

BLINDNESS AND LITERACY IN THE *LIVES* OF HOMER

The biographical device of blindness is undoubtedly the single feature of Homeric biography most familiar to modern readers, and it seems to have been as central to ancient understandings of Homer as well. As Barbara Graziosi observes, an examination of the full range of available literary and visual evidence shows that, while there are occasional sculptural representations of Homer as sighted, and there are some texts that will make that claim as well, the overwhelming tendency seems to be to represent him as blind, and even those writers who depict Homer as sighted feel compelled to draw attention to their own denial of the more common version.¹

Both ancient and modern scholars have written extensively concerning the veracity or otherwise of this claim, and of the possible significance of its assertion. Cross-cultural parallels are adduced to the *guslari* of the south Slavic tradition, some of whom are known to have been blind.² Some, taking the blindness at face value, have argued that it can be explained as a legitimizing move derived from the historical blindness of the Homeridae,³ the ‘school’ of rhapsodes from whom much of our biographical material may derive, or even from the personal testimony of Cynaethus, to whom some attribute the *Homeric Hymn to Apollo*.⁴ Other, more sceptical, readers, have suggested that the blind, begging, Homer of the *Lives* is incompatible with the exalted social role attributed to singers within epic⁵ or, conversely, that the representation of Homer as blind is the result of a naive application of the biographical fallacy, falsely deducing Homer’s blindness from that of Demodocus in the *Odyssey*.⁶ More recently, Graziosi has usefully drawn connections between the representation of Homer as blind and as poor and close to the gods, and suggests that Homer’s poetic abilities may have been seen as divine compensation for his blindness; she has also usefully suggested reading the blindness in more explicitly literary terms, suggesting that Homer’s blindness be read using the same techniques used to interpret Oedipus’ blindness.⁷

One aspect of Homer’s blindness has evaded the attention of modern scholarship, namely its necessary connection to claims of literacy. The historicist (‘was Homer *really* blind?’) and reverse biographical fallacy (‘Homer is blind only because Demodocus is’) approaches taken by many contemporary Homerists, along with our shared (and natural) preoccupation with uncovering the *actual* means of composition and transmission for epic, have, I contend, led us to ignore the obvious fact

¹ B. Graziosi, *Inventing Homer: The Early Reception of Epic* (Cambridge, 2002), 126–32.

² A.B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, MA, 1960), 18.

³ M.L. West, ‘The invention of Homer’, *CQ* 49 (1999), 364–82.

⁴ R. Dyer, ‘The blind bard of Chios (*Hymn. Hom. Ap. 171–76*)’, *CPh* 70 (1975), 119–21.

⁵ J. Latacz, *Homer: His Art and his World*, tr. J.P. Holoka (Ann Arbor, MI, 1996), 29.

⁶ Such a reading would, I suggest, constitute a ‘reverse biographical fallacy’: the fallacy of assuming that the biographical fallacy was the operative mode of a biographical text, when, as I hope to show, other motivations are clearly more significant.

⁷ Graziosi (n. 1), 138–63. This possibility is made explicit in the *Vita Romana* account of Homer’s blindness as caused by a vision of Achilles; see below.

that, in the ancient world, a blind man will not be a literate man, and certainly will not use writing as the means of composing, remembering and transmitting his work.⁸ If we examine the ancient Homeric *Lives* that come down to us, we see that Homer's blindness is problematic for many of their authors, and that a given *Life's* handling of the device of blindness is indicative of that *Life's* attitude towards the use of writing in the production and distribution of Homeric epic.⁹

This relationship between blindness and literacy has so far been discussed primarily in negative terms. Both Lefkowitz and Gigante have argued against the plausibility of a blind poet composing the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.¹⁰ Gigante argues that, since Homer must have used writing to at least some extent in the composition of epic, the accounts of his blindness cannot be valid. Since the work of Parry and Lord has shown the possibility of constructing poetic works on the scale of Homeric epic without the aid of writing, Gigante's point is unsustainable. Regardless of the status of the claim that Parry's and Lord's Yugoslav fieldwork can be used as a model for the composition of Homeric epic, they did incontrovertibly show the possibility of composing sustained and complex epic poems without the aid of writing, and in the aftermath of their work it can no longer be claimed that such a task is *impossible*.¹¹ Equally unconvincing are the supplementary arguments Gigante develops here against Homer's blindness: that Pseudo-Herodotus has the now blind Homer open a school on Chios (207), and that, in the episode in which Homer enters a phratry house on Samos, he performs an epigram which says that the lighting of a fire will make the room look nobler (211). The school which Homer opens on Chios is specifically described as teaching his poems (*ta epea*), in explicit contrast to the earlier school he had operated in Smyrna, which taught writing (*grammata*), among other subjects (*tên allên mousikên*) (194); the contrast seems designed to make clear that Homer is not teaching his poems in written form on Chios. As for the epigram on Samos, I am uncertain as to why Gigante believes that a once-sighted blind man would be incapable of using a verb of seeing to describe a fire, or that a blind man would be incapable of discerning that a fire was not lit.

While I do not agree with Gigante that a blind Homer is impossible (because Homer must have used writing), I agree with his more basic and underlying premise that a blind Homer must have been an illiterate Homer and I will suggest that, in our *Lives*, this device of blindness serves us as an index of the author's views on

⁸ A reasonable objection at this point would be the (well-documented) cases of John Milton, James Joyce and Jorge Luis Borges, among others, whose blindness in no way prevented the continued composition of highly literate and highly text-based literature and, in Borges's case, did not prevent him from assuming the directorship of the National Library. Such literary activity presumes, of course, a considerable infrastructure of already existing textual literature, and a system of readers and/or amanuenses (Milton's daughter and friends; Joyce's friends including Samuel Beckett; Borges's mother) to accomplish the transfer from textual to oral in both directions; and abundant evidence testifies to the laborious nature of such proceedings. Our *Lives* of Homer, when they insist on Homer's blindness, have serious reservations about transcription as a legitimate mechanism for the transmission of verbal art.

⁹ All citations from the *Lives* will be given with page numbers from Allen's OCT edition.

¹⁰ M.R. Lefkowitz, *The Lives of the Greek Poets* (Baltimore, 1981), 23; G. Gigante, *Vite di Omero* (Naples, 1981), 21.

¹¹ See e.g. Lord (n. 2) on a poem performed by Avdo Mededović which ran to 12,000 lines, approximately the length of the *Odyssey*. Significantly, this poem, 'The wedding of Smailagić Medo', was learned by Avdo by listening to a recital from a printed songbook version, which was only one-sixth the length of the poem Avdo himself would later perform.

the compositional strategies used in crafting Homeric epic. Not all of the *Lives* make their views on Homer's blindness (and thus on his use of writing) explicit and programmatic, but almost all of them, if examined with care, demonstrate at least an implicit engagement with this theme.

The most detailed account of Homer's blindness is found in the Pseudo-Herodotean *Vita*. According to its author Homer becomes blind while returning home from his Mediterranean travels via Ithaca. While on Ithaca (Allen, 196), he contracts an eye ailment, and becomes blind after his condition worsens at Colophon (Allen, 196–7):

Ὁ δὲ Μέντης ἀναπλέων ἐκ τῆς Λευκάδος προσέσχεν εἰς τὴν Ἰθάκην καὶ ἀνέλαβε τὸν Μελησιγένη· χρόνον τε ἐπὶ συχρὸν συμπεριέπλει αὐτῷ. ἀπικομένῳ δὲ ἐς Κολοφῶνα συνέβη πάλιν νοσήσαντα τοὺς ὀφθαλμοὺς μὴ δύνασθαι διαφυγεῖν τὴν νόσον, ἀλλὰ τυφλωθῆναι ἐνθαῦτα. ἐκ δὲ τῆς Κολοφῶνος τυφλὸς ἔων ἀπικνέεται εἰς τὴν Σμύρναν καὶ οὕτως ἐπεχειρεῖ τῇ ποιήσει.

