

Interpres Intepretum: Joachim Camerarius' Commentary on *Iliad* 1

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Joachim Camerarius' 1538 commentary on book one of the *Iliad* has been called "the first attempt to write a true commentary" on the work of Homer in the early modern period (Pontani 2008). Camerarius was born in Bamberg in 1500. He first studied Greek and Latin at the University of Leipzig under Georg Helt, receiving a bachelor's degree in 1514 from Leipzig and an MA from Erhurt in 1521 (Bietenholz I 247-8, Baron 7-9). He worked as director of the Gymnasium in Nuremburg from 1526 to 1535; as a professor of Greek literature in Tubingen from 1535 to 1541 (during which time his commentaries on books one and two of the *Iliad* were first published); and finally as professor of Latin and Greek in Leipzig from 1541 to 1574 (Baron 8, 237-8). He died in 1574.

Camerarius was a close friend and student of Philipp Melanchthon, and was in contact at various times with the circle of classical scholars that included Conrad Mutianus Rufus, Crotus Ruveanus, and Eobanus Hessus (Baron 7). He also maintained a sporadic epistolary friendship with Erasmus after their meeting in Basel in the summer of 1524 (Bietenholz I 247-8). This friendship seems to have been strained but not broken by a conflict between the two in 1535 stemming from a letter (now lost) that Erasmus wrote to Eobanus Hessus in which he severely criticized Camerarius' editions of the works of Greek astrologers (ibid.). During his lifetime Camerarius published widely on a range of subjects, including editions of Homer, Sophocles, Cicero, and Plautus (Bietenholz I 248); a recent

estimate of his output puts the number of books published under his name at “at least 183”, not including minor revisions of works and re-printings (Baron 8). His most famous works include a biography of Melanchthon in 1566, an edition of Ptolemy’s *Tetrabiblos* in 1535, and an edition of Plautus in 1552 (Pfeiffer 139).

The work on which this paper focuses was published initially in Strassburg by Karl Müller in 1538. (For the purposes of this project I am using a copy printed in 1576 in Frankfurt by Ioannis Welchelus.) The dedicatory epistle was written to *Bolgancus Augustus Severus* (Wolfgang Schiefer), a classical scholar who worked under Ferdinand the 1st in the early 16th century and eventually became tutor to his son (Bietenholz III 243). The structure of the work is as follows: the dedicatory epistle (i-iv); a preface (1-29) containing a discussion of: the authorship of the work (14-17), the classification of the work (17-19), the title of the work (19-21), the goals of Homer in writing the *Iliad* (21-22), the ancient reception of the work (22-25), and the various ancient interpreters of Homer (25-28); a prose argument of *Iliad* 1 (29); a line-by-line commentary on the text (30-75); an edition of the Greek text with a literal Latin translation on the facing page (76-115); a translation of the Greek text into literary Latin (116-133); and a general index (which has been omitted from the present normalized edition).

Camerarius’ aim in writing the commentary seems to have been to make the first book of the *Iliad* accessible not only to his students (Pontanti 2008), but to the educated lay person as well. He cannot have expected all of his prospective readers to have a thorough background in Greek, as he occasionally provides glosses for lines that a reader familiar with Greek would have no particular trouble with. This

also explains the inclusion of two different translations into Latin in the commentary—the literal translation will have been useful in providing vocabulary aids to readers whose Greek was deficient.

The commentary gives the reader a sense both of the peculiarities of a particular Renaissance scholar's approach to an ancient text, and of the culture of classical scholarship in which that scholar was working. For Camerarius the study of ancient texts in an academic sense is in no way separate from the study of them for reasons of aesthetic appreciation and particularly moral instruction. In the preface to the line-by-line commentary (30), he proposes that the first book of the *Iliad* is useful not only in rhetorical or legal settings (because of the quality of its speeches) but also as an *exemplum vitae*. He regularly in the course of his commentary draws the reader's attention to passages that he deems artistically noteworthy. And as will be shown below, he laces the commentary with passages from other ancient authors, intended not only as a tool for understanding the text itself, but as a resource for the reader who he assumes will seek pleasure and instruction from authors outside of Homer (especially Virgil).

