

Minding Your P and Q: More than One Homer?

Seventy years ago, the late Frederick Combellack declared that the long-running battle in Homeric scholarship between “Analysts” and “Unitarians” had been, in the eyes of a majority of scholars around the world, decided in favor of the latter (Combellack 1950). But he also insisted that we cannot determine, except by mere subjectivity, where Homer’s “originality” is to be found. Nonetheless, anyone who reads through the Cambridge *Iliad* commentary volumes is likely to come away strongly impressed with the complex internal coherence of that epic. Similar things have been said about the overall design of the *Odyssey*, though many scholars are justifiably uneasy about its final book.

But Combellack spoke too soon — the late Martin West, in two of the last books of his illustrious career, argued that the *Iliad* should be credited to a highly skilled poet labelled P, whereas the *Odyssey* is due to a later, derivative, and decidedly inferior poet he calls Q (West 2011, 2014). He was able to quote (as does Combellack before him) Wilamowitz, from both early and late in his career, as saying that only *Idioten* could think that both poems came from a single creator. West had already placed the whole of *Iliad* 10 in brackets in his Teubner edition, but it’s a little more drastic to set aside the almost unanimous judgment of antiquity that a single person traditionally called *Homerus* (whatever the name actually meant) lies behind the great majority of the epics.

This paper will not claim to solve the puzzle, but it will seek to bring attention to a curious fact about the Homeric lexicon, one that is hard to interpret on either view of authorship, and to set it in a larger lexicographical context. That fact, mentioned in the introduction to J. H. Dee’s two-decade-old word-frequency study, is that, of the 7145 lemmata that underlie ca.

183,000 non-capitalized words in the epics, 51% are *koina* (occurring at least once in each) and 49% are *Iliad*- or *Odyssey*-isolates (Dee 2001). But, remarkably, the *koina* account for 96% of the 183,000, and those numbers would be even more lopsided if the *Iliad* had included just one instance each of *mnê stê res* (232 times in the *Odyssey*) and *subô tê s* (70).

Dee did not attempt to decide whether this odd statistic should be interpreted as “evidence of single authorship or just the homogeneity of a long-developed heritage” (xvi), but West’s claim of double authorship requires a more careful consideration of the issue. For now there are two quite different hypotheses, yet it is by no means obvious what kind of lexical distribution would be expected, either from a single author within an oral-formulaic tradition or from the combination of a great predecessor and an imitative but less skilled follower, both operating within that tradition

The paper explores this theoretical question, first on its own merits, then in comparison with two other datasets, one small but highly relevant, the other quite large but also somewhat remote. The first is the pair of nearly contemporary texts by Hesiod, *Theogony* and *Works and Days*, where we have an undisputed single author but very different subject-matter; the second is the vocabularies of the comedies of Shakespeare and Ben Jonson, where (regardless of eccentric ideas about the former) hardly anyone would contend that both corpora were written by the same person.

A compact handout will present comparative statistics—insufficient to prove one position against another, but enough to offer a clearer picture of this difficult but significant issue.

Bibliography

F. M. Combellack, “Contemporary Unitarians and Homeric Originality,” *American Journal of Philology* 71 (1950) 337-364.

J. H. Dee, *Vocabula Homerica in IV series per litteras et per numeros digesta: Four Sets of Word-Frequency Lists for the Iliad and the Odyssey* (Hildesheim: Olms-Weidmann, 2001).

M. L. West, *The Making of the Iliad: Disquisition and Analytical Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

M. L. West, *The Making of the Odyssey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).