As Mentès sailed back from Leucas, he brought his ship in at Ithaca and picked up Melesigenes, and for some time he sailed around with him. But when he arrived at Colophon, it happened that Homer's eye disease came back, and he was unable to escape the disease, but became blind there. And from Colophon, Homer, as a blind man, arrived at Smyrna and in this condition took up poetry.

Pseudo-Herodotus here quite explicitly makes the claim that, while Homer was a literate and indeed a teacher of writing, his literary career began only once he had become blind. This point is reinforced in the paragraph immediately following, when we hear of what is specifically labelled as Homer's first poetic composition:

Χρόνον δὲ προϊόντος ἐν τῇ Σμύρνῃ ἄπορος ἔων τοῦ βίου διενόηθη ἀπικέσθαι ἐς Κύμην. πορευόμενος δὲ διὰ τοῦ Ἑρμοῦ πεδίου, ἀπικνέεται ἐς Νέον τεῖχος, ἀποικίην Κυμαίων. ὥκισθη δὲ τοῦτο τὸ χωρίον ὕστερον Κύμης ἔτεσιν ὀκτώ. ἐνθαῦτα λέγεται αὐτὸν ἐπιστάντα ἐπὶ σκυτεῖόν τι εἰπεῖν πρῶτα τὰ ἔπεα τάδε·

When a little time had passed, and since he was without a means of support, Homer decided to go to Cyme. After he had journeyed across the plain of the Hermus, he arrived in Neon Teikhos, a Cymeian colony, which had been founded eight years after Cyme itself. It is said that Homer for the first time spoke these, his first verses, standing at some cobbler's shop there ... (Allen, 197)

The arrangement of the story is carefully calculated to reconcile a series of potentially contradictory goals. The author of this *Vita* clearly thinks that it is important that Homer be well-travelled and literate, in order to account for the broad awareness of a variety of regions and ways of life implied by the epics. Our author goes as far as to suggest that Homer likely took written notes while he travelled *εἰκὸς δέ μιν ἦν καὶ μνημόσυνα πάντων γράφεσθαι* (Allen, 196). At the same time, he insists that the composition and transmission of Homeric epic occurs only orally.¹² While Homer's blindness is a traditional – indeed nearly compulsory – component

¹² See also the Pseudo-Herodotean account of Thestorides, who is said to have received the right to transcribe a minor epic poem (the *Phocais*) in exchange for feeding and caring for Homer; whereupon Thestorides flees to Chios and begins to perform the *Phocais* as his own work. The episode seems designed to suggest the dangers of transcription, particularly the loss of control over a work suffered when written texts of it circulate.

of his biography, Pseudo-Herodotus uses this theme to construct a clear break in Homer's life between a literate, sighted phase of investigation and travel, and a blind (and therefore non-literate) phase of poetic composition.

Pseudo-Herodotus' handling of the device of blindness suggests a compositional environment in which writing, while not altogether absent, does not play a major role. Readers of Homeric epic have argued that a blind poet could not have created the vivid visual descriptions and similes characteristic of Homeric epic.¹³ Pseudo-Herodotus' elegant solution resolves the problem temporally, dividing Homer's life into sighted/literate and blind/poetic halves. This solution also offers a resolution of the epichoric/Panhellenic tension inherent to Homeric epic, and accounts for why a poet who, whatever his birthplace, was generally thought to come from the Aegean, would have devoted an epic poem to the wanderings of Odysseus, whose Ithacan home was far removed from Homer's. The biographical device of travel literalizes the process of gathering epichoric versions of the Trojan War; when Homer's travelling days are finished by his blindness, he begins to assemble his stories into a Panhellenic narrative.

In an unusual counterpart to the familiar competition over the birthplace of Homer, Pseudo-Herodotus suggests that cities may have vied for the honour of being known as the site of Homer's blindness:

οἱ μὲν δὴ Ἰθακήσιοι λέγουσι τότε μιν παρ' ἑωυτοῖς τυφλωθῆναι ὥς δὲ ἐγὼ φημι τότε μὲν ὕγιῃ γενέσθαι, ὕστερον δὲ ἐν Κολοφώνι τυφλωθῆναι. συνομολογοῦσι δέ μοι καὶ Κολοφώνιοι τοῦτοισι.

While the Ithacans do indeed claim that Homer became blind among them, I say instead that at that time he regained his health, and only later among the Colophonians did he become blind. The Colophonians agree with me in these matters. (Allen, 196)

It may seem odd to us that cities would strive to be known as the site of Homer's blinding, but if we think of Homeric travel as a device to represent the construction of Panhellenic epic out of epichoric material, the question of whether Homer lost his sight permanently (or only temporarily) on Ithaca may assume greater importance. A Homer blinded permanently after Ithaca finds in that island his last and most important source of information, and it is no surprise to be told that the Ithacans make such a claim. By contrast, a Homer who remains sighted a while longer may gather more material elsewhere, and Pseudo-Herodotus insists that Homer's travels continue for some time. Further, we hear from the *Certamen* that the Colophonians still (in the compiler's time) point to the place where Homer began to compose poetry; evidently, the juxtaposition of blindness and poetic composition was an inherent part of the Colophonian narrative about Homer, and to accept a final blindness on Ithaca would be to locate his first moment of poetic inspiration there as well.¹⁴

Of the two *Lives* traditionally attributed to Plutarch, the second (which is very brief) says nothing about Homer's blindness. The first, however, takes an interesting position, and one quite distinct from that of Pseudo-Herodotus. Where the latter

¹³ Below I discuss one ancient critic who made precisely this argument.

¹⁴ Gigante (n. 10), 29 notes that this is the only point at which Pseudo-Herodotus indulges in source criticism; evidently the question of where Homer became blind had ideological significance for the Chian tradition as well.

writer (uniquely) presents a continuous and synthetic narrative, Pseudo-Plutarch I offers us material from four earlier sources (Ephorus, Aristotle, the Colophonian tradition and an epigram by Antipater), then provides a few comments of his own in summation. In a pattern we shall see repeated frequently, this author's agenda is accordingly revealed as much in the selection and presentation of evidence from his sources as in his own direct statements.

