“All the Famous Deeds of Achilles are Yours”: Homeric Exemplarity in Late Antique Panegyric

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**Abstract:** Late antique panegyrist often raise up their *laudandi* by casting a shadow on Homer and his (mainly Iliadic) heroes. This paper traces the history of an increasingly irreverent attitude towards Greece’s foundational poet and his heroes within panegyric compositions and asks what motivates this flamboyant rejection. The impact of a Christian mode of exemplarity is incontestable, but cannot wholly account for this development. Christian encomia which engage the Hebrew Bible for their *synkriseis* generally shy away from undercutting the venerable biblical exempla. My suggestion is that the “aggressive” attitude towards Iliadic exempla in classicizing panegyric is bound up with the position of the *Iliad* as the didactic text par excellence and as a central, yet deeply problematic, text in debates around ideal rulership.

**Introduction: Belittling Homer, Replacing the Iliad**

When Alexander, at the beginning of his campaign, made a detour to visit Troy and pour libations on Achilles’ tomb, he inaugurated a long list of generals and emperors who would imitate him, thus aligning themselves both with the Macedonian king and his Homeric avatar.¹ Alexander’s wistful comment, that

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Achilles was blessed for having in Homer “a great herald of his fame,”\(^2\) would also be echoed throughout later antiquity and right down to the end of Byzantium, when Mehmet II, upon conquering Constantinople, did not neglect to visit the site of Troy and offer his own version of Alexander’s *makarismo*.\(^3\) Whether or not this famous quip was actually delivered by Alexander, what lies behind it is, arguably, an appreciation of Homer not just as the ideal epic poet who stands at the origins of literature, but also as the supreme *court* poet: from the Hellenistic period onwards Homer (or at least the *Iliad*’s Homer) is increasingly viewed as Achilles’ panegyrist. A different source which reports the same anecdote about Alexander has Anaximenes, a historian and rhetorician who joined him on his campaign, retort: “O king, we too shall make you glorious.” Anaximenes apparently anticipates writing Alexander’s encomia or a history of his exploits in encomiastic tone. Alexander’s reply is devastating for his aspiring panegyrist: “By the gods, I would rather be a Thersites by Homer’s hand than an Achilles by yours!”\(^4\)

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1 For visits to Troy by generals and kings and especially Roman emperors, who saw it as their ancestral home, see Sage 2000. For late antique emperors emulating both Achilles and Alexander see, for example, *Historia Augusta*, Alexander Severus 31.4–5 with discussion in van’t Dack 1991.

2 See Plutarch, *Life of Alexander* 15.8: *μακαρίσας αὐτὸν ὅτι … καὶ τελευτήσας μεγάλου κήρυκος ἔτυχεν*.

3 See Ameling 1988.677, n. 98. For an epigram purportedly written by Hadrian, but which is likely late antique and which recasts Alexander’s saying, see Bühler 1978 and Skutsch 1979.

4 *Gnomologium Vaticanum* 78: *παρόντος δὲ Ἀλκιμένου καὶ εἰπόντος Ἐρρῆς, ὥσπερ ἐξέφη, ἠθελεν πρὸς τοὺς θεούς· ἄλλα μὲν τοὺς θεούς ἔφη, “παρ’ Ὑμηροί ἄδικος ἔβουλησεν ἄν ἐννεα Θερσίτης ἢ παρὰ σοι Αχιλλέας.” A similar anecdote is reported in the *Alexander Romance* 42. Translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.
Significantly, however, in this source Alexander’s *makarismos* correlates Homer’s greatness as herald to that of Achilles, and and the possibly interpolated word “not” casts the Homeric hero as undeserving of his poetic fortune: “O Achilles, how [not] being great, you received Homer as a great herald of your fame!” (ὄ Αχιλλευ· ὡς [οὐ] μέγας ὁν μεγάλου κήρυκος ἔτυχες Ὀμήρου!). While the historical Alexander, who reportedly idolized Achilles, would be unlikely to proffer a negative assessment of the hero, in late antiquity Homer-the-panegyrist is routinely attacked precisely for choosing an unworthy subject for his *Iliad*, which is now imagined as an epic panegyric – one of the hallmark genres of late antiquity. Nonnus’ *Dionysiaca*, for example, a sprawling epic poem of the fifth century which presents itself as, chiefly, a panegyric of Dionysus, features a “proem in the middle,” in which the poet refuses to engage in a *synkrisis* of

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5 Arrian’s *Anabasis* (second century CE) reports Alexander’s comment in the same manner as Plutarch, but then goes on to offer the author’s own view that Alexander’s feats were never celebrated as they deserved in either poetry or prose, “so that Alexander’s exploits are much less known than those slightest of deeds accomplished of old” (1.12.2: ὥστε πολύ μικρόν γιγνώσκεται τὰ Ἀλεξάνδρου ἢ τὰ φαινότατα τῶν πάλαι ἐργών). For Arrian as presenting a Homeric persona of himself in his prefatory chapters, see Liotsakis 2019.172–85. Arrian’s diminishing of the Trojan War’s scale and impact ultimately goes back to Thucydides’ “Archaeology,” on which see further below, text around n. 18.

6 For epic panegyric as an innovation of late antiquity with a long heritage in Byzantium see Agosti 2019.120. For the late antique focalization of earlier epic poetry through panegyric, see Pollmann 1999.63: Servius, for example, reads Virgil’s *Aeneid* as an encomium of Augustus. Cf. Ware 2017. For Homer’s epics being read as, fundamentally, encomia by later Greek critics from Dio Chrysostom to Libanius, see Pernot 1993.649–53.

7 See Miguélez-Cavero 2010.

8 On this type of proem see Conte 1992.
Dionysus to Achilles, saying that Homer should have sung the far superior struggles of Bacchus against the giants and left to other poets the labors of Achilles. His choice of the latter, and lesser, hero is, according to Nonnus, due to Thetis who snatched for her son the prize that should have belonged to Dionysus (25.260: τοῦτο Θέτις γέρας ἰππασαν). In a neat reversal of the Iliad’s first book, where Achilles’ γέρας, Briseis, is famously seized by Agamemnon, Nonnus’ Achilles snatches, through his mother, another’s γέρας: he undeservingly receives Homer’s gift of poetry, which should have belonged to Dionysus.  

George of Pisidia, Nonnus’ last late antique imitator, writes in the seventh century an iambic poem in praise of Heraclius’ victorious campaign against the Persians (De expeditione Persica, 622-24 CE). In the first canto (or “listening session”; ἄκροασις in Greek), Pisides claims that, if Homer had been aware of Heraclius’ perfect nature, he would have dedicated his efforts to sketching his portrait as the “one, fourfold image to be added to all the virtues combined” (1.80-81: προσθεὶς … τῶν ἄρετῶν συνημμένων / μίαν … τετράμορφον εἰκόνα), having abandoned the many fables (1.78: ἀφεὶς τὰ πολλὰ τὸν λόγον μυθέωματα) that forced him to portray the four virtues separately, embodied in different heroes.  

While Pisides follows this up with a reference to Nestor as a positive model of eloquence, naturally surpassed by Heraclius, a fragment from the third ἄκροασις suggests that his view of the Iliad’s protagonist would have been much more

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9 Much has been written on Nonnus’ combative relationship with Homer. The most extensive treatment is Shorrock 2001. For the competition between Dionysus and Achilles in the “proem in the middle,” see now Henry 2020.448–51.

