

The Elements of ‘Virtue’ in *The Iliad*

Tugce ARAS

Abstract—*The Iliad* is an epic poem of Homer narrates The War of Troy between Trojans and Achaeans which takes place in ancient history and it is full of heroic stories. The Trojan War is caused by the betrayal of Helen and Paris and the war is concluded with the death of Hector and the collapse of Troy. In Homeric society, wars and being a great warrior occupy a significant place in their lives since great warriors are believed as virtuous existences. That’s why, Homer tells the great stories of great warriors. Alongside heroic stories, Homer also indicates a path to be virtuous through Achilles’ rage, dishonesty of Helen and voluptuous behaviours of Paris. He underlines these elevated elements and gives lessons from each of them to his society to praise ‘virtue’. However, it oversteps its time and place and it is able to survive until the modern world thanks to its moral messages which are still valid. In this paper, Homer’s lessons through these elevated elements related to ‘virtue’ are going to be studied and depicted with exemplifications from the poem.

Index Terms—Morality, honesty and dishonesty, rage, honour, virtue.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Iliad by Homer which has been read by millions of people from different cultures holds the field of not just literature but history and sociology for ages. It is far beyond being just a book, it “functions as a reference guide into both ancient history and literature” to learn what is good and bad. *The Iliad* serves as a ‘Holy Bible’ to better understand cosmological tradition of Greek mythos (p. 426) [1].¹ This mythos includes stories of heroes who acquire fame in the society. Homer reflects the structure of Greek society and he tells the stories of Greek heroes to lead to the right path in *The Iliad*. The stories have been transferred not only from one generation to another but also, from one culture to another. Thus, it has become a divine fact to establish moral rules in society and Homer has become a “teacher” who gives moral lessons through his characters and their actions because poets are the teachers of the society for Greek people (320) [2].² In this sense, we can consider Homer as a ‘shepherd’ of the herd or a ‘prophet’ who guides his people. Because of these reasons, *The Iliad* is an epic and epics include the nations’ sorrow, grief, exultation, valour, and their wars and victories (p.427) [1].³ The integrity of these themes constitutes an epic and an epic poem gives moral lessons to the next generation via incidents. Besides, characters are moliminous as well as the incidents and Homer’s characters are not ordinary people from the society, they are heroes, kings or gods whose names are renowned. Since they are believed to be superior to ordinary people, they serve as a model for the ordinary

people in terms of ‘virtue’. Homer uses his heroes to praise ‘virtue’. He also displays its importance and the possible results in the absence of it. Moreover, *The Iliad* has been equipped with a series of events that will lead to the results of the decisions of significant characters from beginning to end (p. 428) [1].⁴ Additionally, these decisions are based on virtuousness of heroes which build the plot of *The Iliad*.

On the other hand, as a genre, an epic has the same structure as a tragedy according to Aristotle and he calls *The Iliad* pathetic (p. 1-2-15) [3]. Therefore, *The Iliad* can be considered as a tragedy because the poem consists of tragic stories of Trojans and it ends up with the death of one of the heroic characters apart from many deaths happened throughout the poem. The effect of the heroes’ decisions on these tragic stories is incontrovertible and Homer tries to tell something to his society with these stories.

The Iliad is centred on the plot of Trojan War between Trojans and Achaeans. However, several elevated matters are behind the scenes to bring about this war and these matters of Homer come to exist with the actions of the characters (p. 5) [4]. These ‘elevated matters’ are the basic elements of ‘virtue’ what make *The Iliad* a ‘Holy Book’. This ‘Holy Book’ tells a tragic narrative which starts with the betrayal of Paris and dishonest Helen, wraps up with the ‘rage’ of Achilles and draws to a close with the duel of Hector and Achilles who are honourable and great warriors. By this way, Homer gives messages to his society through these elements of ‘virtue’.

II. THE ‘RAGE’ OF ACHILLES

The Iliad begins with the line “Rage-Goddess, sing the rage of Peleus' son Achilles [5]” (I. 10) and the rest of the poem, his rage is under every rock. He has anger to someone or something that Homer wants to show us. That’s why, the book starts with this line and we encounter a lot of scenes related to his anger. Homer displays his rage as a monster which has twin tail. One of the tails is iniquitous, violent, cruel and the other is good and right. Homer’s Achilles who is the son of Thetis and Peleus, the king of Phthia, is a Godlike character of the poem. He is powerful and insurmountable like a God but, he is mortal, and he dies like every human. Additionally, he knows that his fate is dead and buried in a battlefield and he is in the middle of a battlefield of Troy. Because of this reason, he may be angry about his fate or battles in which he dies.