Of his sources, the epigram by Antipater makes no comment on Homer's blindness (it is, instead, concerned with the multiple claims to the status of Homer's birthplace). Ephorus presents an etymology for 'Homer' connected to blindness: he believes that the blind are so named because they need *homêreuontes*, or guides (Allen, 240). Pseudo-Plutarch I does not inform us of Ephorus' views on the circumstances of Homer's becoming blind, or of whether the blindness should be dated before, during or after Homer's poetic career. We are given little idea of what Aristotle's own views on Homer's blindness were, but are left with the implication (whether derived from Aristotle himself or from Pseudo-Plutarch I's selective quotation from him) that Aristotle either did not believe Homer to have been blind, or did not consider the question of his blindness to have been of much significance.¹⁵

The final source used by Pseudo-Plutarch I is a Colophonian tradition represented by an epigram from a statue of Homer said to have been located there, according to which Homer was a Colophonian and a poet who used writing:

¹⁵ The blindness is alluded to only once in Pseudo-Plutarch I's material taken from Aristotle: he presents two versions of the Delphic oracle Homer is said to have received urging him not to travel to Ios (which will be the site of his death scene). The shorter version, cited below in the discussion of Homer's death, and which we find also in the *Certamen* and in Proclus, makes no mention of blindness; the longer version, found only here in Pseudo-Plutarch I's Aristotelian material, at least suggests it:

ὄλβιε καὶ δύσδαμον· ἔφες γὰρ ἐπ' ἀμφοτέροισιν
πατρίδα δίζηαι, μητρός δέ τοι οὐ πατρός ἐστι
μητρόπολις ἐν νήσῳ ὑπὸ Κρήτης εὐρείης,
Μίνως γαίης οὔτε σχεδὸν οὔτ' ἀποτηλοῦ.
ἐν τῇ σὴ μοῖρ' ἐστὶ τελευτῆσαι βίότιοι
εὖτ' ἂν ἀπὸ γλώσσης παίδων μὴ γνῶς ἐπακούσας
δυσξύνετον σκολιοῖσι λόγοις εἰρημένον ὕμνον.
δοιὰς γὰρ ζωῆς μοίρας λάχες, ἣν μὲν ἀμαυρὰν
ἡελίων δισσῶν, ἣν δ' ἀθανάτοις ἰσόμοιρον
ζώντι τε καὶ φθιμένῳ· φθίμενος δ' ἔτι πολλὸν ἀγήρω.

Blessed and unfortunate one, for both are your natures:
You seek your fatherland, but your mother-city is that of your mother,
Not your father, on the island near broad Crete.
Neither near nor far from Minos' land,
In which it is your lot to end your life
When you hear, uncomprehendingly, from the tongue of boys
A hymn hard to understand, spoken in twisted words
For there are two living fates cast for you, one a dimming
Of your twin suns, the other a lot matching the immortals;
Living and dying. And in dying you will still not age. (Allen, 241–2)

If Pseudo-Plutarch is here still quoting from Aristotle, then Aristotle's account of Homer's life must have addressed the question of his blindness, although frustratingly we cannot tell from Pseudo-Plutarch's quotation just what Aristotle's views might have been.

νιὲ Μέλητος, Ὅμηρε, σὺ γὰρ κλέος Ἑλλάδι πάσῃ
 καὶ Κολοφῶνι πάτρῃ θήκας ἐς αἶδιον,
 καὶ τὰσδ' ἀντιθέω ψυχῇ γεννήσας κούρας
 δισσὰς ἐκ στηθέων¹⁶ γραψάμενος σελίδας·
 ὕμνεϊ δ' ἣ μὲν νόστον Ὀδυσσέως πολύπλαγκτον,
 ἣ δὲ τὸν Ἰλιακὸν Δαρδανιδῶν πόλεμον.

O son of Meles, Homer, you gave *kleos* to all of Greece
 and to Colophon, your homeland for all ages.
 And these maidens you fathered in your godlike soul,
 twins, from your breast, by writing your pages:
 One of them hymns the far-wandering *nostos* of Odysseus,
 the other, the Iliac war of the Dardanians.

(Allen, 243)

When Pseudo-Plutarch I adds his own comments, he shares the Colophonian inscription's conviction that Homer wrote (both use the verb *graphō*) both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, and nothing else (Allen, 243). Taking all of the evidence provided under consideration, we can see that, again, a Homeric biographer has strategically deployed the evidence he offers about Homer's blindness to reinforce his claims about textual transmission. Mention of the issue of Homer's blindness is, as we have said, virtually compulsory for Homeric biographers. Since, however, blindness is incompatible with literacy, and Pseudo-Plutarch characterizes Homer as *writing* his epics, he is careful to say nothing about Homer's blindness that would prevent him from claiming a textual composition for the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Two of his four sources say nothing of Homer's blindness, while one of those two provides inscriptional reinforcement for the claim that the epics were written. The evidence from Ephorus and Aristotle is presented so as to make as little mention as possible of blindness, to evade the question of whether these two authors accepted that Homer was blind, and to provide no evidence that might contradict our biographer's claims that Homer was not blind. The device of Homer's blindness, so much discussed, cannot be ignored altogether; biographers who wish to avoid the claims about orality implicit in the device of blindness must therefore either deny the blindness outright, or (as Pseudo-Plutarch I does) mention it only in passing, so as to avoid drawing any conclusions from it.

Proclus represents a more extreme presentation of the sources on blindness, one clearly designed to assert a particular theory concerning the composition and transmission of Homeric epic. He makes an explicit claim that Homer wrote (again, using the verb *graphō*) both and only the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* γέγραφε δὲ ποιήσεις δύο, Ἰλιάδα καὶ Ὀδύσσειαν (Allen, 102). He even goes so far as to cite sources (Xenon and Hellanicus) who argue for separate authorship for the two epics, although his presentation suggests scepticism about this position. Even so, his is the only one of the Homeric biographies even to mention so extreme an Analyst position. He is also the biographer to take the strongest stance against the blindness of Homer:

τυφλὸν δὲ ὅσοι τοῦτον ἀπεφάναντο, αὐτοί μοι δοκοῦσι τὴν διάνοιαν πεπηρωσθαι·
 τοσαῦτα γὰρ κατείδεν ἄνθρωπος ὅσα οὐδεὶς πώποτε.

¹⁶ Accepting here West's ἐκ στηθέων in place of Allen's ἡμιθέων.

And those who think that Homer was blind seem to me to be maimed in their understanding, for he saw more than any other man ever saw. (Allen, 101)

Proclus' attack against the story of Homer's blindness uses in support the argument that Homer must have been able to see and understand more than any man. This argument is developed in more detail further on:

φαίνεται δὲ γηραιὸς ἐκκλειοπῶς τὸν βίον· ἡ γὰρ ἀνυπέρβλητος ἀκρίβεια τῶν πραγμάτων προβεβηκυῖαν ἡλικίαν παρίστησιν. πολλὰ δὲ ἐπεληλυθὼς μέρη τῆς οἰκουμένης ἐκ τῆς πολυπειρίας τῶν τόπων εὐρίσκεται. τοῦτ' ὃν προσυπονοητέον καὶ πλούτου πολλὴν περιουσίαν γενέσθαι· αἱ γὰρ μακραὶ ἀποδημίαι πολλῶν ἀναλωμάτων δέονται, καὶ ταῦτα κατ' ἐκείνους τοὺς χρόνους οὔτε πάντων πλεομένων ἀκινδύνως οὔτε ἐπιμισγομένων ἀλλήλοις πω τῶν ἀνθρώπων ῥαδίως.

Homer appears to have been an old man when he departed this life, since his unsurpassed precision in matters of fact show him to have been of advanced age. From his wide experience of places travel to many regions of the world can be deduced. We must additionally suspect that he had a great surplus of wealth,¹⁷ since great journeying requires much expenditure, and at that in those times when neither was frequent sailing safe nor was there in any way an easy mixing of peoples with each other. (Allen, 101–2)

This represents an interesting variant on the account offered by Pseudo-Herodotus, who similarly believes that Homer must have had wide experience of the world, but who reconciles that belief with the oral composition and transmission of epic biographically by making Homer sighted first and blind later. Proclus, who as we have seen is certain that Homer was a literate poet, is therefore equally convinced that Homer must have remained sighted throughout his life. Both writers, it should be noted, believe in some role for writing in Homer's career; Pseudo-Herodotus constructs a version of Homer's life in which Homer composes epic without writing, but cannot recall his experiences as a traveller without taking notes, while Proclus insists on the use of writing in all aspects of Homer's career. Neither text's Homer, therefore, is exactly equivalent to the oral-traditional poet of contemporary classical scholarship, although in Pseudo-Herodotus we see evidence that at least some in the ancient world could imagine oral composition of Homeric epic.