10 Menander Rhetor 373 had advised praising the emperor’s deeds according to the four cardinal virtues. For Menander’s influence on Pisides see Demoen / Verhelst 2019.187–88. On Pisides’ antagonism with Homer and other classical authors, see Xenophontos 2020.
disapproving. The fragment addresses the hero in direct speech: “you rage, Achilles, and are drunk in your mind” (1.1: σφύζεις Ἀχιλλε, καὶ μεθύσκῃ τὰς φρένας). If a comparison with Heraclius had been made here, it would have been to the clear detriment, if not humiliation, of the Homeric hero.\textsuperscript{11}

The strategy of raising up the \textit{laudandus} by casting a shadow on Homer and his heroes is attested in the Latin literary tradition too. Already in the second century Fronto writes to Lucius Verus (in 165 CE) “the many exploits you accomplished Achilles would desire to have accomplished and Homer to have written.”\textsuperscript{12} Jerome’s \textit{Life of St. Hilarion}, written in 390 CE, begins with a reference to Alexander’s \textit{makarismos} of Achilles on his visit to the hero’s tomb. Jerome, however, proudly proves Alexander wrong.\textsuperscript{13} Homer was not the ideal panegyrist, and Achilles was far from the ideal subject of panegyric. Jerome’s subject, St.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{11} Pertusi 1959.293 speculates that the fragment belonged in a proemium which juxtaposed Achilles’ senseless wrath to the “santa ira” of Heraclius against his Persian enemy, Chosroes.
\item \textsuperscript{12} The letter (1.1) is fragmentary; this is the first surviving sentence, but its beginning is missing: … tantas res a te gestas, quantas Achilles gessisse cuperet et Homerus scripsisse.
\item \textsuperscript{13} Alexander’s \textit{makarismos} is also reported at the beginning of the \textit{Life of Probus} (1.1) in the \textit{Historia Augusta}, but here the author, Flavius Vopiscus of Syracuse, who must have been Jerome’s near-contemporary, assumes a humbler stance, refusing to present himself as a new Homer. He does not promise an elegant style and declares that he will limit himself to reporting the \textit{res gestae} of the emperor (1.1.6: neque ego nunc facultatem eloquentiamque polliceor sed res gestas). Flavius’ attitude is somewhat similar to the deferential tone of Silius Italicus (late first century CE), who has Scipio catch a glimpse of Homer in the Underworld (13.778–97) and lament that Roman achievements will not be sung by the divine bard who made Achilles greater by his verse. While the reader might “set off Scipio’s pessimism against Apollo’s promise to Ennius in the previous book” (Hardie 1993.115–16), the prevailing tone is one of sorrowful regret, evoking Alexander’s recognition that no panegyrist could ever match Homer.
\end{itemize}
Hilarion, is so much superior that Homer himself would have envied Jerome or even have fallen short of the laudatory task (1: *ut Homerus quoque si adesset, vel invideret materiae, vel succumberet*). In the sixth century, Venantius Fortunatus writes a poem for his friend, the bishop Felix, in celebration of his re-routing of a local river and the construction of a new dam. The poem (3.10) begins with an attack on the ancient bards: they should yield just as ancient deeds yield to innovation (3.10.2: *vincuntur rebus facta vetusta novis*). If Homer had witnessed the bishop’s feat, “everybody would read of Felix, none of Achilles” (3.10.5: *cuncti Felicem legerent modo, nullus Achillem*). Achilles is, once again, unworthy of his poetic fame.

This figurative erasure or belittling of Homer and his heroes survives well into the Byzantine era, where we find, for example, Theodosius Diaconus (tenth century) writing a panegyric poem, *De Creta Capta*, for Nicephorus II Phocas. Theodosius protests that Homer elevates what is actually small (v. 20: ὑψων τὰ μικρὰ) and “mingles lowly feats into conceited speech” (vv. 29-30: ὁ μιγνῶν / πράξεις ταπεινὰς εἰς ἐπηρμένους λόγους). Although not a panegyric *stricto sensu*, the Byzantine epic of Digenis Akritas (twelfth century) also accuses Homer of writing falsehoods, which now need to be silenced along with the legends of

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14 For a similar sentiment in a Greek panegyric, see Themistius *Or.* 19, a speech in praise of the emperor Theodosius, where Alexander’s saying is again mobilized and the panegyrist proclaims himself happy for having Theodosius as his subject (233b: ἐγὼ δὲ ἐμαιτῶν εὐδαιμονα ὑπολαμβάνω, ὅτι σὲ κηρύττειν ἔλαχον οἱ ἐμοὶ λόγοι).

15 On this poem and its debt to late antique panegyric tropes, see Agosti 2019.122. Kaldellis 2019 argues for a significant rupture in the performance of imperial panegyrics between the seventh and eleventh centuries; see esp. 706 on the classicizing experiments of the second half of the tenth century and the poem by Theodosius Diaconus.
Achilles and Hector. The disparagement of the main Iliadic heroes and the belittling of Homer’s poetic achievement have thus become instrumental in elevating both the new panegyrists and the subjects of their praise, but what are the mechanisms that drove this increasingly irreverent attitude towards Greece’s foundational poet and his heroes? And when exactly did it start?

**Homer and Panegyric: A Brief “Archaeology”**

A view of the Trojan War as, in reality, a primitive affair and relatively minor conflict is as old as Thucydides. The Athenian historian, in the “Archaeology” section of his first book, bitterly protests that the Trojan War does not deserve its renown: “while being most famous among those of old, it is shown by the facts to have been inferior to its repute and to the tradition that still attaches to it on account of the poets.” Thucydides, much like later panegyrists, aims to discredit the magnitude of the Trojan War in order to aggrandize the present conflict and,

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16 The attack on Homer can be found in both of the oldest manuscripts which transmit the poem. In the Grottaferrata manuscript, 4.27–28: παύσασθε γράφειν Ὅµηρον καὶ μῦθους Ἀχιλλέως / ὡσαύτως καὶ τοῦ Ἐκτορος, ἀπερ εἰτε ψευδέα (“Cease writing of Homer and the legends of Achilles / and likewise of Hector; these are false.”); in the Escorial manuscript, v. 718–9: καὶ οὔ λέγομεν καυχήσεις καὶ πλάσματα καὶ μῦθους / ἀ Ὅµηρος ἐψεύσατο καὶ ἄλλοι τῶν Ἑλλήνων (“And we are not repeating the boasts or fictions and stories / which Homer and other Hellenes falsely invented.”). Texts and translation from Jeffreys 1998.

17 E.g., on George Pisides belittling Homer, Plutarch, and Demosthenes in order to enhance his self-projection as imperial spokesman, see Xenophontos 2020.

18 Thuc. 1.11.3: ὃνομαστάτα τῶν πρὶν γενόμενα, δηλούται τοῖς ἔργοις ὑποδείστηρα ὡντα τῆς φήμης καὶ τοῦ νῦν περὶ αὐτῶν διὰ τοὺς ποιητὰς λόγου κατεσχηκότος. On the structure of the “Archaeology” and Thucydides’ difficulty with the Trojan War’s reputation, see Ellis 1991, esp. 373.
by extension, his own work, which would thus surpass and replace the epic
tradition.¹⁹ A century later, such a criticism of the small scale of the Trojan War
can already be found in a panegyric speech. In early 322 BCE Hyperides delivers
the Funeral Oration in Athens, celebrating the city’s resistance to Macedon in the
Lamian War. Hyperides claims (paragraphs 35-36) that the Athenian general
Leosthenes is superior to the Greek heroes who conquered Troy: while they only
took one city, Leosthenes saved his city and humiliated the force that ruled over
the whole continents of Asia and Europe; and while they defended the honor of
one woman, Leosthenes prevented the hubreis that would be committed against all
the women of Greece.

Hyperides’ exultation of his laudandus above the heroes of the Trojan War is,
however, atypical in this era: in both the Classical and Hellenistic periods
laudandi are more often equated with, rather than elevated above, their real or
mythic ancestors, including Homeric heroes.²⁰ In Isocrates’ panegyric of the city
of Athens, the Panathenaicus (339 BCE), Agamemnon, envisioned as the mythic
equivalent of Athens and by extension all of Greece, is unconditionally and
extensively praised as the model king who united all the Greeks against the
barbarian Trojans and did not give up on his Pan-Hellenic mission until his
objective was achieved.²¹ His feat was insurmountable in his own time and will

¹⁹ See, e.g., Nicolai 2001.284.
²⁰ For the unconventional nature of this comparison in Hyperides, see Herrman 2009 comm. ad loc.
²¹ Panathenaicus 73–84. Isocrates presents Agamemnon as a model for Athens’ (and Macedon’s)
expansionist agenda against the “barbarian” East.
remain so for all posterity.\footnote{Panathenaicus 78: τούτου δὲ κάλλιον στρατήγημα καὶ τοῖς Ἐλλησιν ὄφελμότερον οὐδεὶς φανήσεται πράξεις ὀυτὲ τῶν καὶ ἐκεῖνον τῶν χρόνων εὐδοκιμησάντων ὀυτὲ τῶν ὑστερον ἐπιγενομένων.} In a different speech, addressed to the Cypriot king Evagoras (\textit{Or.} 9), Isocrates praises Achilles, Ajax, and Teucer as the glorious ancestors of Evagoras and the most distinguished heroes in the war of the Greeks against the “barbarians” (9.17.6: ἐπὶ τοὺς βαρβάρους).

