

Did Philologists Write the *Iliad*? Friedrich August Wolf's Criteria of Style and the Demonstrative Power of Citation

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Abstract: Friedrich August Wolf posits in his *Prolegomena ad Homerum* that, from the time of the first transcription of Homer's epics around 700 BC to the time of the Alexandrian editions, the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* underwent repeated revisions by a multitude of poets and critics. According to Wolf, the 'unified' works that we know are the products of emendations by Alexandrian critics who attempted to homogenize the style of the epics and to return them to their 'original' form. This paper argues that Wolf's narration of the history of these texts relies on and produces aesthetic claims, not historical ones. Wolf determines the dates and origins of passages based on intuitive judgments of style for which he cannot provide linguistic or historical evidence. And his conclusions that the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were not written by Homer, but rather by a history of emendations and revisions, enthrones his work—the work of philologists—in place of the literary genius Homer. Thus philology becomes for Wolf an aesthetic discipline that produces canonical and beautiful works of literature. This aesthetic task is essential for philology to fulfill its educational and political responsibilities.

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The question in my title—did philologists write the *Iliad*—is a philological question, and it can be answered with philological methods. In this case, those methods are primarily of two sorts. One method tries to reconstruct the history of the text's composition and transmission based on the claims of ancient sources. For example, we could take Plato's remarks about the author of the *Iliad* as evidence. Of course the answers that ancient authors provide are dubious, because we cannot know the evidence on which they are based. The second method determines the date of composition for specific verses in the epics by analyzing linguistic and stylistic aspects. With this method we can determine if a word or verse is in archaic Greek, the Greek of Homer around 750 BC, and so possibly by Homer, or rather a so-called Homer. And this is the Homeric question you have probably heard before. In its most basic formulation, the Homeric question asks: Did Homer write the *Iliad*? This is the question Friedrich August Wolf asks in his *Prolegomena ad Homerum*, a prologue to his never-published edition of the *Iliad*. My question, asking instead whether philologists wrote the *Iliad*, is more pointed for this collection of articles, but also, I believe, more revealing for Wolf's conclusions. What I

will explore in this essay is how Wolf's affirmation of my question has significant aesthetic implications.

Writing on classical philology and Homer, Nietzsche states: "Homer als der Dichter der Ilias und Odysee ist nicht eine historische Überlieferung, sondern ein *ästhetisches Urteil*" (263). According to Nietzsche, when we claim that a text is by Homer, we do not mean that it is by a historical figure, but rather that it belongs among an elite group of archaic texts of great aesthetic achievement. Of course the classical philologist Nietzsche recognizes that it is Wolf—the founder of modern philology—who first reveals that the claim of Homer as author is an aesthetic claim, not a historical one. For many, the idea that the genius poet was simply a legend originating from aesthetic claims was both tragic and unacceptable. For Wolf, however, the dethronement of the historical Homer means the celebratory enthronement of philology, both historically and aesthetically. It means that philology, not Homer, stands at the beginning of the western literary tradition; that philology is capable of such aesthetic achievement. In a three-step process, I hope to explain the implications of such a claim by unraveling the various roles aesthetics plays in Wolf's philological method. First, I will look at Wolf's own differentiation of historical versus aesthetic methods in his philological program. Second, I will show how the historical and the aesthetic methods approach one another in Wolf's analysis of style in the Homeric epics. Finally, I will show why Wolf thinks that philologists composed the epics and consider how this result impacts the position of philology in regards to history and aesthetics.

Aesthetics determines the classics, history delivers the original text

Throughout his life, Wolf actively promulgated a philological program with two connected, but also necessarily separate goals ("Darstellung" 80). One was to establish philology as a scientific discipline at the new German research university (Turner, "The Prussian Universities"; Hülten Schmidt); the other goal was to establish philology as a part of a broader *Bildungsprogramm* for the whole nation. As a science, philology's "Ziel [ist] kein anderes als *die Kenntniss der altherthümlichen Menschheit selbst, welche Kenntniss [...] durch das Studium der alten Ueberreste [...] hervorgeht*" (Wolf, "Darstellung" 124-125). Here, in his lectures on philology, Wolf argues that philology obtains knowledge of ancient humanity through the "Ueberreste" that the philologist takes as his objects of study. These "Ueberreste" include all remnants from antiquity, meaning that he studies both beautiful works of art

and literature, *and* everything else. Because of this difference in objects—that is the difference between beautiful objects and non-beautiful ones—the philologist also has two different methods of observation:

Von der einen Seite sind [die Ueberreste] als *Monumente und Zeugnisse vergangener Zustände* anzusehen; in welcher Hinsicht sie, bis zu einem Fragmente eines mittelmässigen Schriftstellers, bis zu der kunstlosesten Anticaglie [or old junk] herab, einen geschichtlichen Wert haben [...]. Von der andern Seite sind die Werke des Alterthums als *ästhetisch schöne* zu betrachten, deren freilich eine geringere Zahl vorhanden ist [...]. (Wolf, “Darstellung” 33)

Thus the philologist uses a historical method that considers all remnants of antiquity to form his understanding of ancient humanity. This method considered alone resembles our *Kulturwissenschaft*, but Wolf instead turns to aesthetics to justify philology in terms of a national *Bildungspolitik*. It is by studying the “schönen und classischen Werke” that German society as a whole can improve its taste and morals (Wolf, *Encyclopädie* 11). And these classics cannot be from any period, but must be from antiquity, because ancient Greece and Rome exhibit the most “organisch entwickelte [...] bedeutungsvolle [...] National-Bildung” (Wolf, “Darstellung” 125). Studying the remnants of the most *gebildete* society thus lends itself to the *Bildung* of modern society. This justifies, in Wolf’s opinion, the historical philology of antiquity in a way that the philology of any other culture cannot be justified (“Darstellung” 13, 124, 138; Weimar 229-233; Wegmann 353-370). Philology is thus a scientific discipline that historically analyzes the remnants of antiquity, but it selects remnants and justifies itself as discipline based on aesthetic claims and its pedagogical task (Wolf, *Encyclopädie* 8).

Creating an authentic text using stylistic analysis

With the aesthetic and historical aspects of philology in place, I would now like to turn to Wolf’s use of stylistic analysis in his proposed edition of the *Iliad*. Wolf’s task in editing Homer is to deliver the most authentic, pure and original edition he possibly can (“Darstellung” 39; *Prolegomena* 192). According to Wolf, the philologist must first try to edit the text using manuscripts and *scholia*, which are the marginal notes in medieval copies of epics that often transmit the claims of ancient authors about various verses’ authenticity. These provide hard historical evidence. But when evidence is lacking, Wolf turns to stylistic analysis (“Darstellung” 42), which has two

possible methods. One can either choose the best aesthetic reading—that is one can emend the text so that it is grammatically sound, poetically beautiful, and narratively logical—or one can strive for a historically accurate reading.

Wolf repeatedly attacks the aesthetic method in favor of a historical method. He argues in fact that often one has to alter some of the most beautiful passages in Homer to attain the historically pure original. For example, there are grammatical elegances in the text that Homer, simply because of the state of the Greek language in the age in which he lived, could not have known. Such a thorough understanding of the development of the language is a necessity for historical stylistic analysis. Wolf thus dates passages by everything from spelling, to neologisms, to orthography, to syntax. But this historical linguistic method is not Wolf's only strategy for dating passages. When Wolf is not able to make a claim about a specific linguistic aspect that reveals the passage's date, he relies on what he simply calls his ability to "feel" (*Prolegomena* 127) or "sense" (*Prolegomena* 133) the "sound" (*Prolegomena* 81) of the text. For example, Wolf believes he can intuitively tell the difference between the style of a more archaic Greek and the Ionian Greek of classical Athens. He uses this ability to claim that the other ancient epics beyond the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, such as the *Orphica*, do not belong to the Homeric corpus:

Grant me, please, *your close attention to the sound of those verses*, and compare it with Homer; either you will find nothing spurious in the *Orphica*, or you will admit that they were made in imitation of the Homeric—that is, cultivated Ionic—language, and are very far from being as old as is claimed. (Wolf, *Prolegomena* 81)

Within the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* there are also non-Homeric passages. Wolf claims that there are a number of "joints" that connect what he believes were originally separate songs (a point to which I will return). These passages were artificially composed after Homer to make a unified epic. Wolf argues that anyone can sense that these passages are non-Homeric:

[O]ne sort [of artificial passage] are a number of obvious and imperfectly fitted joints, which I believe that I have found, in the course of very frequent readings, to be both the same and in the same places: joints of such a sort that I think *anyone would at once concede*, or rather *plainly feel*, *once I had demonstrated the point with a few examples*, that they had not been cast in the same mold as the original work, but had been imported into it by the efforts of a later period.