¹ This statement is originally in English, it is taken from the abstract of the article.

²⁻³ These statements are originally in Turkish and they are translated by me. The original ones are indicated in the endnotes.

⁴ This statement is originally in Turkish and it is translated by me. The original one is indicated in the endnotes.

He withdraws since Agamemnon distrains on his godsends. However, it is possible that he uses this situation as an excuse, he feels fear inside since the battle of Troy can be his end and this feeling of him may cause his rage to emerge. Besides, he may be angry about Gods who are immortal and play with humans like toys. In brief, he may be justified in his rage from his point of view. On the other hand, his wrath does affect in one way or another all the characters of the poem. The wrath, which is so destructive, brings down not only many a good Achaean, but Hector (and Troy) (p. 260) [6]. Aristotle also addresses anger as a moral 'virtue' in his work, *The Nicomachean Ethics* and says that anyone can get angry — that is easy — but to do this to the right person, to the right extent, at the right time, with the right motive, and in the right way [7]. (2009: ii.9) However, Achilles cannot control or steer his rage with the right extent and the right motive or in the right way. His rage brings about not only the death of his beloved cousin Patroclus whom Achilles grows up together but also, the death of many people in the poem. It captures him, reigns in his thoughts and makes him a cruel and violent man. The great warrior, the honest Achilles becomes a tragic hero because of these actions.

Homer indicates the wickedness of 'rage' if it is not controlled in the right way and he presents a character who is not just a warrior hero but also a man who is facing with his inner tensions (p. 265-266) [6]. Even in the poem, Phoenix tells the story of Meleager who withdraws like Achilles and he is advised about Meleager's rage and what his rage causes at the end (p. 261) [6]. Just like Achilles' teacher Phoenix, Homer gives advices to us through his tragic hero.

III. 'DISHONESTY' OF HELEN AND 'VOLUPTUOUS' PARIS

The Iliad tells the story of The Trojan War which is brought on the betrayal of Paris and Helen. Helen who is the wife of Menelaus and has extreme charm and beauty falls in love with Paris who is the son of Priam, the king of Troy on his trip to Sparta. Helen leaves her husband, Menelaus, and comes to Troy with Paris. Thus, The Trojan War starts with the arrival of Menelaus and his brother, Agamemnon, to Troy for revenge. Considering that the importance of The Trojan War which is the main subject of the story, behaviours and characteristics of Helen and Paris have a significant role to understand and learn 'virtue' that Homer wants to show us.

First of all, it can be said that everything starts with inconsiderateness of Paris. He escapes with Helen without thinking about the outcome of his actions. Paris is presented as a voluptuous character who is self-obsessed and disregards his society. His voluptuous behaviour shows up in the poem during the war. In the book III, he is thrown down the gauntlet by Menelaus. During the duel of Paris and Menelaus, Paris is taken from the battlefield by Aphrodite to his chamber when he is about to be killed by Menelaus and he does not return to the duel again. On the contrary, he invites Helen to bed while Trojans are struggling in the war:

"let's go to bed, let's lose ourselves in love!
Never has longing for you overwhelmed me so,
no, not even then, I tell you. that first time
when I swept you up from the lovely hills of Lacedaemon,

sailed you off and away in the racing deep-sea ships
and we went and locked in love on Rocky Island ...
That was nothing to how I hunger for you now
irresistible longing lays me low! [5]"(3. 431-57)

This scene shows his voluptuousness clearly. Homer presents Paris not to be taken as an example and he conveys his thoughts and sends his message to his society through Hector's words which are in the book III and VI:

Hector raked his brother with insults, stinging taunts:
"Paris, appalling Paris! Our prince of beauty
mad for women, you lure them all to ruin!
Would to god you'd never been born, died unwed.
That's all I'd ask. Better that way by far than to have you
strutting here, an outrage
a mockery in the eyes of all our enemies. Why,
the long-haired Achaeans must be roaring with
laughter! [5] (3. 15-43)