In the mid third century BCE Theocritus writes a hexameter encomium for Ptolemy II Philadelphus in which the king is compared to Diomedes and Achilles. The comparisons appear near the beginning of the poem, in the section dealing with Ptolemy’s ancestry, and their obvious function is to underline the similarities between fathers and sons (verging on identity in the case of the Ptolemies, as father and son share the same name), as well as to strengthen the Ptolemaic dynasty’s claim to two heroes that are important in a Macedonian context.\footnote{Idyll 17.53–57: Ἀργεία κυάνοφρυ, σὺ λαοφόν Διομήδεα / μισγομένα Τυδήτι τέκες, Καλυδωνίῳ ἄνδρι, / ἀλλὰ Θέτις βαθύκολπος ἀκοντιστάν Ἀχιλῆα / Αἰακίδα Πηλῆ: σὲ δ’, αἰχμητὰ Πτολεμαῖε, / αἰχμητῷ Πτολεμαίῳ ἀρίζηλος Βερενίκα. “Darkbrowed lady of Argos, you lay with Tydeus, a man of Calydon, and bore bloodthirsty Diomedes; deep-bosomed Thetis bore spearman Achilles to Peleus, son of Aeacus; but you, warrior Ptolemy, are the child of the warrior Ptolemy and glorious Berenice.” Trans. Hunter 2003. On the importance of Diomedes as an Argive hero for the Macedonian royal house (the “Argeads”), see Hunter’s comment on v. 53 and on his cult in Ptolemaic Cyprus; comm. on vv. 53–58.} While the arrangement of the comparisons might imply that Philadelphus, who had two divinized parents, is superior to Diomedes (who had none) and Achilles (who had one),\footnote{For this argument, based on the presentation of the comparisons in a sort of priamel, see Griffiths 1979.76.} it is left up to the reader to draw this conclusion. Theocritus does not spell
out the implications of the heroes’ ancestries nor does he feel the need to distance Philadelphus from the reputation of Diomedes as bloodthirsty and impious or from the wrathful, impulsive, and overly violent traits of Homer’s Achilles. On the contrary, the strong Homeric flavor of the poem’s language together with the thematic echoes work to present Philadelphus “as a latter-day Agamemnon or Achilles, and thus as the true heir of Alexander.”

Homer and the Iliad in Late Antique Panegyric

The contrast with the treatment of Iliadic heroes in late antique panegyrics is stark. Although not all instances would fall into the pattern outlined below, there is a clear tendency not only to belittle the Trojan War on account of its scale (as seen above) but also, and more crucially, to draw attention to the moral and other shortcomings of its heroes, which the laudandi are said not to share. A striking example is the encomiastic poem written by Cyrus of Panopolis (fifth century) for the emperor Theodosius II and preserved in the Palatine Anthology:

πάντα μὲν Αἰακίδαο φέρεις ἄριδείκετα ἔργα
νόσφι χόλου καὶ ἔρωτος· ὀστεύεις δ’ ἀτε Τεῦκρος,
ἀλλ’ οὐ τοι νόθον Ἠμαρ· ἔχεις δ’ ἐρυκυδέα μορφήν
tὴν Ἀγαμεμνονέην, ἀλλ’ οὐ φρένας οἶνος ὀρίνει·
ἐς πινυτὴν δ’ Ὀδυσῆη δαώρον πᾶν σε ἐίσκνο, (5)
ἀλλὰ κακῶν ἀπάνευθε δόλων· Πυλίου δὲ γέροντος
Ἰσον ἀποστάξεις, βασίλευ, μελιφέα φωνήν,
πρὶν χρόνων ἀθρήσεις τριτάτην ψαύοντα γενέθλην.

25 Hunter 2003.60. For an overview of Hellenistic praise literature, see Strootman 2010, esp. 40–44.
All the famous deeds of Achilles are yours, except for his wrath and his love; you draw the bow like Teucer, but are no bastard; you have the great beauty of Agamemnon [Iliad 3.169], but wine does not disturb your mind; in prudence I liken you to the cunning Odysseus, but without wicked deceit, and, O King, you distil a honey-sweet speech equal to the old man of Pylos, before you see Time touching the third generation. (AP 15.9)\(^\text{26}\)

Cyrus compares Theodosius to a host of Homeric heroes, but they are all found to be in some way problematic, so each and every comparison has to be hedged, qualified, and contained by “subtracting” the attributes of each hero that are offensive and cannot be applied to the emperor. As each comparison is separated from its corresponding “subtraction” by either a change of line or strong caesura, the poem almost stages the process by which the panegyrist goes over the Homeric exempla looking for an ideal match for his laudandum, only to discover that Homeric heroes are, in fact, remarkably flawed models. The first comparison is perhaps also the most remarkable, because, especially for a late antique audience, Achilles’ personality is defined by his wrath and his many loves (for Deidameia, Briseis, Penthesileia, and Polyxena).\(^\text{27}\) One may very well ask what will be left of Achilles once his wrath and love are removed.

This litany of Homeric heroes to whom the emperor is similar and yet manifestly superior is somewhat reminiscent of Julian the Emperor’s encomiastic

\(^{26}\) Cameron 2016.40–41, whose translation I have used here, argues that this must be a fragment from a longer panegyric rather than an independent poem and that it must have been written at around 435 CE. On this poem cf. Viljamaa 1968.77–79 and Agosti 2019.122–23.

\(^{27}\) For the focus on Achilles as lover in post-classical antiquity, see Fantuzzi 2012.
tour de force: his *Second Panegyric for Constantius* (*Or. 2*), written while Julian was Constantius’ Caesar in Gaul, probably in the winter of 357/8 CE, after Julian had won several decisive battles. Almost the entirety of the speech is taken up by a gigantic *synkrisis* of the emperor to various Iliadic heroes. In the following passage, for example, we read of the emperor’s unsurpassable skills as soldier and archer:

\[ \text{τίνι δήποτε οὖν τῶν ὑπὸ τῆς Ομηρικῆς ύμνουμένων σειρήνος εἴξομεν; ἐστὶ μὲν γὰρ τοξότης παρ’ αὐτῷ Πάνδαρος, ἀνήρ ἀπιστος καὶ χρημάτων ἔττων, ἀλλὰ καὶ} \]

\( ^{28} \) This date and whether or not the speech was actually delivered are still moot points; see Drake 2012. 39. On the “sincerity” of the speech and whether or not it contains a hint of insubordination towards Constantius, see n. 29 below.

\( ^{29} \) There is no space here to consider in detail the controversial beginning of this speech, where Julian plunges directly into a discussion of the relative merits of Achilles and Agamemnon in the context of their Iliadic conflict. Some scholars have argued that Julian’s criticism of Agamemnon’s insolence in removing Briseis from Achilles is a veiled threat against Constantius, who had recently recalled from Gaul Julian’s close friend and advisor Saturninus Secundus Salutius: Julian could be hinting that, like Achilles, he is no longer willing to be fighting his king’s battles. For the speech as a cryptic allusion to Julian’s disloyalty, see Bidez 1965.113; Athanassiadi 1992.63–66; Curta 1995.186–87; Schorn 2008.248–50; Stenger 2009.142–49; Drake 2012.37; Alvino 2016; Omissi 2018.202. While this reading is not entirely implausible, it should be noted that Julian criticizes Achilles almost as much as he does Agamemnon: he condemns him as excessively rash in falling out with his king and as misguided in spending his time singing when he should have been fighting. At the conclusion of this passage Julian claims that Constantius is a better king than Agamemnon, granting forgiveness even to those who do not deserve it. The *synkrisis* thus conforms to the pattern of other such Iliadic comparisons in the speech. For arguments against the view of this panegyric as a veiled threat against Constantius, see Whitby 1999.87, esp. nn. 46 and 47; Garcia Ruiz 2018.208–209. Ross 2018.184 is also right to point out that Julian’s later persona as the openly rebel and “apostate” should not be retrojected to “Julian the Caesar” of the mid 350s.
And now which one of those heroes to whom Homer devotes his enchanting strains shall I admit to be superior to you? There is the archer Pandaros in Homer, but he is treacherous and yields to bribes [Il. 4.97]; moreover his arm was weak and he was an inferior hoplite: then there are besides, Teucer and Meriones. The latter employs his bow against a pigeon [Il. 23.870] while Teucer, though he distinguished himself in battle, always needed a sort of bulwark or wall. Accordingly he keeps a shield in front of him [Il. 8.266], and that not his own but his brother’s, and aims at the enemy at his ease, cutting an absurd figure as a soldier, seeing that he needed a protector taller than himself and that it was not in his weapons that he placed his hopes of safety. But I have seen you many a time, my beloved Emperor, bringing down bears and panthers and lions with the weapons hurled by your hand. (Or. 2.52d–53b)

Julian’s selective and bathetic reading of the Iliad not only points out moral shortcomings (Pandarus’ treachery) but also cuts the Homeric heroes down to absurd figures or, literally, a “laughable soldier” (γελοίος … στρατιώτης).