Proclus' discussion of the etymology of Homer's name offers another opportunity to advance his agenda:

οἱ μὲν οὖν Σμυρναῖον αὐτὸν ἀποφαινόμενοι Μαίονος μὲν πατὸς λέγουσιν εἶναι, γεννηθῆναι δὲ ἐπὶ Μέλῃτος τοῦ ποταμοῦ, ὅθεν καὶ Μελησιγενῆ ὀνομασθῆναι δοθέντα δὲ Χίοις εἰς Ὀμηρεῖαν Ὀμηρον κληθῆναι. οἱ δὲ ἀπὸ τῆς τῶν ὀμμάτων πηρώσεως τούτου τυχεῖν αὐτὸν φασὶ τοῦ ὀνόματος· τοὺς γὰρ τυφλοὺς ὑπὸ Αἰολέων ὀμήρους καλεῖσθαι.

Those who say that Homer was from Smyrna say that his father was Maion, and that he was born on the banks of the river Meles, from which he was named Melesigenes. When he was given as a hostage (*eis homêreian*) to the Chians, he was called Homer. And others say that he acquired this name from the maiming of his eyes, since the blind are called *homêroi* by the Aeolians. (Allen, 99)

¹⁷ Proclus would thus appear to be a *locus classicus* for the modern tendency to assume that Homer was of a high social status, for which see Graziosi (n. 1), 125–63.

Proclus does mention the ‘blind’ etymology for Homer’s name, but he deliberately downplays its significance, both by giving it as his second alternative and by the fact that he withholds his source for this etymology. He does not commit himself wholeheartedly to the ‘hostage’ etymology, but its greater prominence, together with its integration into a somewhat fuller narrative, do suggest that this is the version to which he attaches more weight. I would point out in addition the use of the phrase for Homer’s blindness, ‘the maiming of his eyes’ (τῆς τῶν ὀμμάτων πηρώσεως), which is recalled later when Proclus attacks those who believe Homer to have been blind as ‘maimed in their understanding’ (τὴν διάνοιαν πεπηρώσθαι). The repetition of the phrase suggests that the latter phrase is a retort to those who express the view taken in the former. Further, despite Proclus’ wording, the evidence does not uniformly suggest that Smyrnaean tradition accepted the ‘hostage’ etymology; in fact, the *Certamen* specifically associates the ‘blindness’ etymology with Smyrna (Allen, 226). In various ways, then, Proclus makes the ‘hostage’ etymology more prominent than the ‘blindness’ etymology, thereby reinforcing his claim that Homer was neither blind nor illiterate.

The views of Hesychius of Miletus seem to have been broadly similar to those of Proclus. Like Proclus, Hesychius emphasizes the ‘hostage’ etymology, indeed to such an extent that the ‘blindness’ etymology is omitted altogether.¹⁸ Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of Hesychius’ biographical material is the strange discussion he provides of Homer’s blindness:

τυφλὸς ἐκ παίδων γεγονώς, τὸ δ’ ἀληθὲς ὅτι οὐχ ἡττήθη ἐπιθυμίας ἢ παρὰ τῶν ὀφθαλμῶν ἄρχεται καὶ παρὰ τοῦτο ἱστορήθη τυφλός.

Homer had been blind since childhood, but the truth is that he never yielded to the lust which takes its beginnings from the eyes, and on that account is considered as blind.

(Allen, 259)

Most of the *Lives* take a fairly decisive stance one way or another on the subject of Homer’s blindness; some do not make their stances explicit, but their presentation of the evidence makes it possible to infer their views. Hesychius of Miletus is the only one of Homer’s biographers to assert and deny the blindness within one sentence. Moreover, he is the only biographer even to suggest that Homer may have been blind since childhood; all of the others who accept the blindness either assert that it was the result of some incident in his adulthood, or they mention the ‘blindness’ etymology for his name, thus indirectly confirming that Homer spent some substantial period of his life as a sighted man. Most likely, I believe,

¹⁸ Hesychius’ version of the Smyrnaean account of Homer is distinct from the versions found in both Proclus and the *Certamen* (Allen, 257–8):

ἐκλήθη δ’ Ὅμηρος διὰ τὸ πολέμου ἐνισταμένου Σμυρναίοις πρὸς Κολοφωνίους ὄμηρον δοθῆναι, ἢ τὸ βουλευομένων Σμυρναίων δαιμονία τι ἐνεργεῖα φθέγξασθαι καὶ συμβουλευσαὶ ἐκκλησιάζουσι περὶ τοῦ πολέμου.

He was called Homer due to his being given as a hostage (*homēros*) by the Smyrnaeans when war was impending with the Colophonians, or because, when the Smyrnaeans were considering their options Homer, through the power of some *daimōn*, spoke and offered his counsel to them as they held an assembly about the war.

It is beyond the scope of this article to enumerate, let alone interpret, all of the discrepancies, large and small, between the versions of the various *poleis*’ accounts of Homer’s life as represented by his various biographers. This moment may serve as a further illustration.

Hesychius is citing a source which makes this claim of childhood blindness, which is of course even more awkward for a claim of literate authorship than is adult blindness. In that case, the equation of vision and lust which follows may be an attempt to evade, by rendering allegorical, a piece of evidence that he none the less feels compelled to report. Perhaps nowhere else in the biographical tradition are we given so clear a picture of the ways in which those who understand Homer to have been literate negotiate the inconveniently prevalent tradition that he was blind. This passage also demonstrates the oblique nature of the implicit poetics of biographical accounts of poets; not only do the surface claims of biographical narrative have ideological import for understanding of literature, but even (and especially) the silences, evasions, and allegorizations of those narratives reveal much about how the author of the text understood its origins.

The *Certamen* represents another ambiguous case. The main narrative of the competition between Homer and Hesiod – that is, the portion of this text which probably derives from Alcidas – never once mentions Homer's blindness, nor does it at any point say anything that demonstrates conclusively either that Homer was blind or that he was sighted. As we shall see below, the closest this portion of the text comes to commenting on Homer's blindness comes in its account of Homer's death – and there the inference that Homer is blind is based on omission rather than on a direct claim. In the compiler's frame surrounding the competition narrative, there is precisely one reference to Homer's blindness – in fact, to the Smyrnaean claim that Homer was named Melesigenes at birth (after the Meles river) but was renamed Homeros when he became blind, based on the etymology of the name Homer derived from an Aeolic word for 'blind' (Allen, 226). As readers, we are uncertain whether or not the compiler endorses this version of the Smyrnaean story, reported as it is alongside alternative versions of Homer's birth derived from Chios and from Colophon. The compiler never directly challenges the claim that Homer was blind, and so we may at most say that plausibility suggests that he assumed this to be so, and that, further, he accepted the general view that Homer was blinded only later in life. Certainly, writing plays no significant role in Homer as represented by the *Certamen*. The original contest narrative, which depicts a contest of spontaneous poetic composition, makes no reference to writing. The compiler's frame, which tends to report parallel versions of Homer's story without resolving apparent inconsistencies,¹⁹ may not have reflected on the implications of sight or blindness.