The content of the commentary ranges widely, including etymologies, grammatical explanations, metrical analysis, paraphrasing/clarification, and background information. Original textual criticism, however—which is an important feature of Renaissance commentaries on other works—is a noteworthy omission (Gaisser 66). There are a few reasons for this: first, the manuscript tradition of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* is unique in the classical world in terms of longevity and reliability (Kirk xix). This is a much different situation from the one contemporaries

of Camerarius faced when writing commentaries on other classical texts that had been rescued from obscurity. Camerarius was working with a text that had been essentially fixed since before the fall of the Roman empire. The effect this had on his commentary on the *Iliad*, however, was ambivalent: it both freed Camerarius from having to venture guesses as to the correct reading of the text, but it also deprived him of the opportunity to win such prestige as resulted in that period when a scholar successfully proposed an (at least ostensibly) original reading of a more corrupt text (Gaisser 67). This exerted an influence on the final form that the commentary took, as Camerarius needed to find other ways of making his reading of Homer valuable.

One major feature of the commentary that can be explained by the unique history of the text of the *Iliad* is Camerarius' reliance on ancient scholarly sources. The picture that emerges when reading the commentary is not so much of a scholar coming to grips with a heretofore unknown text and offering his own unique reading of it, but rather that of an anthologist of scholarship who has read (as Camerarius must have) all of the major commentaries on a now famous work and is merely compiling them into a single document. The introduction to the commentary, for example, features an entire section under the heading "de interpretibus Homericis" in which Camerarius provides a history not so much of the interpretation of Homer but of the *interpreters* of Homer in the ancient world, focusing on the library of Alexandria and the Grammarians and ending with an extensive list of the names of no less than 53 *interpretores Homericis* (25-27). References to ancient scholars such as Rhianus, Zenodotus, Athenaeus, Macrobius,

and Priscian can be found throughout the commentary (31, 32, *ibid.*, 39, 61).

Camerarius' habit of bringing the scholarship of the past into his commentary accounts for one of the most prevalent mannerisms of the text—the use of unsupported attributions. As often as he cites a source by name (or uses the catch-all term “Grammatici”), Camerarius will attribute an opinion or a story about some point in the text to “aliqui” or “alii” (as at the discussion of Διὸς βουλή on page 32; the folk etymology of λαοί on 35; the interpretation of stemmata on 35; and the discussion of Hephaistus' fall to Lemnos on page 74). Also common is the use of verbs without an explicit subject or passive constructions without an agent, e.g. “tradunt” on page 31 and “traditur” on 38.

A few examples will also suffice to demonstrate the importance that the scholarly sources take on in the commentary—for Camerarius does not merely cite them in passing, but often gives them pride of place. To begin with, the first sentence of the commentary proper is not an original statement about the *Iliad* by Camerarius himself; he instead reports a comment by the grammarian Fabius regarding the value and utility of certain books of the poem. The first word of the line-by-line portion of the commentary is “Protagoras”—Camerarius begins this part of the work not by offering his own interpretation of the opening words of the poem but by immediately foregrounding a criticism that has been made of them by an earlier commentator.

Camerarius does not, however, rely solely on scholastic sources in the commentary. Ancient Latin and Greek literature play an equally important role; references to Greek authors such as Plato, Euripides, and Pindar, and Latin authors

such as Virgil, Horace, Ovid, and Cicero are scattered through the text. Camerarius uses these references in three main ways. In the first category are references that are demonstrative of a particular point Camerarius is making (grammatical, metrical, interpretive etc.). In this category fall many of the quotations from Homer —Camerarius often relies on other passages of Homer to clarify the point he is making about the one under consideration. For example, in his discussion of δαῖτα in line 5 of the *Iliad* (on page 32), he asserts that earlier editors have emended the line incorrectly: “δαῖτα enim Homerum vocasse hominum non bestiarum cibos.” He then provides the reader with a quote from *Odyssey* 3.36 as evidence for the claim —the quote does nothing more than corroborate a point which he has already established. References to Latin authors are also occasionally used this way, as on page 33 where a line from Horace is deployed to provide an example of neuter adjectives in an adverbial sense. Note that in uses of this sort, Camerarius explicitly calls out the reason for making the reference: “Latini etiam sunt saepe neutris adverbialiter usi [...] sed et pluraliter Horatius” (followed by the relevant quote from Horace).

Second, Camerarius sometimes uses ancient sources not as demonstrative of a point he has been making, but as authorities on a particular subject. A good example is the use of Horace on page 31 in the discussion of Homer’s poetic reticence. Here Camerarius quotes Horace at length as an authority on the subject —the quote from Horace is not another example of such poetic reticence, but rather is meant to provide the sort of support for Camerarius’ argument that the citation of a journal article would in a contemporary scholarly paper. And again, as

with references in the first category, the reason for the reference is made more or less explicit: "Quod fit laudabiliter, et artificio quodam οἰκονομικῶ, quemadmodum et Horatius ait: Ordinis haec virtus erit et venus, aut ego fallor,/ Ut iam nunc dicat iam nunc debentia dici,/ Pleraque differat et praesens in tempus omittat,/ Hoc amet hoc spernat, promissi carminis autor."

