay, several monographs have addressed the relationship between Homer and his contemporaries or near-contemporaries. M. Mueller, for example, has produced a study of Sappho and Homer that places the poets in dialogue rather than in competition (*Sappho and Homer. A Reparative Reading* [2024]). What emerges is a ‘reparative reading’ that reveals how Sappho’s poetry can shed light on ‘some of the unnoticed and undervalued features of the Homeric poems’ (p. 193). This is a novel approach to the study of these most storied of poets and paves the way for further reparative readings in these genres and beyond. Comparably novel (and avowedly controversial) is B. Currie’s *Homer’s Allusive Art* (2016). This revives neo-analytical study of Homer by arguing for the presence of allusions within the Homeric corpus (including but not limited to the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*), including allusions to non-extant poems as well as to Near Eastern poetry. While this methodology may not convince the diehard adherent to the oral-traditionalist viewpoint, Currie’s point that Homer alone should not be exempt from this sort of study is productively borne out in the case studies he develops. T.J. Nelson expands upon Currie’s work in *Markers of Allusion in Archaic Greek Poetry* (2023), which argues that overt awareness of and reference to other poets (which he terms ‘indexicality’) is not the purview of Hellenistic and Latin poetry, but was a fundamental feature of Greek poetics from the very beginning. Both Currie’s and Nelson’s books represent important interventions into the orality and textuality debates that are so fundamental to Homeric studies.

New editions are making important works of ancient Homeric scholarship more accessible to a wider variety of readers. An edition and translation is in progress of the *Odyssey* commentaries of Eustathius, the twelfth-century bishop of Thessaloniki (vols 1–2 [2022–], edd. E. Cullhed and S.D. Olson). Eustathius’ works provide many illuminating insights on both the Homeric poems and ancient scholarly debates about them, but his Greek and the formatting of existing scholarly editions of his work can be difficult to access for non-specialists. The compression and specialised language typical of Homeric scholia can be challenging even for Homeric scholars. A collaborative project under the aegis of Cambridge University Press (forthcoming 2025) will enable many more readers to understand and enjoy the considerable resources found in these ancient scholarly discussions. This new edition will include all the scholia to the *Iliad*, including the mythological D-scholia, not presented in the excellent edition of H. Erbse (1969–88). It will also provide English translations as well as extensive glossaries, explanatory notes and indexes. Scholars are also studying ancient scholarship as their main focus of inquiry rather than as a tool for understanding Homeric epic, as in a volume of essays honouring

the career of A. Rengakos (*More than Homer Knew: Studies on Homer and His Ancient Commentators* [2020]). These essays explore the rich variety of ancient examinations of Homer in sources ranging from Aristarchus to Sappho, Pindar, Callimachus and Stephanus of Byzantium.

Many recent initiatives strive to make information on the Homeric epics more widely available, often in new forms and media. Various digital resources both enable new approaches to Homeric studies and make existing research methodologies more practicable for large data sets. These include the [Chicago Homer](#), whose mission is to ‘make the distinctive features of Early Greek epic accessible to readers with and without Greek’. It offers searchable Greek texts of the Homeric epics, Hesiod (*Theogony*, *Works and Days* and *Shield of Heracles*) and the Homeric hymns, along with English and German translations and a range of search parameters not readily available from databases such as Perseus and the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*. The international collaborative database project *Digital Initiatives in Classics: Epic Speech* (DICES), now (late 2024) in a password-protected beta phase, expects to go live in 2025. It builds on existing databases (including [Speech Presentation in Homeric Epic](#), a compilation of all speech presentations in Homeric epic created by D. Beck) to provide searchable access to all the direct speeches in epic poets from Homer through Christian poets of late antiquity. The Ancient Greek and Latin Dependency Treebank ([AGLDT](#)) created by the Perseus project annotates a large corpus of Greek texts, including Homeric epic, with syntactic, morphological and semantic tags, allowing for various forms of close reading and analysis on a scale not previously possible. New advances in Homeric studies informed by computational linguistics that use language modelling and machine learning can be difficult for Classicists to access, as some are proprietary or are in development, while others are published in article form in journals with which Classicists may be unfamiliar, such as *Literary and Linguistics Computing* or the *International Journal of Digital Humanities*.

Given the enduring appeal of Homer to specialists and non-specialists alike, most welcome has been the publication of new translations, guides and commentaries. Notably, E. Wilson became the first woman to publish an English translation of the *Odyssey* (2018), and C. Alexander achieved the same feat for the *Iliad* (2015). Given how many translations of these works have already been published, these are fresh contributions that, in different ways, offer novel approaches to these poems. The *Cambridge Guide to Homer* (2020), edited by C. Pache, offers an expansive overview of many literary and cultural topics, largely in the form of ‘micropedia’ essays. Comprising three parts, ‘Homeric Song and Text’, ‘Homeric World’ and ‘Homer in the World’, this is a remarkably diverse resource for students as well as scholars. No less ambitious in its scope is *The Oxford Critical Guide to Homer’s Iliad* (2024), edited by Ready. What sets this apart is its structure, which consists of individual essays devoted to each of the *Iliad*’s 24 books. Helpfully, each essay adheres to the same structure (‘Plot summary’, ‘Themes’, ‘Poetics’, ‘Internal Cross-References and Further Reading’), which facilitates use of the volume as a whole. The *Oxford Critical Guide to Homer’s Odyssey*, organised under similar principles and edited by Christensen, is expected in 2025. The multi-volume encyclopaedic collection of essays on ancient epic edited by S. Finkmann and C. Reitz (*Structures of Epic Poetry* [2019]) provides extensive coverage of the Homeric poems on virtually any topic related to structure in epic poetry.

A new commentary on the *Iliad* is under way, based on the Ameis–Hentze–Cauer German commentary (1868–1913). The ‘Basel Gesamtkommentar’, as it is collectively known, began publication in 2015 with a *Prolegomena* volume that provides background on the major Homeric questions and on the distinctive editorial choices of the series. Each subsequent volume includes text and commentary on one book of the *Iliad*. Books covered

to date are 1–4, 6–7, 14, 16, 18–19, 21 and 24, with additional books in progress. Although the volumes appear first in German, and the series rationale is based on the need for an up-to-date German commentary, English translations have been appearing soon after the initial German publications. This illustrates one of the notable trends of the last decade, the increasing prominence of English as the *lingua franca* of Homeric studies.

University of Texas at Austin

DEBORAH BECK
deborah.beck@austin.utexas.edu

Wake Forest University

AMY MARS
latherak@wfu.edu