The only one of the *Lives* to offer a mythological account of the blinding of Homer is the *Vita Romana*, and it offers two such accounts:

τυφλωθῆναι δ' αὐτὸν οὕτω πως λέγουσιν· ἐλθόντα γὰρ ἐπὶ τὸν Ἀχιλλέως τάφον εὐξασθαι θεάσασθαι τὸν ἥρωα τοιοῦτον ὁποῖος προήλθεν ἐπὶ τὴν μάχην τοῖς δευτέροις ὅπλοις κεκοσμημένος· ὀφθέντος δ' αὐτῷ τοῦ Ἀχιλλέως τυφλωθῆναι τὸν Ὅμηρον ὑπὸ τῆς τῶν ὀπλων αὐγῆς, ἐλεηθέντα δ' ὑπὸ Θέτιδος καὶ Μουσῶν τιμηθῆναι πρὸς αὐτῶν τῇ ποιητικῇ. ἄλλοι δέ φασι τοῦτο αὐτὸν πεπονθέναι διὰ μῆνην τῆς Ἑλένης ὀργισθείσης αὐτῷ διότι εἶπεν αὐτὴν καταλειπέναι μὲν τὸν πρότερον ἄνδρα, ἠκολουθηκέναι δ' Ἀλεξάνδρῳ· οὕτως γοῦν ... ὅτι καὶ παρέστη αὐτῷ φασὶν νυκτὸς ἡ ψυχὴ τῆς ἡρώωνος

¹⁹ Note, for example, that, while the contest narrative incorporates the Delphic oracle claiming that Homer's mother was from Ios and predicting his death there, the writer of the frame narrative quotes as authoritative an oracle from the time of Hadrian claiming that Homer was born on Ithaca, to Telemachus and Nestor's daughter Polycaste (Allen, 227).

παραινούσα καῦσαι τὰς ποιήσεις αὐτοῦ [καλῶς δέ]²⁰ εἰ τοῦτο ποιήσοι πράξοι. τὸν δὲ μὴ ἀνασχέσθαι ποιῆσαι τοῦτο.

They say that Homer was blinded in something like the following way. When he went to the tomb of Achilles he prayed to see the hero such as he was when he advanced for battle decked out in his new armour. At the sight of Achilles Homer was blinded by the gleam of the armour, but he was pitied by Thetis and the Muses and was honoured by them with the gift of poetry. But others say that he suffered this loss because of the wrath (*mēnis*) of Helen, who was angry with him because he said that she had left behind her first husband, and followed Alexander instead. So at least ... says that the *psukhē* of the heroine even stood before him at night to advise him to burn his poetry and that he would be all right if he did so. But he could not bear to do so. (Allen, 252–3)

Both of these stories have interesting resonances with the rest of the tradition. As others have observed,²¹ the Achilles story, with the gift of poetry as a divine compensation for the divine punishment of blinding, is reminiscent of, for example, the myths of Aesop and of Tiresias. Certainly, the juxtaposition of sudden disability and sudden poetic or mantic inspiration, both the result of divine action, is a common theme in Greek myth, as Robert Garland has observed.²² For my purposes here, what is interesting in these myths is less their undoubted typological similarities, but rather the differing models of intelligence, insight and communication expressed in each of them.

The strange story of Tiresias' blindness, related to us in Pseudo-Apollodorus and attributed to Hesiod, none the less represents a fairly simple version of the type.²³ After being turned from male to female, and from female back to male, through disturbing the same pair of copulating snakes, Tiresias is asked by Zeus and Hera to compare the sexual pleasures enjoyed by the two sexes. Opinions vary as to Tiresias' response, but Hera is evidently displeased, blinding Tiresias, while Zeus, happier with the response, compensates by granting him oracular powers (*hē mantikē*). Here, the loss and its compensation are clearly represented as equivalent and perhaps to some degree exclusive; the everyday capabilities of vision preclude prophetic abilities. There may be an analogy here with Tiresias' reversals of gender as well; Tiresias can experience the world as man or woman, but not both simultaneously, just as he can have exoteric or esoteric knowledge, but not both at once. Gender and vision are both represented as static and absolute qualities; transformation from one state to another is imaginable, but not the simultaneous exercise of both. Moreover, nothing about the act of prophecy requires the use of writing, and the equation between vision and prophecy in fact suggests an entirely oral means of communication.

The story of Aesop, as the *Life of Aesop* relates it, suggests a slightly different pattern. Aesop was thought to be not only exceptionally ugly, but also mute (*Vita Aesopis* 1); he is granted the power of speech and the wisdom of the Muses after

²⁰ Accepting here West's emendation, as well as *πράξοι* for *πρόσχοι* in the same line.

²¹ See e.g. T. Compton, 'The trial of the satirist: poetic *vita* (Aesop, Archilochus, Homer) as background for Plato's *Apology*', *AJPh* 111 (1990), 330–47; Graziosi (n. 1), 160–3.

²² See R. Garland, *The Eye of the Beholder: Deformity and Disability in the Graeco-Roman World* (London, 1995), 99–102.

²³ Apollod. 3.6.7, incl. Hes. fr. 267 M–W. Note that Pseudo-Apollodorus gives us an alternative account from Pherecydes, in which Athena blinds him because he has seen her bathe, and his mother, the nymph Chariclo, begs successfully for some compensation; in this version, the compensation is specifically the ability to hear and understand birdsong.

an encounter with a priestess of Isis (*Vita Aesopis* 5–8). Much of the remainder of the *Life* is taken up with witty exchanges between Aesop and his master, the Samian philosopher Xanthias, in which Aesop reveals his improvisational verbal cleverness (a variety of intelligence which, as we shall see, Homer is represented as lacking). Perhaps most interestingly for my purposes, Aesop is at one point asked to prepare the finest feast imaginable for Xanthias (*Vita Aesopis* 51–3). When Aesop's feast turns out to be boiled, roasted and spiced tongue, followed by tongue broth, Xanthias reproaches his slave, whose rebuttal reinforces the oral nature, not only of Aesop's improvisational wit, but of his master's teachings:

Αἴσωπος λέγει ‘χάριν σοι ἔχω, ὅτι ἀνδρῶν φιλολόγων παρόντων μέμφη με. εἰπάς μοι ὅτι “εἴ τι χρήσιμόν ἐστιν ἐν τῷ βίῳ, εἴ τι ἡδύτερον ἢ μείζον, ἀγόρασον”. τί οὖν ἐστιν ἐν τῷ βίῳ γλώσσης χρησιμώτερον ἢ μείζον; μάθε ὅτι διὰ γλώσσης πᾶσα φιλοσοφία καὶ πᾶσα παιδεία συνέστηκεν. χωρὶς γλώσσης οὐδὲν γίνεται, οὐδὲ δόσεις, οὐ λῆψις, οὐδὲ ἀγορασμός· ἀλλὰ διὰ γλώσσης πόλεις ἀνορθοῦνται, δόγματα καὶ νόμοι ὀρίζονται. εἰ οὖν διὰ γλώσσης πᾶς βίος συνέστηκεν, γλώσσης οὐδὲν ἐστι κρεῖττον.’
(*Vita Aesopis* 53).

Aesop said, ‘I’m grateful to you for reproaching me in the presence of these learned men. You told me to “buy whatever was the most useful, the sweetest and the most important thing in life”. Well, what is more useful or important in life than the tongue? You know that all philosophy and education exist because of the tongue. Without the tongue, nothing happens: neither giving, nor taking, nor buying. But through the tongue cities are ruled, and ordinances and laws are defined. If all of life exists because of the tongue, then there is nothing greater than the tongue.’