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[... N]o one of even average intelligence could avoid encountering them. (Wolf, *Prolegomena* 127, emphasis added)

What characterizes such passages is the lack of any argument beyond his sensibility (Wolf, *Prolegomena* 128-129, 133). One could say in fact that Wolf's judgment of the sound of such passages shares something with Kant's aesthetic judgments: they are both subjective judgments of sensible things that demand agreement without any logical argument as justification. And Wolf readily admits as much: "For these matters one needs a certain sensibility which arguments do not provide" (*Prolegomena* 148); or even more pointedly: "Ruhnken [a contemporary philologist to Wolf], indeed, said (having given the best verdict on the subject) that the point can be sensed by the expert but cannot be explained to the inexpert" (*Prolegomena* 133).

Instead of providing arguments or explanations, all Wolf can say is: read the passage yourself, and if your historical taste of ancient Greek is developed enough, is *gebildet* enough (here *Bildung* sneaks into the scientific method), then you will understand what he means. In fact, it is examples rather than arguments that will convince: "In this field, examples are certainly more effective than the profound declarations of principle that great scholars have often laid down [...]" (Wolf, *Prolegomena* 64); or: "The following examples from this class [of impure emendations] will show anyone with a thorough knowledge of Homer's genius and idiom what I mean at a glance [...]" (Wolf, *Prolegomena* 62). One could say that the past two hundred years of scholarship on Homer have been a matter of finding the actual arguments behind what Wolf sees "at a glance" in these passages. In fact he has often been proven correct concerning which passages do or do not belong to the original Homer (Fowler).

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Allow me to recall the two arguments I have covered so far. First, Wolf recognizes two methods of philology: an aesthetic method that determines what exemplary culture is, and a historical method that researches the entirety of antiquity in order to understand ancient humanity and to produce accurate editions of classics. To see how this emendation process works I have shown that in fact Wolf's method often relies on an aesthetic sensibility of the philologist to date the style of verses. In this final section I want to answer the question of my title—did philologists write the *Iliad*—and then turn to the

aesthetic implications that an affirmative answer to this question could have. First, it is necessary to offer a little more background on Wolf's *Prolegomena* and on the recent history of the Homeric question. Seven years before the publication of Wolf's *Prolegomena*, the *scholia* of a tenth-century manuscript of the *Iliad* were published and they included substantial references to ancient scholarship that raised doubts about Homer as the singular unique author of the epics. Wolf's text then ignited the modern debate about the epics' author, with its famous theory that in Homer's time writing either did not exist or was in such a nascent stage that it was unavailable for the composition of long epics. This theory leads Wolf to argue that the epics were originally part of an oral tradition. Ancient Greek bards, called rhapsodes, performed smaller sections of the epics that were later collected and connected in Athens in the seventh century BC (Wolf, *Prolegomena* 122). Wolf posits the transcription of the poems from short oral songs to a single written epic—that is the adaptation from one medium to another with the ensuing mistakes—as the birth of philology. He believes that a number of poets worked together to choose the best versions of the songs they could find—versions they thought of as truly Homeric due to their aesthetic quality—and then composed from them a unified text. These poets thus had a philological task, but in the editing process aesthetic quality was their sole criterion (Wolf, *Prolegomena* 158). Because of the liberties taken in this kind of editing, Wolf suggests that in large part the Homer we know is determined by the philological work of these Athenian poets (*Prolegomena* 156, 192).

Wolf's conjectures have since been proven false. Writing was in fact available at the time of Homer and modern scholarship generally believes that the epics were recorded around 700 BC. We now believe that the text we know is at least relatively similar to what a rhapsode would have sung at that time. Modern philology has been able to determine this date, although not definitively, through a method of stylistic analysis similar to Wolf's that seeks to distinguish various historical strands in the epics by differentiating the historical dialects present in them (Myres; Davison; Heubeck; Parry; Turner, "The Homeric Question"). For example, one can follow neologisms in the text to specify date ranges from which certain words or verses could originate. By determining the age of the last large group of neologisms to appear in the text, one is also able to ascertain a date when the text was written down. With this method it has been determined that the epics were set down in written form by 700 BC, but did undergo some changes in seventh- and sixth-century Athens, just as ancient sources inform us. So it seems in fact that emendation did play

a role in significantly shaping the text at this very early juncture, though not as profoundly as Wolf would have it.

