Iliad and *Alexiad*: Anna Comnena's Homeric Reminiscences

Andrew R. Dyck

WHEN SCLERAENA, mistress of Constantine IX (*regn.* A.D. 1042–1055), first entered the palace, one of the courtiers was heard to mutter οὐ νέμεσις, an allusion to the comment of the Trojan elders when Helen mounted to their city's tower (*Il.* 3.156f): οὐ νέμεσις Τρῶας καὶ ἐϋκνήμιδας Ἀχαιοὺς τοιῇδ' ἀμφὶ γυναικὶ πολὺν χρόνον ἄλγεα πάσχειν. Alas, the recipient of the compliment had to inquire as to its meaning. And no wonder: women of whatever position were not normally vouchsafed a classical education in Byzantium. Even Styliane, the daughter of Michael Psellus (who retails this anecdote), had to begin her literary studies not with Homer, as a boy would, but with the Psalms.[1]

Far different the case of Anna Comnena, whose Homeric learning is on display throughout her *Alexiad*. Yet if her confidant George Tornices can be trusted, even she had to begin her studies of profane literature covertly, in the hours reserved for rest and sleep.[2] Even the rare woman who ventured to break into the male realm of profane letters was by no means sure of receiving a fair hearing: consider the case of the woman who wrote a set of elementary grammatical notes (σχέδη) for school instruction and received from John Tzetzes the ungallant advice to return to the spindle and distaff.[3] Anna's, however, was an unusual ambition that bore fruit in an uncommon achievement. I propose to explore here one aspect of that achievement, namely the Homeric allusions that stud the *Alexiad*. Not that the subject has been neglected in the past: indeed, it could hardly have been overlooked, given that the very title of the work sets it in relation to the *Iliad*.[4] The

[1] Psellus *Chron.* 6.61 (ed. E. Renauld, I [Paris 1926] 146); C. Sathas, Μεσαιωνικὴ βιβλιοθήκη V (Venice 1876) 65, cited by R. Browning, "Homer in Byzantium," *Viator* 6 (1975) 16.

[2] G. and D. Tornikès, *Lettres et discours*, ed. J. Darrouzès (Paris 1970) 245 lines 25ff.

[3] *Cf.* S. G. Mercati, "Giambi di Giovanni Tzetze contro una donna schedografa," *BZ* 44 (1951) 418 lines 5f; the text is reprinted with notes by B. Baldwin, *An Anthology of Byzantine Poetry* (Amsterdam 1985) 194f.

[4] A. Vasilikopoulou-Ioannidou, Ἡ ἀναγέννησις τῶν γραμμάτων κατὰ τὸν ιβ' αἰῶνα εἰς τὸ Βυζάντιον καὶ ὁ Ὅμηρος (Athens 1971) 89 n.5, compares the Ἡρακλειάς of

collection of relevant passages by E. Oster,[5] supplemented by G. Buckler,[6] provides the indispensable groundwork; but there is perhaps still room for an investigation of the *uses* to which Anna put this material.

Various functions were possible. Rhetoricians advised appealing to the judgment of respected authority (κρίσις, corresponding to Latin *auctoritas*).[7] In this way, for example, Anna appeals to Homeric precedent for her inclusion of barbarian names: οὐδὲ γὰρ οὐδ' Ὅμηρος ἀπηξίωσε Βοιωτοὺς ὀνομάζειν καί τινας βαρβαρώδεις νήσους διὰ τὴν τῆς ἱστορίας ἀκρίβειαν (*Al.* II 215.14–16).[8] Another possibility was to use mythological allusions to add 'sweetness' (γλυκύτης) to a narrative, as recommended by the influential rhetorician Hermogenes of Tarsus (330.2ff Rabe), writing in the second century A.D. It was probably on this basis that Michael Psellus, whom Anna greatly admired (*Al.* II 34.5–13), advised his students to use mythological examples in their speeches.[9] In addition, a number of Homeric tags had established themselves as proverbial phrases or clichés. Anna has her share of such, including one that actually found its way into an ancient collection of proverbs, namely the "Patroclus-excuse," referring to the slave women who used Patroclus' death as a pretext for bewailing their own fate (*Il.* 19.301f): ὣς ἔφατο κλαίουσ' (*scil.* Briseis), ἐπὶ δὲ στενάχοντο γυναῖκες, Πάτροκλον πρόφασιν, σφῶν δ' αὐτῶν κήδε' ἑκάστη.[10] This she thrice invokes: at *Al.* I 107.20, describing Caesar John Ducas' suggestion that the Empress Maria should ask for a safe conduct for herself and her child and then withdraw (a proposal ostensibly put forward to advance her interests); at I 130.10, on Robert Guiscard's motive for championing the pseudo-Michael; and at II 191.27, on the cause of pseudo-Diogenes, a mere pretext for the Comans.[11] But in alluding to Homer, Anna also

George of Pisidia as precedent for the -ας termination added to a personal name with intent of elevating the subject to epic proportions.

[5] E. Oster, *Anna Komnena* III (Rastatt 1871) 58–62.

[6] G. Buckler, *Anna Comnena: A Study* (London 1929) 197–99.

[7] Testimonia in H. Lausberg, *Handbuch der literarischen Rhetorik* (Munich 1960) §426.

[8] I cite the *Alexiad* by volume, page, and line of *Anne Comnène, Alexiade*, ed. B. Leib, I–III (Paris 1937–45). *Cf.* H. Hunger, "Stilstufen in der byzantinischen Geschichtsschreibung des 12. Jahrhunderts: Anna Komnene und Michael Glykas," *Byz Stud* 5 (1978) 161.