Granted that the night after the tongue feast described above Aesop prepares an identical feast to illustrate the point that there is nothing *worse* than the tongue (*Vita Aesopis* 55), the juxtaposition of the two stories certainly underscores the centrality of speech in the constitution of the social sphere (note, perhaps, the contrasting English expression ‘the pen is mightier than the sword’, which similarly argues for the power of language, but in a text-based, rather than oral, context). Although we are later shown that Aesop can read (or at least recognize the letters of the alphabet and identify words beginning with those letters; *Vita Aesopis* 78–80), it is clear that Aesop’s wisdom, and his skill, are best expressed not through the written word, but rather in improvised and spontaneous speech (a context which the *Vita*, significantly, also assumes for the philosopher Xanthus’ teachings). Where the story of Tiresias sees prophetic vision as a suitable, even superior, substitute for the sense of sight, the story of Aesop works somewhat differently. Instead of taking the structure of ‘disability as punishment compensated for by heightened ability’, the Aesop story, as we have seen, gives its protagonist wisdom as a kind of *surcompensation* for his earlier muteness, granted him as a reward for his piety. Extreme cleverness in speech, then, is represented as a heightened form of the capacity for speech, where prophecy (perhaps a kind of heightened vision, but one which dispenses with, rather than heightens, the everyday capacity of the sense), is a compensation given in a case where a man’s more ambivalent actions require both reward and punishment. The Achilles story of Homer’s blinding, then, is much closer to the story of Tiresias than to that of Aesop; both men have seen or known what they should not, and are punished for that transgression, but win compensation thanks to the pity of one or more of the gods. In Homer’s case, that pity is earned through prayer, which moves the gods for its evident love of

Achilles and, possibly, from a sense that Homer, thanks to that love, would be the ideal human vessel for the transmission of the story of Achilles from the Muses and Thetis. Where Aesop gains earthly (and earthy) wisdom as a reward for his piety, the more ambivalent behaviour of Tiresias and Homer offers a divine wisdom at the price of the loss of worldly awareness.

The Helen story, in turn, cannot help but remind us of the story of her blinding, and subsequent healing, of Stesichorus for much the same offence, a matter I have discussed elsewhere.²⁴ The blindings of Homer and of Stesichorus are found, in opposition to each other, in Plato's *Phaedrus*:

ἐμοὶ μὲν οὖν, ὦ φίλε, καθήρασθαι ἀνάγκη· ἔστιν δὲ τοῖς ἀμαρτάνουσι περὶ μυθολογίαν καθαρισμὸς ἀρχαῖος, ὃν Ὅμηρος μὲν οὐκ ᾔσθετο, Στησίχορος δέ. τῶν γὰρ ὀμμάτων στερηθεὶς διὰ τὴν Ἑλένης κακηγορίαν οὐκ ᾔγνόησεν ὥσπερ Ὅμηρος, ἀλλ' ἄτε μουσικὸς ὢν ἔγνω τὴν αἰτίαν, καὶ ποιεῖ εὐθὺς—

Οὐκ ἔστ' ἔτυμος λόγος οὗτος,
οὐδ' ἔβας ἐν νηυσὶν εὐσέλμοις,
οὐδ' ἴκεο Πέργαμα Τροίας·

καὶ ποιήσας δὴ πᾶσαν τὴν καλουμένην Παλινωδίαν παραχρῆμα ἀνέβλεψεν.

(Plato, *Phaedrus* 243a2–243b3)

So, my friend, I need to be purified. There is an ancient purification for those who have erred in *muthologia*, one which Homer did not perceive, but Stesichorus did. For when he was robbed of his eyes because of his slander of Helen, he was not ignorant like Homer, but since he was *mousikos* he knew the cause, and created immediately:

'This is not a true story,
You did not embark in the broad-benched ships,
You did not reach the citadel of Troy.'

And when he had created the whole of the so-called *Palinode* he recovered his sight immediately.

As I have already argued,²⁵ Plato's Socrates is interested here in the opposition he can construct between epic and lyric forms of knowledge; he associates epic with rhetoric and with writing, and lyric with philosophical dialogue and with speech, as a means of situating his discussions with Phaedrus about desire, rhetoric and writing. For my purposes in this article, what is perhaps most interesting about the passage is that, while Plato's Socrates is here silent on the question of whether Homer used writing to compose his poetry, he does most definitely associate oral (that is, non-writing-based) composition with Stesichorus, who composes the whole of the *Palinode* while blind. It is unclear whether, in this context, Plato's Socrates would claim that Homer was also an oral poet or whether he would here associate Homer with writing, a move which in the context of the *Phaedrus* would of course reduce the status of Homer and his epic still further. Either way, the anecdote as represented here associates blindness with poetic composition in still another

²⁴ I discuss the issue of Stesichorus' blinding (and subsequent regaining of his sight) in A. Beecroft, "'This is not a true story': Stesichorus' *Palinode* and the revenge of the epicchoric", *TAPhA* 156 (2006), 47–70. See also id., *Authorship and Cultural Identity in Early Greece and China: Patterns of Literary Circulation* (Cambridge, 2010), ch. 4, for the possibility that the *palinode* might be a performance genre, situating a certain kind of citharodic lyric in relationship to Homeric epic.

²⁵ Beecroft (n. 24 [2006]).

way: the Stesichorus of this episode can compose poetry both sighted and blind, but the poetry he composes while blind displays a kind of knowledge (that his earlier work had offended Helen) unavailable to him earlier. We do not know the date of the anecdote of Homer's blindness as narrated in the *Vita Romana* above, but it seems plausible to take the anecdote there in the context of the celebrated account of Stesichorus' blindness first reported by Plato, even if the latter attributes Homer's failure to his not being *mousikos*, while the former attributes it to his love for his own poetry.

Both versions of the blindness of Homer represented by the *Vita Romana* are fascinating examples of the intertwining of vision, desire, and poetry, and of the adaptation of mythic structures to accounts of the lives of poets. I would like to draw particular attention to the fact that these two stories rely on (and propagate) completely opposite assumptions about the composition and transmission of Homeric epic. The Achilles version, as with Pseudo-Herodotus, assumes an oral poet. The Homer of the beginning of this version clearly has a fascination with the Trojan War and its heroes, and some familiarity with locations important to that war. He is not, however, a poet until he becomes blind. More explicitly than we have seen anywhere else, this version of Homer's blinding makes it clear that the blinding precedes his poetic composition not only chronologically, but also as a matter of logical necessity. The Homer who is blinded by Achilles cannot possibly be literate as a poet. The Homer blinded by Helen, in contrast, is emphatically a literate poet; in fact, his poems exist in manuscript form and the loss of those manuscripts would represent the destruction of the poems. Furthermore, for Helen, blinding a poet seems equivalent in some sense to silencing him; *either* he must destroy his poems by burning them *or* she will destroy him and the possibility that he might write more slanders against him by blinding him. In either case, this Helen believes that poetry is made possible by vision and by writing, and destroyed by the absence of either or both.

The author of the *Vita Romana*, by so casually juxtaposing these two ideologically opposed accounts of Homer's blindness, betrays no discernible agenda of his own – and may, thereby, reveal the agendas of his sources all the more clearly.²⁶ Where many of our other biographers seem to manipulate the evidence they present in order to advance a particular theory about Homeric epic, this author prefers to catalogue as full a range of theories as possible. He lists nine possible candidates for Homer's birthplace, eight possible fathers, three possible mothers, five possible chronologies and two possible birth names for Homer (one of which, Melesagoras, is not found in the other lives). Both the 'blindness' etymology and the 'hostage' etymology co-exist here, and predictably without any attempt to give either a priority over the other. The two *Vitae Scorialenses*, thought by Allen to derive from the *Vita Romana*,²⁷ are similarly catholic in their presentation of alternative versions of the basic facts of Homer's existence, and, except for their accounts of his death, singularly uninformative for our purposes.

