

One Ring to Rule Them All: Quintus of Smyrna, Cyclic Poetry, and Imperial Greek Aesthetics

In the Hellenistic period Alexandrian scholars collected and cobbled together the poems that comprised the totality of Greek mythology, from the very beginning of the cosmos to the end of the heroic age (Burgess 2001). This body of poetry was called the κύκλος (“ring”), since the poems, when put together, formed a narrative circle; in English this collection is more commonly known as the epic cycle. The most famous part of this cycle was the eight poems that told the entire story of the Trojan War, including Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.

The third century CE Quintus of Smyrna covered much of the narrative material contained in Trojan War cyclic poems in his 14-book *Posthomerica*, which depicts events from the end of the *Iliad* to the beginning of the *Odyssey*. The epic’s opening and closing, single invocation to the Muses in book 12, and book divisions have traditionally been sources of anxiety for scholars (e.g., James 2004, Campbell 1981), but these features demonstrate how Quintus revises the aesthetics of the Hellenistic cycle by creating a poetic join between the Homeric poems.

Imperial Greek poets manufactured their own cyclic poems that covered similar sets of events as the epic cycle but with expanded time frames and in different aesthetic modes. In the third century Pisander of Laranda published the monstrous 60-book epic *Marriages of Heroes and Gods* that covered all events from the marriage of Zeus to the marriages of Roman emperors in the poet’s own time. This poem presumably treated the Trojan War, but with a dramatic shift away from the Homeric focus on conflict. Similarly the fifth century Nonnus produced the slightly shorter 48-book *Dionysiaca*, which Shorrock (2001) argues was designed as an epic cycle that displaced the original themes and episodes onto the divine figure of Dionysus.

In this paper I argue that Quintus, Pisander, and Nonnus through their poetry were participating in a debate over the place of Homeric poetry in imperial Greek culture. While the latter two argued that the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were stand-alone texts with their own unique style, Quintus argued that the Homeric poems reached their ultimate form joined into a cyclic whole. This debate in turn indicates a different strand of Homeric reception in the imperial period, when Hellenic identity was an important part of Greek self-promotion under Roman hegemony.

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