30 I am using the translation by Wright 1913.
shooting at pigeons and hiding behind others’ shields.\textsuperscript{31} Nor is it just the relatively minor Iliadic heroes that Julian subjects to this type of treatment: later on (in 75b–76b) he compares Constantius to Nestor and Odysseus in terms of the loftier pursuits of public speaking and deliberations. Julian cleverly points out that Nestor’s attempts at persuasion in \textit{Iliad} 1 were far from successful and then criticizes Nestor’s idea to build a wall for the Achaean camp as both cowardly and having no practical effect: after building Nestor’s proposed wall the Achaeans were in fact worsted by the Trojans. Odysseus, for all his famed eloquence, actually made matters worse in the embassy to Achilles (\textit{Iliad} 9): Achilles was provoked to start making preparations for his return home, which he had not even contemplated before listening to Odysseus. Achilles himself is not spared either: in a long-winded sequence (58b–62a) Julian compares Constantius’ battle by the river Drave (in the war against Magnentius) to Achilles’ battle by the Scamander.\textsuperscript{32} Whereas Achilles inhumanely slaughtered all the Trojans he captured in his blind rage after Patroclus’ death, Constantius magnanimously proclaimed an amnesty for his repentant enemies and is thus obviously the better man.

Agamemnon’s cruelty also turns him into a negative exemplum. Julian (99d–100a) claims that Constantius’ mercy towards his vanquished usurper’s son and allies marks him out as superior to the Achaean king “who vented his rage and

\textsuperscript{31} For Julian’s particularly scathing attack on Hector as an ineffectual warrior, see 67a–68c and 73b.

\textsuperscript{32} In the same breath as he denounces Achilles’ savagery Julian also accuses Homer of inventing as a “plaything” Achilles’ battle against the river itself: it is a fanciful, unrealistic account (\textit{Ὀμηροῦ … παίγνιον, καὶ ἀτομου μονομαχίας τρόπον ἐπινοήσαντος}). In 74a–b Julian also compares the Trojan War to Constantius’ military efforts in terms of scale, to the obvious benefit of the latter.
cruelty not only on those Trojans who had accompanied Paris and had outraged the hearth of Menelaus, but even on those who were yet unborn, and whose mothers even were perhaps not yet born when Paris plotted the rape.” The reference here is to Iliad 6.55–60, where Menelaus is about to spare a Trojan supplicant, but Agamemnon intervenes and convinces his brother to kill the supplicant, saying all Trojans deserve to die, including those not yet born. Other panegyrists mobilize the same pronouncement by Agamemnon in order to portray different emperors as merciful by comparison. Themistius, a rhetorician and philosopher active in Constantinople in the fourth century, praises Theodosius I as a fellow-philosopher and contrasts his mildness towards Rome’s enemies to the brutality of Homer’s Agamemnon:

σκόπει τοίνυν ὁ βασιλικότερος Θεοδόσιος τοῖς λυπήσασι προσενήνεκται ἢ ὁ Πελοπίδης τε καὶ Ἀτρείδης καὶ εὐρυκριῶν Ἀγαμέμνων ὁ παρ’ Ὄμήρῳ. ἐκεῖνος ἔπιτιμᾷ τὸν ἀδέλφον μαλαττόμενον πρὸς τὸν ἰκέτην, καὶ πικρὰν οὕτως εὐχὴν προσεύχεται καὶ βαρβαρικήν, μηδένα τῶν Τρώων διαφυγείν, μηδ’ ὄντινα γαστέρι κοῦρον ἐόντα φέροι, μηδὲ τούτον διαφυγεῖν, ἀλλὰ καὶ τούς οὕπω τεχθέντας ἀπολέσθαι πρὸ τοῦ γενέσθαι. ἡμεῖς δὲ <πρᾶοι> πρὸς τοὺς ἰκέτας.

Reflect, then, on how much more like a king Theodosius has behaved towards those who angered him, than the descendant of Pelops, the son of Atreus, Homer’s Agamemnon of wide dominion. He reproved his brother when he was relenting towards the suppliant, and sent up such a bitter, even barbaric prayer, that none of the Trojans should escape, not even the male child whom his mother carries in her womb, that not even he should escape but even those as
yet unborn should die before they come into existence. But we are gentle
towards those who are suppliants. (Or. 34.25)³³

Although Themistius does not cite here Agamemnon’s famous Homeric lines
as he does elsewhere,³⁴ he uses one of Agamemnon’s formulaic epithets
(ἐὐρυκρείων) to give a Homeric coloring to his own text. The strong censure of
Agamemnon’s behavior is woven into the paraphrase of his words and mapped
onto the Greek – barbarian dichotomy, as his prayer is labelled not only “bitter”
but also “barbaric” (ἐὐχὴν … βαρβαρικήν). In contrast to his Isocratean portrayal
as champion of pan-Hellenic civilization enacting vengeance on eastern
barbarians, the Agamemnon of late antique panegyric often becomes a toxic king.
This is literally the case in another speech by Themistius, also addressed to
Theodosius I (in 381 CE), where the plague that ravishes the Achaean camp in
Iliad 1 stems directly from Agamemnon’s folly:

τοσοῦτον ἕστιν ἁγαθὸν τοῖς ὑπηκόοις δικαιότης τοῦ ἡγεμόνος, ὡσπερ αὖ πάλιν
τοῦ μὴ ἄρεστοι τῷ θεῷ, μηδὲ άρεστά ἐργαζομένου ἄρχειαι ἡ δίκη οὐκ ἅπ'
ἀυτοῦ ἐκθύς, ἀλλὰ ἀπὸ τῶν ἄρχομένων.

“ἐννήμαρ μὲν ἀνά στρατόν ὥχετο κῆλα θεοῖο”
καίτοι ὁ στρατὸς οὗτος οὐ συνηγρίαινε πρὸς τὸν Χρύσην τῷ Ἀγαμέμνονι, ἀλλὰ
tούναντίον

³³ For Themistius’ speeches, here and below, I am using the translation of Heather / Moncur 2001.
On the political context of this speech, which is, in fact, a self-defence of Themistius against his
detractors, as well as an encomium of Theodosius, see the analysis in Swain 2013.68–78.
³⁴ See Or. 10.132a, written for Valens. Here as well Agamemnon’s words are denounced and he is
accused of not being truly “of wide dominion,” as he was only king of the Argives and
Mycenaeans and not all men (οὐκ ἦν εὐρυκρείων ἀληθινός, ἀλλ’ Ἀργείων μόνων βασιλεὺς καὶ
Μυκηναίων).
“καὶ ἐπευφήμησαν ἄπαντες
αἰδεύεσθαι τ’ ἱερὴ καὶ ἀγλαὰ δέχθαι ἄποινα.”

ei δ’ αὐ καὶ ὁ στρατὸς ξυνηδίκει, ὅτι συνεχόρει, ἀλλὰ τοὺς γε ὅρεῖς καὶ τοὺς κύνας τί τους ἀθόφους ὁ ὄιστός ἐν τοῖς πρώτοις ἐπεπορεύετο; ἀλλὰ διδάσκει, ὡς ἐοικεν, Ὄμηρος ἡμᾶς τὰ μὲν τῶν ἱδιωτῶν πλημμελήματα εἰς αὐτοὺς ἵστασθαι τοὺς πλημμελοῦντας, ταῖς δὲ τῶν βασιλέων ἀγνωμοσύναις ὑπεύθυνον γίνεσθαι καὶ τὸ ὑπῆκοον. εἶτα ὅσπερ φῶς ἐκχεόμενον ἀκήρατον ἐξ ἀκηράτου λαμπτήρος ἡ τῆς σῆς γνώμης ἀγαθοεργία ἄπαντας μὲν κατανύγαξε καὶ τοὺς πόρρω καὶ τοὺς πλησιόν, ἐκδηλότερον δὲ τοὺς ἀγχοῦ ἐστῶτας.