Hector raked his brother with insults, stinging taunts:
"What on earth are you doing? Oh how wrong it is,
this anger you keep smoldering in your heart! Look,
your people dying around the city, the steep walls,
dying in arms-and all for you, the battle cries
and the fighting flaring up around the citadel.
You'd be the first to lash out at another-anywhere
you saw hanging back from this, this hateful war.
Up with you
before all Troy is torched to a cinder here and now!
[5] (6. 311-38)

Hector criticizes Paris since he escapes from the war and hides himself behind his beautiful lover. He defines his action as a 'wrong' thing and using the word 'wrong' can be understood clearly that Homer gives a lesson by displaying what is wrong and true via Hector's statements. Hector is the representative of Homer as a big brother who recommends since he uses the lines "You'd be the first to lash out at another-anywhere you saw hanging back from this, this hateful war" to demonstrate what is supposed to be done. In addition, he implies to blame Paris for the reason of this goriness war by expressing that the people of Troy die for him. In this sense, it is clear that Paris' imprudence and voluptuousness cause the bloodshed of his people.

Helen is another character of Homer who attracts the attention with her characteristic features. Her infidelity as well as Paris' inconsiderateness brings on not only the war but also the destruction of Troy. "Helen metes out to both Paris and Aphrodite some of the blame" for her betrayal in her statements (p. 10) [8].

...
"Maddening one, my Goddess, oh what now?
Lusting to lure me to my ruin yet again?
Where will you drive me next?
Off and away to other grand, luxurious cities,
out to Phrygia, out to Maeonia's tempting country?
... [5] (3. 374-405)

She alleges that Aphrodite lures her but, she is the one who swings the balance. Aphrodite can make something

'tempting'; however, she has the freewill to determine her decision. The same goes for the relationship between Paris and Helen. There aren't any clues in the poem which show that Paris abducts Helen. Yet, Helen puts the blame on Paris' shoulders at every turn. Helen pretends as if she is taken without her request. In the scenes which are between her and her father-in-law, Priam who is the king of Troy, she says these sentences to claim that she pursues Paris to Troy as if he does not have her permission:

"I revere you so, dear father, dread you too
if only death had pleased me then, grim death,
that day I followed your son to Troy, forsaking
my marriage bed, my kinsmen and my child,
my favourite, now full-grown,
and the lovely comradeship of women my own age.
Death never came, so now I can only waste away in
Tears. [5]" (3. 158-83)

In fact, she is lying. She tries to deceive him, and she tries to make herself pathetic. If she felt as she says, she wouldn't have approached so boldly (p. 115) [9]. Her lines prove the idea that she is dishonest and deceitful (p. 115) [9]. She is aware of her sin and she is embarrassed of it; she blames herself in her thoughts but, she doesn't give tongue to her self-blaming frankly; she imputes Paris or other gods and goddesses more than herself. Even when she expresses herself as a wicked person in her lines such as "...bitch that I am, vicious, scheming.... [5]" (6. 338-66), she tries to smell like a rose and she tries to beguile the people by blaming others in her following lines like in the scene which she talks to Hector:

"...
But come in, rest on this seat with me, dear brother.
You are the one hit hardest by the fighting, Hector,
you more than all-and all for me, whore that I am,
and this blind mad Paris. Oh the two of us!
Zeus planted a killing doom within us both,
so even for generations still unborn we will live in song.
[5]" (6. 338-66)

Besides, In the conversation with Priam, she is invited by him to introduce the warriors of Achaeans and she mentions about the absence of her brothers and contributes that they can be irritated by the ugly words that are said for her;

...
My blood brothers. Mother bore them both. Perhaps
they never crossed over from Lacedaemon's lovely hills
or come they did, sailing here in the deep-sea ships,
but now they refuse to join the men in battle,
dreading the scorn, the curses hurled at me ... [5]" (3.
215-45)

This scene shows Helen's basic realization of her sin because she cognizes that she is guilty (p. 116) [9]. In *The Iliad*, she equivocates even if she is aware of her guilt; she never confesses clearly but, In *the Odyssey*, Helen explicitly acknowledges her part in the elopement that led to the Trojan War and her willful participation in her transport to Troy (p.

