

## Homer's Hellenistic Audience

From a literary perspective, the transition from the Classical to the Hellenistic period is generally perceived in terms of a break rather than as a continuity. Among the changes the Hellenistic period brings, it seems, is a shift from oral performance to poetry intended for reading. In addition, texts experienced visually rather than orally, as well as the Museum and Library of Alexandria, further enabled a refined, learned style appreciable only by a small, highly educated audience of elites. This longstanding view of Hellenistic literary culture has some, perhaps even a large, degree of truth to it, but is too simplistic to describe fully the roles of literature among diverse Hellenistic audiences. In this paper, I would like to take a few first steps in reconsidering the question of audience by investigating how Homer was experienced in the Hellenistic period and what this might mean for Hellenistic literature.

Prior to the Hellenistic period, Homer and the Epic Cycle had already held an important place among popular audiences. Homeric recitations were to be found at festivals and could be competitive (West, 1-3). Papyrological and literary evidence, however, suggest that Homer was presented much differently in the Hellenistic period (Husson). Athenaeus 620b-c, in particular, reports on the activities of rhapsodes, and further informs us that Demetrius of Phalerum brought performers called *Homeristai* into theaters. Thus, by the Hellenistic period, Homer was both a scholarly text, thanks to the work of those such as Zenodotus and Aristarchus, and a script (Nagy, 156). The division between “script” and “text” suggests two different Homers, one “popular” and the other “scholarly.” This conclusion is complicated, however, by the fact that papyri containing fragments of Homeric theatrical performances retain archaisms, including archaic accent markings (Nagy, 128; 154-155). The *Homeristai*, then, seem not to have

performed a simplified (or modernized) version of Homer, nor were their performances confined to the educated elite (Husson, 99).

The literary and papyrological evidence for the *Homeristai* provide an example of high literature being brought before a large Hellenistic audience, an example with important implications for our conception of Hellenistic poetry. First, the preservation of archaic forms and accents among the popular *Homeristai* suggests that more than the Museum elite could understand literary dialects, a point somewhat supported by examples from drama (Revermann, 102-104). In fact, epichoric dialects are more likely to pose problems of intelligibility than traditional literary ones (for the differences, see Hall, 173-174). An author such as Apollonius, then, if recited, may well have been comprehensible to audiences outside the elite. Homeric performances would also have made Homeric plots and characters more familiar among average Greeks than one might expect. Without doubt, Hellenistic poetry often requires a high level of learnedness to be fully appreciated. Such learnedness is not necessarily required for *enjoyment*. One might think most immediately of Herodas' *Mimiambes*, though familiarity with Homeric scenes and tropes might make a work such as Theocritus' *Idyll* 11 accessible, as well.

This paper will not insist that Hellenistic literature was aimed at popular audiences, but, more modestly, I propose that popular audiences were not *de facto* excluded from Hellenistic poetry. Indeed, elite and popular audiences need not always have been discrete groups. Theaters, symposia, royal courts, poetic competitions, and other venues would have brought together audiences varying in size and social composition, and so it may well be beneficial to consider Hellenistic poetry in light of this variety. Indeed, an approach to Hellenistic poetry freed from the constraints of being "elite" literature could significantly reshape scholarly understanding of the period.

## Bibliography

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