A leader’s righteousness is just such a great boon to his subjects. In the opposite case, however, of one who is not pleasing to God and who does not perform pleasing acts, vengeance starts not from him but from his subjects.35

“For nine days the shafts of the god visited the army,” [II. 1.53] even though that army did not share Agamemnon’s spleen against Chryses but on the contrary,

“all called out that he should respect the priest and accept the glorious ransom.” [II. 1.22–3] And if the army did indeed share the wrongdoing because it concurred, why then did the arrow [of disease] spread first of all among the mules and the guiltless dogs? Homer is teaching us, it seems, that while the sins of individuals fall on the sinners themselves, for the folly of kings it is their subjects who are called to account. And so, like light which pours unsullied

35 I have altered the translation of Heather / Moncur 2001, which reads here: “justice stems not from him but from his subjects.”
from the unsullied lamp, the good wrought by your thought shines on all, both far and near, but more clearly on those who stand close by. (Or. 15.191c–192a)

As so often happens in Greek literature, questions of “origins” become indissoluble from the literary text that is both the “origin” of Greek literature and a meditation on what distinguishes a “cause” from a “beginning.”36 The Iliad might begin with the wrath of Achilles mentioned in the very first verse, but, as it swiftly transpires, the wrath is but the end result of a series of preventable catastrophes going back to the plague, which itself goes back to the diseased mind of Agamemnon and his cruel rejection of Chryses. As Themistius points out, the army did not share Agamemnon’s savage impulses (οὐ σοφρίσκετε), but was nevertheless punished, as were the animals of the camp. Responsibility weighs heavier on Theodosius now. While he is explicitly said to be unlike Agamemnon, he is also subtly warned that he is the potential origin of widespread misfortune: if he errs, his subjects will suffer like those of Agamemnon.37 It is also significant that Themistius commences this speech, which he copiously sprinkles with Homeric quotations,38 by confidently presenting his own, philosophically inflected, speech as equal both to Homer’s Iliad, of which he paraphrases the first verse, and to Thucydides, who, as Themistius recognizes, “does not hesitate to declare, as an enticement and allurement to his prospective audience, that he is going to relate in full the war between the Peloponnesians and the Athenians,

36 See Hunter 2018.131.

37 For yet another speech by Themistius in which Agamemnon’s anger as portrayed in the Iliad is used as a cautionary tale against the dangers of this emotion, see Or. 8.111c–112a, written for the quinquennalia of Valens. Here Themistius cites Iliad 1.103–4, where Agamemnon’s mind is consumed by violent rage as he addresses Calchas.

38 See the summary in Russell 1998.40–43.
judging it the greatest and most calamitous of all that had previously occurred” (184c). Themistius is fully aware that his elevation of Theodosius above the Homeric kings follows in the footsteps of Thucydides’ belittling of the Trojan War as an effective advertisement of his own work.

Although this level of engagement with the Homeric text and the literary traditions it generated is naturally more at home in Greek rather than Latin panegyric, Claudian, who possibly received a Greek education in Egypt, provides a good example of how the Iliadic Achilles can be used as a negative exemplum to be superseded by his laudandum, paralleling the modes of Homeric exemplarity found in Greek panegyric but evoking an image that would have been known to his audience from other literary (and also visual) sources and not necessarily directly from Homer. In the first book of his poem on Stilicho’s consulship (400 CE) Claudian praises the “huge slaughter” of Visigoths and Bastarnae with which Stilicho avenged the death of his predecessor Promotus:

Pallantis iugulum Turno moriente piavit
Aeneas, tractusque rotis ultricibus Hector
irato vindicta fuit vel quaestus Achilli.
tu neque vesano raptas venalia curru (100)
funera nec vanam corpus meditaris in unum
saevitiam; turmas equitum peditumque catervas
hostilesque globos tumulo prosternis amici;
inferiis gens tota datur.

39 For the visual sources see, e.g., Ghedini 2007, esp. the scenes at Troy depicted on the so-called “Tensa Capitolina.”
Aeneas avenged the slaughter of Pallas with the death of Turnus; Hector, dragged behind the chariot-wheels, was to wrathful Achilles either revenge or gain; you do not carry off in mad chariot dead bodies for ransom nor plot idle savagery against a single corpse; you slay at your friend’s tomb whole cavalry squadrons, companies of foot troops, and hordes of enemies. A whole nation is offered up to the Underworld. (Stil. 1.97–104)⁴⁰

At stake here is not the gentleness and mercy of the laudandus as opposed to the cruelty of the Homeric kings, but rather the scale of the slaughter and the cold-blooded efficiency of the Roman consul whose revenge is “bigger and better” than those of Aeneas and Achilles. Claudian swiftly dispatches pius Aeneas in little more than one verse (the line ending with the evocative piavit), and then dwells on Achilles’ savage treatment of Hector’s corpse. While some in Claudian’s audience might have read about these notorious events in the Iliad itself, it is upon the Roman re-imagining of the Homeric Achilles that this poet primarily draws in order to paint his Achilles as a negative foil for Stilicho.⁴¹ Claudian’s disparagement of the Iliadic hero as mad (100: vesano … curru) and venal (99: quaestus; 100: venalia) seems to build upon the portrayal of Achilles (mediated through Aeneas’ eyes) as “selling the lifeless body [of Hector] for gold” in the ekphrasis of Aeneid 1 (484: examinumque auro corpus vendebat Achilles). The “idle savagery” of Claudian’s Achilles (101–2: vanam … saevitiam) might also be amplifying the saevus … Achilles (again voiced by Aeneas) of Aeneid 2.29,

⁴⁰ The translation is adapted from Platnauer 1922.

⁴¹ Cf. Ware 2012.93 on Claudian employing, in a different poem, a “two-tiered allusion to the Achilleid and the Aeneid” in order to enhance Honorius’ Achillean features with the Roman mores of the Aeneid. It should be noted, however, that it is the Statian, and not the Homeric, Achilles that is used as a positive foil for Honorius.
though it should be stated that Claudian’s denigration of the Homeric hero is forceful and effective in its own right and does not depend on specifically recalling either the Homeric or the Virgilian text.42

Classicizing and Christian Exemplarities

Claudia Schindler’s comprehensive analysis of Claudian’s use of mythical exempla in his political poetry suggests a variety of processes that led to Claudian’s “destructive” use of myth (“destructive” in that some myths are rejected as mere fiction, while others are deemed insufficient or unacceptable on moral grounds).43 Some of these processes are also relevant for the rejection of Homer and his Iliadic heroes as discussed in this article. For Claudian, as well as for other late antique panegyrists, the past holds a normative power that is paradoxically at odds with the fact that it is becoming increasingly objectionable, especially for Christian audiences. This creative tension allows panegyrists to engage in “panegyrische Überbietung” more extensively and systematically than in the past: by evoking and dismissing mythical exempla as invariably outdated or inadequate they laud the present in absolute, a-temporal terms, suggesting that it should itself become exemplary and, by extension, that their texts should become

42 The disparagement of Achilles on account of his “selling” Hector’s body to Priam is also found in Greek literature, but is perhaps more prominent in Latin. See, briefly, Anthologia Latina 150 (161 R.), an epigram titled “Against Achilles”: “Wicked dismemberer, if you knew how to demand its proper value, you would not drag around that which was worth its weight in gold for you.” (trans. Kay 2006).

43 See Schindler 2015, esp. 38–41 on the Claudian passage also discussed above, but drawing Claudian closer to Homer in her analysis of the comparison to Achilles.
the normative texts for the new era. Schindler also points to the Christian use of *synkrisis* as an “accelerator” of the intra-cultural dismantling of myth that takes place in classicizing panegyrics. Because Origen, for example, declared the Old Testament’s Joseph similar yet clearly superior to Bellerophon, and other Christian authors dwelled on the mythological heroes’ vices, late antique panegyrists had a firm precedent in the established Christian tradition for their “destructive” uses of myth.

The impact of a Christian mode of exemplarity is incontestable. Reinhart Herzog has long described the process by which literal and typological readings of the Jewish Bible blended together and gave rise to a Christian version of “panegyrische Überbietung.” Two speeches in particular, both written to celebrate the life of Basil of Caesarea (fourth century), display Christian takes on the Bible that parallel the panegyrists’ takes on Homer. In Gregory Nazianzen’s *Funeral Oration for Basil* the entire biblical story, from Adam to the Apostles, is compared to Basil’s life and found wanting (Or. 43.70–76): a biblical icon such as Noah’s Ark, which had long been interpreted typologically as Christ’s Church, is now seen as but a shadowy prefiguration of Basil’s specific church, saving its flock from heresy. Gregory of Nyssa’s *Encomium of Basil* (In Basilium fratrem) takes the form of a long sequence of *synkriseis* between Basil and a host of

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44 Schindler 2015.28–31 on “panegyrische Überbietung”; 31–34 on the rejection of myths as inconsequential or unrealistic fiction (for which cf. Julian’s comments on Achilles’ battle with the Scamander, cited in n. 32 above); 34–41 on the “destruction” of myth.