6-7) [8]. However, she accuses Aphrodite instead of accusing herself since she is a selfish character and she wants to make everyone around her think that she is impeccable;

"... when all you Achaeans
Fought at Troy, launching your headlong battles
Just for my sake, shameless whore that I was. [10]" (4.
173-74)

"...Aphrodite sent me, luring me there, far from my dear
land,
forsaking my own child, my bridal bed, my husband too,
a man who lacked for neither brains nor beauty. [10]"
(4. 237-67)

She uses the same language and the same statements as *The Iliad* even if she mentions her part in the elopement clearly in the second book; her malignity does not change. Besides, she confesses her deceitfulness by telling Telemachus that she once helps Odysseus when he creeps in to the city of Troy in *The Odyssey*:

...
That's how Odysseus infiltrated Troy
and no one knew him at all...
I alone, I spotted him for the man he was,
kept questioning him- the crafty one kept dodging.
But after I'd bathed him, rubbed him down with oil,
given him clothes to wear and sworn a binding oath
not to reveal him as Odysseus to the Trojans, not
till he was back at his swift ships and shelters,
then at last he revealed to me, step by step,
the whole Achaean strategy.... [10] (4. 237-67)

She deceives the Trojan people by helping Odysseus and the Achaean people by giving out the warriors' names to Priam that an honest character would not act in this manner. She betrays both the Trojan and Achaean people likewise she betrays her husband, Menelaus. In *The Iliad*, Homer gives us clues to comprehend her behaviours; he makes us think about her actions and he gives evidence in his second book.

On the other hand, not only Helen is the character who is deceitful but also Paris tries to deceive with his statements. He shows up with his persuasive language in every scene which he defends himself:

"Ah Hector, you criticize me fairly, yes,
nothing unfair, beyond what I deserve. And so
I will try to tell you something. Please bear with me,
hear me out. It's not so much from anger or outrage
at our people that I keep to my rooms so long.
I only wanted to plunge myself in grief.
But just now my wife was bringing me round,
her winning words urging me back to battle.
And it strikes me, even me, as the better way.
Victory shifts. you know, now one man, now another.
... [5]" (6. 311-38/ 338-66)

He deludes Hector with his fair words and he tries to make himself pathetic like his lover, Helen. Even only from this passage, it is clear that Paris is a character to display a figure not to be taken as a role model. He exposes himself

unintentionally as a dishonest man who ignores his people and the war that men who do not care about the war are not welcomed since it is a symbol of honour for Homeric society. Taking into account all of these actions of them, Helen and Paris are presented as the symbols of dishonesty and Homer indicates misdeed of being dishonest and what it can cause through Helen and Paris.

IV. THE GREAT AND HONOURABLE WARRIORS: HECTOR AND ACHILLES

Hector and Achilles' names are known all over the world and when their names are mentioned, their combativeness comes to mind in first place. They are great and honourable warriors who fight to death for their honour and virtue. To be able to understand their actions in the battlefield and why battles are the matters of fact in *The Iliad*, one needs to look back at Homer's time, the age when he is assumed to live. Considering that the poem mentions about ancient history, wars occupy a very huge place in people's lives and the things that the Homeric society values most are well-armed, being strong in war, in consultation and in strategy (p. 322) [11].⁵ In addition, according to Homer, war is the only form of existence, more precisely, the existence of mankind (p. 429) [1].⁶ Because of these facts, *The Iliad* consists of many stories of many warriors from beginning to end. Hector and Achilles are the prominent warriors of Homer and they take on a task of being characters whom Homer displays the importance of being a great warrior. In *The Iliad*, the hero reflects the person who chases the honour and glory in the traditional sense and dies for this cause (p. 429) [1].⁷ Apparently, Hector and Achilles accomplish their missions. They fight for honor and glory and they die while they are achieving this goal at the end.

In Homer's society, to be virtuous, one needs to be a great warrior because great warriors become honourable and thus, they succeed to be virtuous (p. 322-323) [2].⁸ That's why, Achilles returns to the battlefield to fight against Hector to gain his honour again since he withdraws before and withdrawing is not something to be approved. Similarly, Hector duels with Achilles to preserve his society, his city, in other words, his honour even if he knows that he dies because being a great warrior requires this devotion and he must do this to maintain his honour.