Yet while Wolf is famous for these disproved conjectures, what is more important to the *Prolegomena* are his conclusions about the work of the Alexandrian critics in the third and second centuries BC, conclusions with which modern historical research has largely concurred. For Wolf this stage of the text is most important because it comes at the end of a long, volatile process of emendation: “The Homer that we hold in our hands now is not the one who flourished in the mouths of the Greeks of his own day, but one variously altered, interpolated, corrected, and emended from the [seventh century BC] down to [the times] of the Alexandrians” (*Prolegomena* 209). For Wolf, the performances of the rhapsodes—the Homer that flourished in the mouths of the Greeks—are beyond our philological reach (*Prolegomena* 208, 220). It is not only the case that a singular Homer as author did not exist, but that the text has been emended so significantly that there is no hope of obtaining a pure original as it was sung. All we can have is a patchwork of single songs by multiple bards strung together and emended continuously from the early Athenian poets down through the Alexandrian critics.

For many of Wolf’s readers this conclusion was a catastrophe. They viewed the loss of Homer as a blow to the idea of the poet-genius. I want to argue, however, that Wolf takes this loss as an opportunity to enthrone philology in Homer’s place. Instead of Homer at the beginning of the literary tradition, we have philology. Wolf accomplishes this switch by asserting that despite the texts’ patchwork history, they still seem to constitute a unified whole:

[...] the sense of the reader bears witness against [history]. [I]ndeed [...] the poems [are not] so deformed and reshaped that they seem excessively unlike their own original form in individual details. Indeed, almost everything in them seems to affirm the same mind, the same customs, the same manner of thinking and speaking. (Wolf, *Prolegomena* 210)

The question is: how could it be possible for the epics to have a unified manner of thinking and speaking if they were the product of continuous emendation over 600 years? Wolf credits this to the responsible philological work of Aristophanes and Aristarchus, two Alexandrian grammarians: “[...] Aristophanes and Aristarchus, by gathering all the remains of antiquity, became connoisseurs of the language appropriate to each age and of the legitimate forms

of primitive language, [...] an area of deep and subtle judgment” (*Prolegomena* 210). With their knowledge of the development of the Greek language, these critics were the first to claim that the other ancient epics were not of Homeric origin. And their emendations to Homer did not depend on their own Hellenistic dialect, but rather they rigidly held to editing a text “of Homeric, or at least archaic coinage” (Wolf, *Prolegomena* 211). With this conception of the Alexandrian critics, we see that Wolf projects his own sensibility for historical style back on the so-called father of philology, Aristarchus (*Prolegomena* 161; Grafton). Thus while the books and “joints” of the epics had different authors in different ages, they all have “in general [...] the same sound, the same quality of thought, language, and meter” (Wolf, *Prolegomena* 133, 214).

The irony of Wolf’s account of the text’s history is that responsible historical philology composed the unified style of the epics that was so aesthetically celebrated in Wolf’s time. One could even say that historical philology composed an aesthetic classic whereas a type of emendation with aesthetic aspirations would have failed, as it would have made the text into a stylistic patchwork. The question that Wolf’s philology poses to us is: to what extent can philology ever be a ‘pure’ historical science, free from aesthetic claims, methods, and implications? From text selection to editing, Wolf’s historical philology reveals that it relies on aesthetic criteria. Perhaps most importantly, Wolf’s conclusions show that Nietzsche’s claim—namely, that Homeric authorship is an aesthetic claim—does not apply to Homer alone. For even if we overcome the idea of Homer as historical author, and recognize philology as the creator and editor of the texts over centuries, then we still continue to make aesthetic claims along with our historical ones. In Nietzsche’s words, philology as the creator of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* is not only historical record, but also an aesthetic judgment, and our philological confrontations with texts are also always aesthetic confrontations (Gumbrecht).

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