²⁶ It is especially unfortunate, in this regard, that the author of this *Life* does not identify his sources.

²⁷ T.W. Allen (ed.), *Homer: The Origins and the Transmission* (Oxford, 1924), 31. In fact, the abundance of sources found in the *Vita Romana*, exceeding that of the other *Lives*, allows Allen to suggest the *Vita Romana* as a source for the Pseudo-Plutarchs, Proclus and the compiler of the *Certamen* as well. See also Gigante (n. 10), 62–4.

Indeed, aside from the blindness itself, the one nearly irreplaceable element in Homeric biography is the story of his death. Of the nine lives of Homer under examination, only the relatively brief accounts by Pseudo-Plutarch II and Hesychius avoid all reference to this story.²⁸ This scene has attracted considerable interest, and has in particular been seen as parallel to the death scenes of Socrates and Aesop, among others.²⁹ These parallels are certainly significant, and to them, I believe, should be added the stories concerning the deaths of Terpander, Sophocles and Anacreon, choking on fruit as they sing. The basic narrative is essentially the same in each; here I present the version found in the *Certamen*:

ἐπὶ δὲ τῆς θαλάσσης καθήμενος παίδων τινῶν ἀφ' ἀλείας ἐρχομένων ὥς φασι
πυθόμενος

ἄνδρες ἀπ' Ἀρκαδίας θηρήτορες ἦ ῥ' ἔχομέν τι;

εἰπόντων δὲ ἐκείνων

ὅσ' ἔλομεν λιπόμεσθα, ὅσ' οὐχ ἔλομεν φερόμεσθα,

οὐ νοήσας τὸ λεχθὲν ἤρετο αὐτοὺς ὃ τι λέγοιεν. οἱ δὲ φασιν ἐν ἀλείᾳ μὲν ἀγρεῦσαι
μυθὲν, ἐφθειρίσθαι δέ, καὶ τῶν φθειρῶν οὓς ἔλαβον καταλιπεῖν, οὓς δὲ οὐκ ἔλαβον
ἐν τοῖς ἱματίοις φέρειν. ἀναμνησθεῖς δὲ τοῦ μαντείου ὅτι τὸ τέλος αὐτοῦ ἦκοι τοῦ
βίου, ποιεῖ τὸ τοῦ τάφου αὐτοῦ ἐπίγραμμα. ἀναχωρῶν δὲ ἐκείθεν, ὄντος πηλοῦ
ὀλισθῶν καὶ πεσὼν ἐπὶ τὴν πλευράν, τριταῖος ὥς φασι τελευτᾷ· καὶ ἐτάφη ἐν Ἴω.
ἔστι δὲ τὸ ἐπίγραμμα τόδε·

ἐνθάδε τὴν ἱερὴν κεφαλὴν κατὰ γαῖα καλύπτει,
ἄνδρῶν ἡρώων κοσμήτορα θεῖον Ὀμηρον.

While [Homer] was sitting by the sea, it is said that he asked some boys who were returning from fishing,

‘Men from Arcadia, hunters, what have we caught?’

They answered,

‘That which we caught we left behind, that which we did not catch we brought away.’

Homer did not understand what they said and asked them what they meant. They said that while they had caught nothing while fishing, they had picked the lice off themselves, and that those of the lice which they had caught they left behind, and that those they did not catch they were carrying on their clothes. Homer then recalled the prophecy that the end of his life had come,³⁰ and he composed the epitaph for his own tomb. As he was returning from that place, and since there was a lot of mud on the ground, he slipped

²⁸ It appears likely, however, that Hesychius knew of, and referred to, this story. In the brief discussion of Homer's death in the *Suda* entry, we are told: γηραιὸς δὲ τελευτήσας ἐν τῇ νήσῳ τῇ Ἴω τέθαιπται (‘He was an old man when he died, and is buried on the island of Ios’, *Suda* ο 251). Burial on Ios (and the plausible inference of death on Ios) suggests affinities with the story of Homer's death found elsewhere.

²⁹ Compton (n. 21).

³⁰ This Delphic prophecy, given earlier in the *Certamen*, is likewise found in several of the *Lives*:

ἔστιν Ἴος νήσος μητρὸς πατρίς, ἣ σε θανόντα
δέξεται· ἀλλὰ νέων παίδων αἰνιγμα φύλαξαι.

There is an island, Ios, your mother's homeland, which will receive you
In death. But beware the riddle of the young boys. (Allen, 228)

and fell on his side, and they say he died within three days. He was buried on Ios, and this is his epitaph:

Here lies the sacred head, hidden beneath the earth,
Of one who adorned heroes, godlike Homer. (Allen, 238)

My interest here in this story rests on one small detail in each version, namely whether or not Homer is said to 'see' the fisher boys. In the context of the question of Homer's blindness, of course, this particular detail is far from trivial, and at times serves as the only evidence we have that a particular biographer of Homer accepts his blindness as factual. As we have seen, blindness is an issue that all biographers of Homer must address. For those who assume that Homer was an oral poet, or for those who do not make any definite assumptions about the composition of Homeric epic, the blindness is not a problem, but for those biographers who believe Homer to have written his poems, it must be explained away or ignored. The account of Homer's death, almost as compulsory as mention of his blindness, serves as a useful means of asserting that Homer was sighted (and thus at least potentially literate), and in the final moments of his life (thus removing the possibility, suggested in Pseudo-Herodotus, of a poetic career subsequent to the onset of blindness).

Of the seven *Lives* that provide the account of Homer's death, fully five avoid using a verb of seeing to characterize Homer's encounter with the fisher boys. As we have already seen, the *Certamen* has Homer question the boys as they approach from the sea. The Pseudo-Herodotean *Vita* has the boys approach Homer and address the riddle to him directly, not only avoiding a verb of seeing, but actually providing a plausible alternative explanation for Homer's awareness of the boys' presence:

Τῶν δὲ ναυτέων καὶ τῶν ἐκ τῆς πόλιος τινῶν ἡμένων παρὰ τῷ Ὀμήρῳ κατέπλωσαν παῖδες ἀλιῆες τὸν τόπον, καὶ ἐκβάντες ἐκ τοῦ ἀκατίου προσελθόντες αὐτοῖς τάδε εἶπον· ἄγετε ὦ ξένοι ἐπακούσατε ἡμέων, ἂν ἄρα δύνησθε διαγνώναι ἄσσω ἂν ὑμῖν εἴπωμεν.

While some of the sailors and some of the people from the town were sitting with Homer, some fisher boys sailed up to the place, and, as they disembarked from their boat, they approached the group and said, 'Come now, strangers, listen to us, and see if you can figure out what we tell you.' (Allen, 215)

The *Vitae Scorialenses I* and *II* and the *Vita Romana* also each find ways of avoiding verbs of seeing here. The *Vita Romana* provides a terse and elliptical version of the story, noting only that Homer was unable to solve the fisher boys' riddle: τῶν παίδων τῶν ἀλιέων οὐχ οἷός τ' ἐγένετο αἰνιγμα λύσαι (Allen, 253), without providing any further narrative. The *Vita Scorialensis I* is similarly uninformative, but the *Vita Scorialensis II* seems acutely aware of the implications the story of Homer's death might have for the claim that he was blind:

πλανηθέντα δὲ τὸν Ὀμηρον ἐν Ἰθάκῃ πολὺν φασὶ διατρίβει χρόνον καὶ πολλὰς χώρας ἀμειψάντα ἐν Ἰῳ τῇ νήσῳ τελευτηῆσαι ἐκ τοιαύτης αἰτίας. καθημένου γάρ ποτε τοῦ Ὀμήρου ἐν αἰγιαλῷ τυφλοῦ αὐτοῦ ὄντος αἰσθέσθαι ἀλιεῖς παρερχομένους ...

