

Why Does Homer Lie?  
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There is a tradition in Greek poetry (and, later, prose) that authors discredit their predecessors as ‘liars’. Pindar, for instance, criticizes Homer for exaggerating Odysseus’ feats by exposing “Homer’s sweet verse, for upon his fictions and soaring craft rests great majesty, and his skill deceives with misleading tales” (*N.* 7. 20-23). Pindar accuses Homer of ‘lying’ in order to boost the credibility of his own account: Ajax was, in fact, a much greater hero than Odysseus. Pindar’s approach is symptomatic of such accusations. The accuser is primarily concerned with himself, i.e. his own credibility, while the accused primarily acts as a foil.

Once the notion that poets, first and foremost Homer, are liars had become something of a stereotype, people started contemplating the possible motivations for lying; this is the main focus of my paper. The question why Homer lies was important, especially for those who wanted to read his poetry in order to derive knowledge from it. The various answers were bound to have consequences for this important aspect of Homer’s reception.

The paper will examine the range of answers that authors from Plato to the imperial period gave to the question of why Homer lies. The starting point will be Plato’s seminal distinction of two types of ‘lies’ and his discussion of Homer’s ignorance in books 2, 3 and 10 of the *Republic*. This distinction has its roots in the two basic meanings of the word ψεύδος: that of unintentional and that of intentional falsehood. Plato and a few die-hard sceptics advocated the view that Homer, like any other poet, lies ‘unintentionally’ and explained it by his lack of knowledge. Others modified this approach and assumed that Homer’s views were mistaken, that is, he was deceived rather than devoid of any knowledge. The areas of knowledge referred to in this type of criticism will be a central point of this paper.

Such criticism was obviously devastating for any reading of Homer as a source of knowledge. Yet not even those who enthusiastically cherished the notion of Homer as a ‘teacher’ could ignore the obvious ‘falsehoods’ in his poetry. Consequently, they felt the need to explain them as ‘intentional’, thus maintaining the idea that he knew what he was doing. The reasons they gave for such deliberate lying include that Homer tried to cover up gaps in his knowledge or that his intention was to please (or entertain) his audience. The latter point deserves further attention because there are various reasons why Homer wished to please his listeners: pleasure in itself – commonly seen as *the* characteristic of poetry – was only *one* motivation. According to one view, the ‘lie’ could even be vindicated as a didactic tool, thereby turning the negative notion into a positive one. I shall conclude by briefly positioning the various views within the context of how Homer was used in ancient education.