45 *Contra Celsum* 4.46; see Schindler 2015.31, n. 65.


47 Herzog 1971.180–85 considers this procedure a perversion or usurpation of typology, which at the end allowed the Bible to enter the territory, and occupy the place, of myth.
biblical figures – in this respect it is the Christian counterpart of Julian’s *Second Panegyric for Constantius*, which mobilizes almost the entirety of Homer’s *Iliad* for its encomiastic mission. In Gregory of Nyssa’s speech, for example, Basil is considered superior to John the Baptist: both Basil and John spoke with *parrhesia* before their kings (Valens and Herod respectively), but Basil was the one who faced the more powerful, and therefore more dangerous, despot. And while the Baptist only spoke to censure Herod’s unlawful relations with a woman – a sin that was limited to one man’s body (14: ἐν τῷ σῶματι τοῦ Ἡρώδου τὸ ἄγος περιωρίζετο), Basil spoke in defence of Orthodoxy, with implications for the whole *oikoumēnê* (ἡ παρανομία πάσης τῆς οἰκουμένης ἄγος ἐγίνετο).

As tempting as it might seem to consider this type of Christian exemplarity and its classicizing counterpart as entirely equivalent, it is important to acknowledge the differences. Both Church Fathers preface their *synkriseis* of Basil to John the Baptist with deferential, pre-emptive remarks. The Nazianzen says that this part of his speech might appear daring, but its purpose is actually to show Basil as the Baptist’s most fervent imitator and as carrying in him something of the latter’s character. Gregory of Nyssa concedes that to compare anyone else to the Baptist would seem mad and impious; Basil is a glaring exception. Neither the Nazianzen nor the Nyssaeus undercuts the biblical figures employed in his *synkriseis* by pointing out morally dubious actions to which the Bible is, in fact, no

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48 *Funeral Oration for Basil* 75: καὶ εἶ τῷ φαίνεται τολμηρὸς ὁ λόγος, ἐκεῖνο προεξεταζέτω τοῖς λεγομένοις, ὅτι μὴ προπηθεῖς μηδὲ εἰς ἰδιόν μετάγων τὸν ἄνδρα τῷ ἐν γεννητοῖς γυναικῶν ὕπερ ἀπαντας, ταῦταν ποιοῦμαι τὴν παρεξέτασιν· ἄλλα ζηλωτὴν ἰσοφαίνων καὶ τι τοῦ χαρακτήρος ἐκείνου ἐν ἑαυτῷ φέροντα.

49 *In Basilium fratrem* 13: μανίας ἐν εἴῃ καὶ ἀσεβείας ἃμα ἄλλον ἀντιπαρεξέβαλεν τῷ τοιοῦτῳ βιω ἄτι συγκρίσεως.
stranger. For example, when Gregory Nazianzen relates Jacob’s life (in 71.3–4), he introduces each of the patriarch’s accomplishments with the verb ἐπαινῶ (“I praise”), which he then also uses to introduce those of Basil (ἀλλ’ ἐπαινῶ καὶ τούτου). Jacob’s short biography here does not include events that could render him morally ambiguous (e.g., his deception of his father) or even ridiculous: no reference is made to his being tricked by his father-in-law into receiving the wrong bride in his bed (Genesis 29:23). Jacob’s biblical life is tailored so that he appears more, not less, acceptable as an exemplum for the saintly laudandus.

There is no doubt that these Church Fathers read their Bible as carefully as Cyrus, Julian and Themistius read their Homer, and that both foundational texts were scoured for appropriate exempla to be used in panegyric synkrisis. While Christian and classicizing exemplarities interlock in projecting an a-temporal and endless present (for Christians: the age of grace), it is evident that Church Fathers have to shy away from treating their biblical exempla as irreverently as Homeric heroes are treated in classicizing panegyric. Whereas Julian can re-play the Iliad for laughs and Themistius can dwell on the toxic aspects of Agamemnon’s personality, biblical figures are the incomplete, but necessarily

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50 See, recently, Hardie 2019.199–201 and 209–222 on how rhetorical exemplum and biblical “type” (in the sense of figura) merge in late Latin poetry and panegyric.

51 Cf. the anonymous Life and Miracles of Saint Thekla, written in the fifth century, where one of Thecla’s miracles (in the trial by beasts) is expressly superior to that of Daniel in the Hebrew Bible (1.19.32–50). As Hylen 2020.494 says, “The story emphasized the ‘greatness’ of Thekla’s miracle without devaluing the Old Testament story.”
respected, earlier iterations of the perfection that was fulfilled in the Christian
plêrôma of time.52

The criticism directed against mythological heroes in Christian apologetics
might also have some impact on the “destruction” of myth in late antique
panegyric (especially in so far as myths are rejected as fiction), but it is not the
driving force behind the irreverence and “aggression” we find in Homeric
exemplarity and which is unparalleled in the treatment of other mythological
heroes. Heracles is a hero who, like Achilles and at least since the times of
Alexander, had long been embedded in kingship discourses and propaganda.53
His heroic saga also brims with undignified, comic,54 or offensive experiences, while
some Church Fathers scorn him “as a demon plagued with vices.”55 Yet his
appearance in late antique panegyric neither reflects nor alludes to this view, and
panegyrists do not generally feel the need to address the hero’s moral
shortcomings. While his labors might be rejected as the “hackneyed themes of
ancient fables” alongside trite gigantomachies,56 or as limited in scope compared

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52 See, also, the popularity of laudatory comparisons with Moses: these point to parallels between
the biblical exemplum (who is a thoroughly positive model) and the laudandus, who is often
described as a “new Moses”; see Rapp 1997. For Gregory Nazianzen as a new Moses or Job in his
poems, see Prudhomme 2020.

53 For the hero’s role in late antique imperial propaganda, see Eppinger 2015.157–255.

54 For an overview of the comic aspects see, Pike 1980.

55 Mellas 2019.125. See, e.g., Origen’s Contra Celsum 7.54 on the affair with Omphale; Lactantius
Div. Inst. 1.9; 1.18.3–10 and 13–17 on his anger.

56 This is the case in Pacatus’ panegyric for Theodosius I (Panegyrici Latini 2.44).
to the emperor’s worldwide salvific mission, to the emperor’s worldwide salvific mission, the hero’s specific accomplishments are paralleled to those of imperial laudandi without the need explicitly to “subtract” moral faults or draw attention to the less than flattering aspects of the hero’s character and career.

The Particularities of the Iliad

My suggestion is that the particularly “aggressive” form of “panegyrische Überbietung” that we see with Homeric (and more specifically Iliadic) exemplarity is bound up with the position of the Iliad as the didactic text par excellence (in the sense that it was taught more than any other text) and with the fact that late Greek audiences were not only trained to read the Iliad critically and from different points of view but were also “programmed” from a long tradition of philosophical or quasi-philosophical debates on kingship to expect this text to be central, and yet deeply problematic, in any attempt to delineate or address the ideal

57 See, e.g., George Pisides’ Heraclias 1.65–68, where Heraclius’ redemption of the whole oikouméné is contrasted to Heracles’ slaying of single beasts. The one who is really castigated here, though, is Homer, who called Heracles a god “missing the mark” (1.66: ἀσκόπως). For Heraclius as Heracles in this poem, see Mellas 2019. Cf. Claudian’s representation of Stilicho as superior to Heracles, and Rufinus as more monstrous than the Hydra, Scylla, and Chimaera in Ruf. 1.283–84 and 295–96, with Ware 2012.126–28.