They say that Homer travelled around, and spent a great deal of time on Ithaca, and that after he had passed through many lands he died on the island of Ios for the following reason. One day, Homer was sitting on the beach (he was blind) and he noticed some fishermen approaching ...
(Allen, 249)

The use of the verb *aisthanomai*, a verb of perception that does not specify the sense used, combined with the reminder that Homer was blind, point to the eagerness of the author of the *Vita Scorialensis II*'s source to demonstrate that the story of Homer's death is compatible with his blindness. All five of the *Lives* discussed so far assert that Homer is blind, and all five narrate his death so as either to reassert the blindness, or at least avoid the use of a verb of seeing in their narration of the death scene.

The two remaining *Lives* to offer this story of Homer's death take a different approach. Both Pseudo-Plutarch I and Proclus, as I have shown, are committed to the idea of Homer as a literate poet, and as a result both are sceptical or hostile to the claim that Homer was blind. This hostility is asserted in various ways throughout both *Lives*, but finds its final and therefore most definitive rejection in their descriptions of Homer's death. In the case of Pseudo-Plutarch I his version of Homer's death comes from Aristotle, and seems altered to suit its editor's agenda:

μετ' οὐ πολὺν δὲ χρόνον πλέων εἰς Θήβας ἐπὶ τὰ Κρόνια (ἀγὼν δὲ οὗτος ἄγεται παρ' αὐτοῖς μουσικός) ἦλθεν εἰς Ἴον. ἐνθα ἐπὶ πέτρας καθεζόμενος ἐθεάσατο ἀλιεῖς προσπλέοντας, ὧν ἐπύθετο εἴ τι ἔχοιεν.

Not much time later, Homer was sailing to Thebes for the Cronia festival (which is a musical competition they hold there), he came to Ios. Sitting there among the rocks, he *saw* fisher boys sailing towards the shore, whom he asked what they'd caught.
(*Vita Plutarchea I*, Allen, 242)

καθεζόμενον δὲ ἐπὶ τινας ἀκτῆς, θεασάμενον ἀλιεῖς προσειπεῖν αὐτοὺς καὶ ἀνακρίναι τοῖσδε τοῖς ἔπεσιν ...

Seated on the shore, Homer *saw* fishermen and spoke to them, questioning them with these words ...
(Proclus, Allen, 100)

In both these cases, the use of the verb *theaomai*, a verb of seeing, asserts the falsity of the claim of blindness. The Pseudo-Plutarchean version reinforces this assertion by having the fisher boys still at sea when Homer addresses them, reinforcing in fact the acuity of Homer's vision. Through a minor change in the language of a story common to nearly all of the *Lives*, these two *Lives* subtly but firmly inform their readers that Homer was sighted, even unto his dying day. It will come as no surprise to recall that these two *Lives*, together with Hesychius (who avoids the story of Homer's death altogether), are the three *Lives* that specifically claim that Homer *wrote* his poems.

Interestingly, the rejection of Homer's blindness (and claim that he was a literate poet) does not imply a more general rationalizing approach to the death of Homer: the *Certamen* and the Pseudo-Herodotean *Life* both insist that Homer died of causes unrelated to the fisher boys' riddle, while Pseudo-Plutarch I and Proclus suggest

a connection between the two, direct or indirect.³¹ The fact that the *Lives* that believe Homer was a literate poet are the ones that take most seriously the idea that he died of depression at failing to answer the riddle suggests in fact a rather different interpretation. The Homer of the *Certamen* and of Pseudo-Herodotus, oral and blind, is a poet who prides himself on his ability to solve puzzles, and to think and speak rapidly on his feet. The very nature of the contest with Hesiod, in which Homer excels at, for example, following up a paradoxical verse with a verse that makes sense of its predecessor illustrates this point, as does the facility with which the Homer of Pseudo-Herodotus composes apposite epigrams on the spot. To describe such a poet as failing a contest of wits with mere fisher boys is of course intentionally ironic and humiliating, and these two *Lives* seem to blunt the irony in suggesting other causes, and thereby to minimize Homer's estrangement from orality and improvisational performance.

By contrast, the sighted and literate Homer of Proclus and Pseudo-Plutarch has no need of such improvisational skills. Neither text represents Homer engaged in any sort of oral battle of wits other than this final and disastrous one. Further, Proclus, in establishing the qualities Homer must have possessed, claims for him old age, extensive travel and great wealth, but makes no claim as to his improvisational skills (Allen, 101). To have failed so basic a verbal game ill befits an oral poet, but not a literate one; the anecdote, indeed, may be seen as further asserting Homer's estrangement from oral culture, and his inability to participate in it. The fact that Proclus' and Pseudo-Plutarch I's Homers die as a result of this failure may on one level privilege the oral over the literate, asserting the value and power of oral improvisation. In so doing, however, it also serves to map the fundamental distinctness of these two verbal media, to connect orality with a social position of marginality and literacy with wealth and position, and to place Homer firmly on the side of the literate.

Homeric blindness, in other words, is a subject of particular importance for the poetics assumed by his biographers. Those, like Proclus, who assert Homer's literacy very strongly, must therefore deny his blindness with equal vehemence, or else, like Hesychius, evade or allegorize the issue, or as with the account of Helen's blinding of Homer, make the blinding subsequent to the composition of the poetry. The fact that these biographers, insistent though they are on Homer's literacy, none the less address the issue of his blindness explicitly, demonstrates the currency of this biographical datum. Our other biographers, notably Pseudo-Herodotus, as well as the author of the anecdote of Achilles' blinding of Homer, show an equal awareness of the implications of blindness for literacy, and construct

³¹ For the *Certamen*, see above. Pseudo-Herodotus: Ἐκ δὲ τῆς ἀσθενείας ταύτης συνέβη τὸν Ὅμηρον τελευτῆσαι ἐν Ἰῳ, οὐ παρὰ τὸ μὴ γινῶναι τὸ παρὰ τῶν παίδων ῥηθέν, ὡς οἰοῦνται τινες, ἀλλὰ τῇ μαλακίῃ ('From this state of weakness it happened that Homer died on Ios, not because he was unable to understand what the boys said, as some think, but from his illness', Allen, 216). Pseudo-Plutarch I: ὅπερ οὐ δυνηθεὶς συμβαλεῖν Ὅμηρος διὰ τὴν ἀθυμίαν ἐτελεύτησε ('Because Homer was unable to interpret this, he died of despondency', Allen, 242). Proclus: οὕτω δ' ἐκέινον ἀθυμήσαντα σύννοον ἀπιέναι τοῦ χρησμοῦ ἔννοιαν λαμβάνοντα, καὶ οὕτως ὀλισθόντα περιπταῖσαι λίθῳ καὶ τριταῖον τελευτῆσαι ('Thus Homer was despondent, and went away, pensive and mindful of the oracle, and in this condition he slipped and fell on a stone and was dead within three days', Allen, 100–1). Notice Pseudo-Herodotus' explicit refutation of the claim that Homer died as a direct result of his failure to interpret the boys' riddle. Note also Proclus' intermediate approach, attributing Homer's death to his injury, but that injury to his emotional state!

their narratives with care in order to demonstrate those implications. The ancient world may not have developed an explicit scholarly debate on the subject of the composition of epic (whether oral or written), but the general shape that that debate would have taken can be found in the *Lives*' discussion of Homeric blindness.

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