Their lines prove this veracity that they do not show the white feather, or they do not take to the hills even if they are aware of their fate. Hector explains the situation in which he feels and thinks in a conversation with his wife, Andromache:

“..All this weighs on my mind too, dear woman.
But I would die of shame to face the men of Troy
and the Trojan women trailing their long robes
if I would shrink from battle now. a coward.
Nor does the spirit urge me on that way.

⁵⁻⁶⁻⁷These statements are originally in Turkish and they are translated by me. The original ones are indicated in the endnotes.

⁸ This statement is based on the information in the article which is originally in Turkish and the original part is indicated in the endnotes.

I've learned it all too well. To stand up bravely,
always to fight in the front ranks of Trojan soldiers,
winning my father great glory, glory for myself... [5]" (6. 429-56)

Hector can be distinguished one of the students of Homer since he says "I've learned" in his lines. Homer sends a message by using the word 'learn'.

Achilles walks along the same line as Hector that he is conscious of his predestination from his mother, the goddess Thetis, and he elucidates what is said about his future while he is talking to Odysseus when he comes to convince him to return to the fight:

Mother tells me,
the immortal goddess Thetis with her glistening feet,
that two fates bear me on to the day of death.
If I hold out here and I lay siege to Troy,
my journey home is gone, but my glory never dies.
If I voyage back to the fatherland I love,
my pride, my glory dies ...
true, but the life that's left me will be long,
the stroke of death will not come on me quickly. [5] (9. 395-426)

However, he does not show any sign of hesitation especially when he is informed about the death of Patroclus. While two fates are waiting for him, he chooses to die; he chooses glory and pride because they officiate what they are expected as great warriors.

V. CONCLUSION

The Iliad by Homer can be seen as a milestone not just for a nation but the humanity. It is also seen as a 'Holy Book' to learn elevated elements about 'virtue'. Homer establishes the first construction of society with his moral messages via his heroes. Throughout the poem, we witness valour stories of heroes but, Homer gives lessons of 'virtue' in the background. In other words, he indicates the right way with the themes of war, honesty and rage since *The Iliad*'s plot is mainly set up on these themes. He lets the society learn from the text so that they can integrate these 'virtuous' elements to their lives. Thanks to these characteristics of the poem, it has grown into a divine position in time and it has overstepped the limits of time and place. In brief, Homer's great work, *The Iliad*, is beyond just being a poem, it is of the essence for humanity because it affects the past, the present- modern world- and the future.

ENDNOTES

²“Grekler için şairleri en geniş ve köklü anlamıyla halkın öğretmenleridirler. Şairin görevi eğitmektir...”

³“Epic destanlar, toplumların millet olma sürecinde ortaya çıkan; milletlerin acılarını, kederlerini, sevinçlerini, yaşadıkları kahramanlıkları, savaşları, başarıları anlatan sözlü ya da yazılı ürünlerdir.”

⁴“İlyada Destanı, başından sonuna kadar önemli karakterlerinin verdikleri kararların sonuçlarını doğuracak olaylar silsilesi ile donanmıştır.”

⁵“Homeric toplumun en çok değer verdiği şeyler iyi silahlanmış olma, savaşta, danışmada ve stratejide güçlü olmadır...”

⁶“...çünkü yine Homer'a göre savaş insanoğlunun tek var oluş biçimi, daha doğrusu varlığını kanıtlayış biçimidir.”

⁷"İlyada Destanı'nda kahraman geleneksel anlamda onur ve zafer kovalayan ve bu uğurda ölen kişiyi yansıtmaktadır."

⁸Aretesini gerçekleştirmek bakımından agathos olan soylu bir kişinin ya da kahramanın eylemleri temele alındığında asıl sınav alanı savaş ve sınavını başarıyla tamamladığının işareti ise zaferdir. Bu bağlamda Jaeger, onurla ulaşılmaya çalışılan aretenin, herkese üstün gelme arzusunun Homeros'un kahramanlarının temel işaretleri olduğunu söyler (Jaeger, 1946, s. 8). Homerik toplumun en çok değer verdiği şeyler iyi silahlanmış olma, savaşta, danışmada ve stratejide güçlü olmasıdır (Adkins, 1960, s. 36) çünkü ancak bunlar yoluyla bir kahramanın aretesine eriştiği söylenir. Ama arete yoluyla ulaşılan bu soyluluk yalnızca eyleme değil akla, sözlere de yayılmalıdır ve öğretmen tam da bu noktada devreye girer. Dolayısıyla Homerik eğitimin içine hem akli hem eylemi hem de karakteri aldığı – her eylem karakterden köken alır – söylemek mümkündür.

