



A "Miserable Piece of Patchwork"

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SCHOLIA

A "MISERABLE PIECE OF PATCHWORK"

Now and again we find in scholarly literature examples of errors remaining obstinately entrenched even after they have been corrected, sometimes two or more times. Like Ovid's defeated lover (*Am.* 1.9.29) or like Glenn Close at the end of *Fatal Attraction*, they are disconcertingly prone to resurrect themselves even when you think they have been finally disposed of. Here I shall point out one such error which, although corrected twice in the past, has recently reappeared in an essay on "The Homeric Question."¹

The error was last corrected when William M. Calder III, biographer of Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, drew our attention to the mistaken belief, from time to time repeated by scholars, that the great German philologist considered the *Iliad* a "miserable piece of patchwork, *ein übles Flickwerk*."²

The claim originated with John Scott, who misrepresented the following passage from Wilamowitz's book *Die Ilias und Homer*:³

Wer die Ilias aus Einzelliedern durch einen plötzlichen Akt entstanden glaubt wie Lachmann, verzichtet . . . auf geschichtliches Verständnis. Er hält sie, wie sie ist, für eines übles Flickwerk und bemüht sich nur darum, die guten Stücke aus dem wertlosen Mörtel des Sammlers herauszuheben.⁴

The passage is interpreted by Scott as follows:

Wilamowitz, convinced that no great poem could be produced by a group of men, devotes his energies to attempting to prove that Homer is but wretched poetry. . . . The *Iliad* is a "miserable piece of patchwork, *ein übles Flickwerk*."⁵

Scott's claim was repeated by Sir Maurice Bowra⁶ and corrected by E. R. Dodds:

Readers should also be warned that, whether from an imperfect knowledge of German or from the carelessness engendered by apostolic fervour, Scott . . . actually attributed to Wilamowitz the view which the latter set out to refute, that the *Iliad* is "a miserable piece of patchwork." . . . The libel is unfortunately repeated in Bowra's *Tradition and Design*, p. 9.⁷

¹ F. M. Turner, "The Homeric Question," in I. Morris and B. Powell, eds., *A New Companion to Homer* (Leiden 1997) 137.

² W. M. Calder, "Ein übles Flickwerk," *CP* 64 (1969) 35-36.

³ J. A. Scott, *The Unity of Homer* (Berkeley 1921) 76.

⁴ U. von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, *Die Ilias und Homer* (Berlin 1916) 322.

⁵ Scott (above, n.3) 76.

⁶ C. M. Bowra, *Tradition and Design in the Iliad* (Oxford 1930) 9: "His [Homer's] creative work can be seen most simply in the construction of the whole poem. Despite its many characters, despite its plot and counter-plot, it remains a whole. To call it a "Flickwerk," as Wilamowitz does, is to miss this essential feature."

⁷ E. R. Dodds, "Homer and the Unitarians," in M. Platnauer, ed., *Fifty Years of Classical Scholarship* (Oxford 1954) 33 n. 34.

Dodds' warning escaped the attention of Cedric Whitman: "For Wilamowitz the *Iliad* as it stands was a 'wretched patchwork.'"⁸ Whitman's book, as we learn from Calder,⁹ misled George Steiner: "Wilamowitz, a titan among Homeric scholars, declared that the *Iliad* was a 'wretched patchwork.'"¹⁰ Calder, who in his note considerably supplied a translation of the misunderstood passage from *Die Ilias und Homer*, expressed the hope that his article would put an end to the misunderstanding.

Unfortunately, however, Scott's book has again misled an unwary scholar. Frank Turner, a contributor to *A New Companion to Homer*, alleges: "Wilamowitz made harsh comments about the quality and character of Homeric poetry. . . . For example, Wilamowitz described the *Iliad* as 'a miserable piece of patchwork.'"¹¹

The moral is: Verify your references! Read Wilamowitz's German and not merely a distorted summary of his views in English!

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⁸ C. H. Whitman, *Homer and the Heroic Tradition* (Cambridge, Mass., 1958) 2.


⁹ Calder (above, n.2) 36.

¹⁰ G. Steiner, "Homer and the Scholars," *The Atlantic Monthly* 208 (August 1961) 78.

¹¹ Turner (above, n.1) 137. Note that Turner, besides misquoting Wilamowitz, believes—wrongly—that the source of the notorious "Flickwerk" phrase is to be found in a discussion of the authorship of the *Odyssey*.

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