58 E.g., in the Panegyrici Latini 11.9.10 (Genethliacus of Maximian Augustus) the emperor traverses the Alps in winter, just as Heracles had done; in 4.16 (Nazarius’ Panegyric for Constantine) the infant Heracles who strangled the serpents in his crib is compared to the young emperor. The same exemplum is also used by Themistius in his Erôtikos, addressed to young Gratian, where the myth is given an allegorical interpretation: Heracles had already learnt to master his passions (169d).

king. Starting from this last point: in a text such as Philodemus’ *On the Good King According to Homer* (P.Herc. 1507; first century BCE) Homeric *exempla* are used to illustrate both good and bad leaders. The ideal *princeps* is said to be φιλόνικος, but not φιλοπόλεµος like Achilles (col. XXV), and he is advised to guard against treating gods and men insolently, like Achilles and Odysseus treated Hector and Polyphemus respectively (col. XXXV–XXXVI). What is probably the first *speculum principis* (partly) to have survived in Greek blends ethical considerations with vigorous criticism of Homer’s heroes.\(^{60}\)

In the following centuries authors like Dio Chrysostom (especially in his second *Kingship Oration*)\(^{61}\) and Plutarch repeatedly evoke Homer, and the *Iliad* in particular, when thinking about what makes the ideal ruler. Plutarch’s praise of Alexander in *de Alexandri Magni fortuna aut virtute* (Mor. 327f–328a) already involves elevating the laudandus above a comprehensive list of Homeric heroes: Alexander is more prudent than Agamemnon who preferred his concubine to his

\(^{60}\) To some extent this type of engagement with Homer must be a response to Plato’s *Republic*, which posited that epic poetry, and Homer in particular, is not an appropriate resource for the education of the guardians. For the context of Philodemus’ treatise and much further bibliography, see Gangloff 2011. For the confluence, in Philodemus, of kingship writings and Homeric exegesis see Murray 1965.173–78, again with further bibliography. An enterprise similar to Philodemus’ was undertaken, on a massive scale, in the third century CE by Porphyry of Tyre, who reportedly wrote ten books on Homer’s usefulness for kings. Nothing of this work survives; see *Suda* 4.178.27 (= Porphyry T370 Smith): περί τῆς ὧν Ῥώμηρον ἡφιλελείας τῶν βασιλέων βιβλία ἕν. The Neopythagorean Diotogenes also seems to have fashioned his ideal king in response to the Homeric, and especially the Iliadic, tradition, but his date is unknown and only meager fragments from his treatise *On Kingship* survive; see Roskam 2020.

\(^{61}\) For the *Kingship Orations* see Moles 1990; Whitmarsh 2001.181–216, esp. on Dio’s self-presentation.
wife; more magnanimous than Achilles in the treatment of his dead foes and more generous than him in enriching his friends and even enemies instead of taking gifts from them; more pious than Diomedes who fought against the gods; and more loved by both friends and enemies than Odysseus was by his family. As is the case with later panegyric, criticism of moral faults attaches particularly well to the Iliadic figures, who are disparaged with reference to their specific actions or behaviors in the Homeric text.

The aspiring young members of Rome’s political elites were taught their Homer in the rhetoricians’ classrooms, where the lens of a moralizing exegesis turned the Iliad into, at least partly, a cautionary tale on the destructive potential of rulers’ passions. Horace’s Epistle 1.2, addressed to a rhetoric student, attests to the sheer gap between what must have been fairly standard readings of the Iliad and Odyssey. Thus, whereas Odysseus is “a useful exemplar for us” (1.2.18: utile ... nobis exemplar Ulixen), the Iliad is the story of “foolish kings and peoples”

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62 343b: σωφρονέστερος μὲν Ἀγαμέμνονος· ὁ μὲν γὰρ προὐκρίνε τῆς γαμετῆς τὴν αἰχμάλωτον, ὁ δὲ καὶ πρὶν ἢ γῆμα τῶν ἀλησκομένων ἀπείχετο. μεγαλουχιστέρος δ’ Ἀχιλλέως· ὁ μὲν γὰρ χρημάτων ὁλίγων τὸν Ἐκτορος νεκρὸν ἀπελύτρωσεν, ὁ δὲ πολλοῖς χρήσιμοι Δαρείὸν ἔθαψε· καὶ ὁ μὲν παρὰ τῶν φίλων δόρα καὶ μισθὸν ἀντὶ τῆς ὀργῆς διαλλαγῆς ἔλαβεν, ὁ δὲ τοὺς πολεμίους κρατῶν ἐπιλογίζεν. ἐσσεβέστερος δὲ Διομήδους· ὁ μὲν γὰρ μάχεσθαι θεοῖς ἢν ἔτοιμος, ὁ δὲ πάντα τοὺς θεοῖς ἔνομιζε κατορθῶν. ποθεινότερος δὲ τοὺς προσήκουσιν Ὅδυσσεος· ἐκείνου μὲν γὰρ ἢ τεκοῦσα διὰ λόπην ἀπέθανε, τούτῳ δ’ ἢ τοῦ πολεμίου μήτηρ ὡς’ εὐνοίας συναπέθανε. On this passage in relation to Plutarch’s use of Homer in the Life of Alexander, see Mossman 1988.84. For the Parallel Lives as a colossal exercise in synkrisis which anticipates later typological views of history, see Dörrie 1969.

63 For the Odyssey being read as moral allegory cf. Lamberton 1986.223–24, who notes that the Iliad would have been read “most commonly as history or as physical allegory.” For Odysseus as
(1.2.8: stultorum regum et populorum) brought down by “sedition, trickery, crime, lust and wrath” (1.2.15: seditione, dolis, scelerete atque libidine et ira).\textsuperscript{64} Wrong is done both within the walls of Troy (by Paris) and without (1.2.16: Iliacos intra muros peccatur et extra): Nestor attempts to no avail to settle the strife between Agamemnon and Achilles, as one is burnt by love and both by anger. Just as Themistius would later warn, “Whatever madness affects the kings, the Achaeans pay the price” (1.2.14: quidquid delirant reges, plectuntur Achivi).\textsuperscript{65}

The students of Greek rhetoricians were also taught that useful instruction could only be derived from the \textit{Iliad} by actively sifting through and rejecting all the negative \textit{exempla}. Plutarch’s \textit{de audiendis poetis} (\textit{Mor.} 14d–37b) stages this process and suggests that Homer’s text itself provides guidance towards such a moralizing “filtering” of the story.\textsuperscript{66} The corpus of \textit{progymnasmata} by Libanius of Antioch (fourth century CE) shows how students were taught not only to engage critically with the \textit{Iliad}’s heroes but also to read them against the grain. The corpus thus includes an unexpected invective against Hector,\textsuperscript{67} an adoxographical encomium of Thersites, and both an encomium of \textit{and} an invective against the mythical champion of the contemplative or wise man in various ancient philosophical traditions, see Montiglio 2011.

\textsuperscript{64} Aristotle already identifies the \textit{Iliad} with pathos (παθητικόν) and the \textit{Odyssey} with ethos – the delineation of character (ἠθική); see \textit{Poetics} (1459b14–15).

\textsuperscript{65} Keane 2011 argues that Horace’s framing of these straightforward and somewhat reductive readings of the Homeric epics invites the audience to seek more sophisticated and less disinterested interpretations.

\textsuperscript{66} See Hunter 2009.169–201.

\textsuperscript{67} Cf. Julian’s attack against the same hero in the \textit{Second Panegyric for Constantius}; above, n. 31.
Achilles, in which the exact same actions of the hero (e.g., his summoning an assembly in *Iliad* 1.54–56) are seen from radically different points of view.⁶⁸

When the panegyrist undertakes the praise of emperors or other late antique dignitaries, they know that in the *Iliad* they will find profoundly ambivalent models for their addressees. These dubious models were also embedded in a complex narrative which many in their audience would have learnt to read as a story of passions running wild, insubordination, broken chains of command, and questionable decisions leading to tragic outcomes. The panegrist’s strain to adjust Iliadic narrative sequences to panegyric ends is, occasionally, palpable. In 383 CE Themistius delivers an *Oration* (16) to celebrate the consulship of Flavius Saturninus, a *magister militum* who successfully concluded a peace deal with the Goths.⁶⁹ In describing how the emperor Theodosius sent Saturninus out to pacify the Goths, Themistius reaches to the Homeric Achilles’ fateful decision to send out Patroclus to face the Trojans (*Iliad* 16). At every turn, the comparison (16.208c–209a) needs to be hedged, qualified, and contained. Most obviously, the outcome is diametrically different: Achilles sent Patroclus to his death, whereas Saturninus came back having secured peace. But several other details also require adjustment: Patroclus could not wield Achilles’ spear of Pelian ash, but Saturninus is able to fit into all of the intellectual armor of Theodosius; Patroclus was sent out with Achilles’ five lieutenants and their troops, whereas Saturninus only had his king’s instructions; Patroclus had to engage in battle, whereas the “arrogant

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⁶⁸ For the encomium of Thersites as adoxography and the two pieces on Achilles see, now, Greensmith 2020.61–63 with comments on how Libanius works extra-Homeric material back into the Iliadic frame.