The third category is composed of those references in the commentary which do not have a reason explicitly adduced for their use. The character of these references is split: in some cases, the reason for their inclusion in the work can be more or less deduced from context, despite the lack of any indication on Camerarius' part. For example, on page 32 of the commentary, in a discussion of the third line of the Iliad, Camerarius directs the reader's attention to Virgil: "Ad hunc versum referri Virgiliana haec possunt: '—iuvenum primos tot miserit Orco.' Et: 'Multa virum volitans dat fortia corpora leto.'"

No other explanation is provided as to the inclusion of these lines, and although they are related in the sense that they describe a similar phenomenon to the one described in the Homeric line (and perhaps were even written in imitation of Homer), their intended function in the commentary still seems unclear. In this case, however, it can be ventured that Camerarius is relying on his prospective reader's prior familiarity with Virgil as a bridge to understanding Homer—the reader who already understand the Virgilian line will have an easier time when comparing it to the Homeric one. The same can be said of quotes from other Latin and Greek authors that Camerarius uses without directly explaining the purpose.

In others instances, however, the reason for the quote itself seems lacking.

Quotes that appear to treat similar subjects as the Homeric passage under discussion are placed after Camerarius' explanation of the passage with nothing more said and without any explicit connection between the two passages; it is as if Camerarius assumes the juxtaposition of the two will be useful or illuminating to the reader on its own and does not require further explication. Such references are numerous and include in particular (though not exclusively) many of the references to the works of Virgil.

Virgil's prominence as an ancient author in the commentaries is second only to Homer. Camerarius makes numerous references to the Virgilian corpus throughout, generally in the form of direct quotes placed after his comments and with little to no explicit introduction or explanation, as described above. The most common deployment is a simple "Et:" or "Virgilius:" followed by a quote, although occasionally Camerarius will be slightly more expansive in his introduction. A more extreme example can be found on page 44, where he goes so far as to use a single unattributed line from Virgil's *Georgics* (4.342) as his only commentary on line 70. There are a few possible explanations for Camerarius' frequent use of Virgil as a source of authority and as a model for explanation. First, it is clear that (following ancient sources) Camerarius takes Virgil to have been a faithful follower and imitator of Homer—for example, in his discussion of plot development in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*: "Haec dispositio et in *Odyssea* mirabilis cernitur, et imitationis summa arte expressa a Marone est." In this sense, Camerarius uses Virgil not only as a poet who wrote verses similar to Homer (which can be used to demonstrate a grammatical point), but as a reader and interpreter of Homer (whose own verses

constitute a sort of literary commentary on the *Iliad*). It should not be surprising given these facts that Camerarius is content with ancient interpretations of the Homeric corpus that group it together with the Virgilian corpus. It is clear that Camerarius viewed the works of Virgil as offering an equally useful set of examples for human instruction and education to those found in the *Iliad*; there is even evidence in the work of recent scholars that Camerarius practiced the consultation of passages chosen at random from the works of Homer and Virgil for the use of divination and personal instruction (Baron 208-209).

Another potential reason for the frequent of Virgil in the commentary is the position given to the Virgilian corpus in the history of Latin literature, and the assumed familiarity that Camerarius' readers would have with it. Passages from Virgil would be the most accessible and useful choice for Camerarius when he is explaining the text of the *Iliad* by analogy to Latin poetry.

It has been shown, then, that Camerarius viewed his commentary not only as a work of scholarship aimed at fellow cultivators of *optimae litterae*, but also as a multifaceted resource available to readers on several varying levels of sophistication. The coherence of the commentary occasionally suffers as a result of this breadth—etymologies and discussions of metrical eccentricity sit cheek-by-jowl with simple glosses of common Homeric vocabulary and lengthy excurses on matters that are more or less external to the poem itself—but this cannot have been envisioned as a weakness by a scholar who was in the habit of consulting random passages from Homer and Virgil as a form of divination. The commentary therefore is no less useful to the modern scholar as a source of information about

the academic “state of the art” in Camerarius’ day than it is as a look at the ends to which the study of humane letters in that period was directed.

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