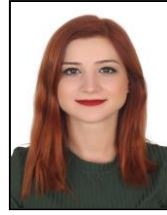
O halde bahsedilen eğitim bir yandan teknik bir yandan da ahlaki bir eğitimidir. Teknik yanda çocuk belli bir yaşam türüne hazırlanır. Ahlaki yanda ise belli türden ahlaki ilkelerle karşı karşıyadır. Diğer bir deyişle, varoluşa dair belli bir ideal sunulmakta ve ideal bir "adam" (man) tablosu bulunmaktadır; bu adamdan beklenen, eğitimi aldığı savaşçı veya arıtılmış/işlenmiş (refined) "şövalye" olmasıdır (Marrou, 1982, s. 9). Bu eğitime dayanan yaşamın çok değerli olacağı açıktır; fakat bir yandan da kahramanların ona ulaşmak adına her şeye hazır oldukları gözden kaçırılmamalıdır. Kahramanlar daha yüce idealler uğruna, cesaret ve azimle her şeyi feda etmeye hazırdırlar. Bu anlamda Homerik etik, aynı zamanda bir "onur" etiği olarak da okunabilir (Marrou, 1982, s. 11).

REFERENCES

- [1] Edman, T. Buğra, and B. Öztürk, "Truva'nın sonu, sürmekte olan bir çatışmanın başlangıcıdır: Homeros, nazım hikmet ve epik destanlar," *Turkish Studies*, vol. 13/20, pp. 423-435, Summer 2018.
- [2] Ç. M. Esra, "Öğretmen homeros," *Beytulhikme An International Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 8, no. 1, pp. 319-338.
- [3] K. Wolfgang. (Nov. 11, 2018). Gods and men in *The Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*. [Online]. 89, pp. 1-23. Available: <https://www.jstor.org/>
- [4] H. J. Cannatella. (Nov. 11, 2018). Plato and Aristotle's educational lessons from *The Iliad*. *Paideusis: Journal of the Canadian Philosophy*

of Education Society. [Online]. 15(2), pp. 5-13. Available: <https://www.jstor.org/>

- [5] Homer, *The Iliad*, Trans. Robert Fagles, introduction and notes by Bernard Knox, The United States of America: Penguin Books, 1991.
- [6] D. Walter. (Nov. 11, 2018). Character structure in Homer's *Iliad*. *The Journal of General Education*. [Online]. 21(4), pp. 259-269. Available: <https://www.jstor.org/>
- [7] Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, Trans. David Ross, revised with an introduction and notes by Lesley Brown. 2nd ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- [8] R. Hanna, "Helen in the *Iliad*; Causa Belli and victim of war: From silent weaver to public speaker," *American Journal of Philology*, vol. 127, no. 1, pp. 1-36, Spring 2006.
- [9] G. J. Ryan. (Nov. 11, 2018). Helen in homer. *The Classical Journal*, [Online]. 61(3), pp. 115-117. Available: <https://www.jstor.org/>
- [10] Homer. *The Odyssey*, Trans. Robert Fagles, introduction and notes by Bernard Knox. The United States of America: Penguin Books, 1996.
- [11] A. W. H. Adkins, "Merit and Responsibility: A Study in Greek Values, in *Öğretmen Homeros*, Esra Çağrı Mutlu, Ed., *Beytulhikme An International Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 8, no. 1, pp. 319-338., Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960.



Tugce ARAS is an instructor at Altınbas University in Istanbul. She was awarded a scholarship and holds a B.A. in English language and literature and she is currently an M.A. student at Istanbul Altınbas University. She has been working as an English teacher for seven years and she has attended in several European Union volunteer programmes including Wikipedia. She has worked on existentialism in Samuel Beckett's "Waiting for Godot" in her graduation thesis from B.A, she has also worked on psychoanalysis in Shakespeare's play "Measure for Measure". Her main fields of interest are mythology, Homer, comparative and fantastic literature.