⁶⁹ For the historical context see the introduction in Heather / Moncur 2001.255–64.
Scythians” immediately bowed before Saturninus. The Iliadic paradigm crumbles under the pressure of all the modifiers and limitations it requires in order to function within a panegyric, just as Iliadic heroes can disappear under the severe modifications they have to undergo in order to become adequate panegyric exempla. At the end, Theodosius’ dispatch of Saturninus is as Iliadic as an Achilles “minus” his wrath and love.

Yet the Iliad’s paradigmatic value remains incontrovertible. By modifying or outright rejecting its narratives and heroes, panegyrists demonstrate that they are able to control all the potentially dangerous ramifications of their exempla, staying always one step ahead of the audience in detecting dissonances between the present situation (which is to be lauded in absolute terms) and the Iliadic paradigm, whose exemplarity will invariably be debatable. Appealing to the authority of the Iliad – a foundational text with which everybody in the audience would have been acquainted, irrespective of religion – thus served multiple interests: it provided a shared, “mythic” language of moral instruction; it enhanced the panegyrists’ standing (more on which in the final paragraphs below); last but not least, it offered the sheer entertainment of bringing the grand Homeric heroes down one peg (invective always being more amusing than praise).71

70 See Stenger 2009.129–35 on Themistius’ construction of the ideal ruler entirely on the basis of traditional Greek culture, but in terms Christians would also find acceptable; Themistius thus envisions an a-temporal Greek polity that remains unaffected by any changes in the religious landscape. Cf. Van Hoof 2013 on Greek paideia as an instrument for social promotion.

71 For late antique invective as aimed more at entertaining rather than persuading the audience, see Cribiore 2013.95–131. On the convergence of encomium and invective in the progymnasma of synkrisis, see the theorist Aphthonius, who defines synkrisis as “either a double encomium or an invective constituted by an encomium and an invective” (10.31: καὶ ὁλως ἢ σύγκρισις διπλοῦν
Conclusion: The Usefulness of a Flawed Model

This article began with the panegyrist’s remonstrations with Homer and their wish (expressed obliquely or directly) to replace his *Iliad* with their own brand of historical / encomiastic composition. It has also often been noted that late antique panegyrist glorify themselves and enhance their own self-projection just as much as they glorify their *laudandi*. In this respect, the *Iliad*’s problematic exemplarity is all the more useful: by dismissing the merits of the Homeric “competition,” panegyrist showcases their learning and ingenuity. In a way, they bring both emperor and audience back to the classroom, where the panegyrist, perhaps a professional rhetorician himself, assumes the familiar role of the teacher expounding his moralizing interpretations of the Homeric text.

There is a final reason why the *Iliad* readily lends itself to the panegyrist’s self-advertising: this epic presents “the best of the Achaeans” being “schooled” by his childhood teacher, Phoenix (in the embassy of *Iliad* 9). The unwarlike Phoenix, an obvious model for the panegyrist in his capacity as advisor to the emperor, is

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72 For the panegyric genre’s competition with epic and historiography, cf. Formisano 2015:88.

73 See, e.g., Penella 2000; Formisano 2008; Xenophontos 2020. That encomia tend to become self-glorifying eulogies for those who compose and perform them was already pointed out by Plato; see esp. *Lysis* 205d with Nightingale 1993.

74 Philodemus quotes the warnings of Hermes to Aegisthus (from *Odyssey* 1.35–43) and Phoenix to Achilles in the final columns of his treatise; although the text is quite fragmentary, it is reasonable to assume that Philodemus wanted to present himself as Piso’s Hermes and Phoenix. See Fish 2016.
“the teacher who punches above his weight.” 75 Indeed, in what must be the only Greek panegyric to use the metaphor of the speech as a mirror, 76 a true *speculum principis*, Themistius declares himself the emperor’s (Valens’) Phoenix:

ἐγὼ σέ, ὦ βασιλεῦ, φημὶ δεῖν τὸν λόγον ἐκεῖνον προτίθεσθαι, εἰς ὃν ὀσπερ κάτοπτρον ἐκάστης ἡμέρας ἀποβλέπων καὶ ἄτενίζων, οὐ τὰς κόμας εὐπρεπέστερον διαθῆσεις, ἀλλὰ τὴν Ῥωμαίων ἠγεμονίαν. οὐδὲν σοι προσδεῖ τῶν Μάρκου παραγγελμάτων, οὐδ’ εἰ τι χρηστὸν ὁ δεῖν τῶν ἀρχαίων αὐτοκρατόρων ρήμα προῆκατο, ἀλλ’ οἶκοθεν τὸν Φοίνικα ἔχεις, οἶκοθεν τὸν ἐξηγητὴν τῶν τε ρητέων καὶ τῶν πρακτέων.

I tell you, your majesty, that it is your task to hold that speech before you, into which, if you look as if into a mirror each day with penetrating gaze, you will dispose in more becoming fashion not your hair but the Roman rule. You have no need of the precepts of Marcus [Aurelius], nor of any other noble phrase

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75 Janan 2020.225 on Phoenix in Statius’ *Silvae*.  
76 As far as I have been able to verify, this metaphor does not appear in other Greek panegyrics. Haake 2018.312 states that only Seneca uses the word “mirror” in a text that may be considered a “mirror of princes,” referring to Seneca’s *de clementia* 1.1 (*ut quodam modo speculi vice fungerer*), which was addressed to Nero. It is intriguing here that Themistius’ hair-arranging emperor would naturally evoke Nero (see O’Meara / Schamp 2006 n. ad loc.) and that the panegyrist commenced this speech by expressing his regret that he did not speak the emperor’s language (71c–72a): Valens would be listening to the speech translated into Latin. Whether by coincidence or not, Valens could be hearing at this point a Senecan echo. Ando 1996.180, n. 42 suggests that Themistius’ professed ignorance of Latin is mere posturing.
uttered by one or other of the ancient emperors; rather, you have here in your
court a Phoenix and guide for your words and deeds. (*Or.* 6.81c)

Themistius’ reference to “words and deeds” (ῥητέων καὶ τῶν πρακτέων) evokes
the Homeric Phoenix’ educational ideal of making his pupil “a speaker of words
and doer of deeds” (*Iliad* 9.443: μύθων τε ῥητήρ' ἔμεναι πρηκτήρα τε ἔργων).

That Themistius uses the word ἐξηγητής here (translated above as “guide”) might
be significant. Themistius—the adviser or new Phoenix is offering to become the
“expounder” and “interpreter,” for Valens, of the old, Homeric Phoenix and his
educational values. But while this self-projection of the panegyrist as the
emperor’s Phoenix is a positive take on the Iliadic teacher, in a number of other
speeches Themistius performs for himself the “panegyrische Überbietung” in
which he would otherwise engage on behalf of his *laudandi*. Themistius
disparages the Iliadic Phoenix as an utter disgrace and failure of a teacher: he was
an exile, who had wronged his father by sleeping with his concubine (*Or.* 9.123d);
he glutted the young Achilles with food and wine instead of teaching him how to
be a philosopher – how to subdue his anger and sexual desire (*Or.* 18.224d); he
bragged about being Achilles’ educator, but neglected to eradicate wrath and *erōs*
from his pupil’s soul (*Erōtikos*, 173d). Themistius’ confident and explicit

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77 I have made a significant alteration to the translation of Heather / Moncur 2001, which reads in
the last sentence, “you have an inner Phoenix and an inner guide for your words and deeds.” The
French translation of O’Meara / Schamp 2006 also takes the οἰκοθεν as a reference to the court and
not Valens’ own psyche. Themistius’ self-presentation as Phoenix in other speeches (see paragraph
below) also supports this interpretation.

78 On this ideal and its reception, see Klooster 2018.

79 This is especially poignant in view of the fact that Valens spoke no Greek, as Themistius himself
acknowledged; see above, n. 76.
presentation of himself as superior to the ineffectual tutor of Achilles is a good place at which to end this investigation of Homeric exemplarity in late antique panegyric: it shows how, by hollowing out, belittling, and rejecting Iliadic paradigms, the panegyrists elevate their own status and place themselves and their speeches in a position from which they can safely instruct the emperor and claim glory in their own right.

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