[9] *Vat.gr.* 672 fol. 183[r]: *cf.* Ja. N. Ljubarskij, "Antiçnaia Ritorika v Vizantijskoje Kulture," *Antiçnost u Vizantija*, ed. L. A. Freiberg (Moscow 1975) 134.

[10] *Cf.* Diogenian. 7.47, where the phrase Πατρόκλειος πρόφασις is explained, ἐπὶ τῶν μὴ δυναμένων διὰ φόβον θρηνεῖν τὰς οἰκείας συμφοράς, ἐξ ἑτέρων δὲ θλίψεων αὐτὰς ἀποκλαιόντων.

[11] *Cf.* Vasilikopoulou-Ioannidou (*supra* n.4) 150 (who, however, misses the third passage cited above); see also 151f for other proverbial phrases derived from Homer.

had motives more closely bound to the special rhetorical problem of the *Alexiad*.

A. Kambylis has closely examined Anna's programmatic statements, both in the prologue and in what he calls her "chapter on method" (*Al.* III 173.21–176.17).[12] In such contexts Anna's problem is to convince the reader that her personal relation to the central figure of her history, her father Alexius I, does not prejudice her objectivity as a historian. In the prologue she stresses "facts" (*πράγματα*) as her main concern, a stance that Kambylis sees as a conscious echo of the Polybian ideal of 'pragmatic history'. In the chapter on method she hopes to persuade by cataloguing the various sources from which she has gathered information and by repeated emphasis on her devotion to truth; here the key word *ἀλήθεια* occurs six times within the space of seventy-five lines.[13] She perhaps protests too much: her history is, inevitably, encomiastic. Yet she has shown awareness that she must be on guard against explicit encomium. What she wanted—and what she found in the Homeric world of gods and heroes—was a readily decipherable means of encoding praise that could not be allowed to appear on the surface. Let us take some examples.

Among the first of her father's deeds that Anna recounts is his armed encounter, as a general under the Emperor Nicephorus III Botaneiates (*regn.* 1078–81), with the pretender Nicephorus Bryennius. After the battle there occurs a curious incident that has not hitherto been recognized as modelled on a Homeric episode. Alexius, with the captured Bryennius in tow, decides to take a nap. But, Anna says, "sweet sleep did not hold" Bryennius (a favorite allusion to *Il.* 2.2); rather, he notices Alexius' sword hanging from the branch of a tree and is tempted to seize it and slay his captor. He would have done so, says Anna, had not some divine power from above prevented him and soothed the savagery of his heart (I 28.4–6): *καὶ τάχα ἂν εἰς ἔργον ἀπέβη τὸ βούλευμα, εἰ μή τις ἄνωθεν θεία τοῦτον διεκώλυσε δύναμις τὸ ἄγριον τοῦ θυμοῦ ἐξημερώσασα καὶ ἱλαρὸν τῷ στρατηγῷ ἐνατενίζειν παρασκευάσασα.* The reader is surely expected to think of *Iliad* 1.194–98, where Achilles, in controversy with Agamemnon, draws his sword but relents when soothed by the intervention of Athena, who, quite literally, comes down from above:

> ἕλκετο δ' ἐκ κολεοῖο μέγα ξίφος, ἦλθε δ' Ἀθήνη
> οὐρανόθεν· πρὸ γὰρ ἧκε θεὰ λευκώλενος Ἥρη,

[12] A. Kambylis, "Zum 'Programm' der byzantinischen Historikerin Anna Komnene," **ΔΩΡΗΜΑ** *Hans Diller zum 70. Geburtstag* (Athens 1975) 127–46, esp. 138.

[13] At III 173.29, 30, 174.2, 176.7, 11, and 16.

> ἄμφω ὁμῶς θυμῷ φιλέουσά τε κηδομένη τε·
> στῆ δ' ὄπιθεν, ξανθῆς δὲ κόμης ἕλε Πηλεΐωνα
> οἴῳ φαινομένη. . . .

By conjuring up this Homeric situation Anna both lends plausibility to an inherently implausible situation and invests Alexius with the aura of a divinely protected leader.

Anna's Homeric allusions comprise points of contrast as well as similarity with the persons and events of her narrative. This fits her encomiastic purpose of making Alexius appear, where possible, even superior to models of the heroic past, his enemies inferior. Thus she makes the point that Alexius, unlike Agamemnon in *Iliad* 2, needed no dream to spur him to battle (*Al.* II 94.2–4): *οὐκ ὀνείρου δεηθεὶς πρὸς μάχην αὐτὸν ἐποτρύνοντος καθάπερ ποτὲ τὸν Ἀτρέως Ἀγαμέμνονα, ἀλλ' ἀναζέσας πρὸς μάχην*. . . . Similarly, when Anna attributes to the Ducas family a speech praising Alexius as a candidate for the throne, it is not by accident that she lays stress on his joining in ambushes and sharing the common dangers of war (I 85.12ff: *μεγίσταις ὑμᾶς δωρεαῖς καὶ τιμαῖς ἀνταμείψεται, ὡς ἑκάστῳ προσήκει καὶ οὐχ ὡς ἔτυχε, καθάπερ οἱ ἀμαθεῖς καὶ ἄπειροι τῶν ἡγεμόνων, διὰ τὸ . . . κοινῶν ἀλῶν ὑμῖν μετασχεῖν ἐν λόχοις τε καὶ τοῖς κατασυστάδην πολέμοις γενναίως ὑμῖν συναγωνιζόμενος* . . . .): for she intends a contrast with the archetypically bad leader, namely Agamemnon as depicted by the Homeric Achilles (*Il.* 1.225–44, esp. 227, emphasizing his refusal to join ambushes). On the other hand, when Alexius' enemy Nicephorus Palaeologus meets his son George, who has helped organize the Comnenan insurrection, Anna contrasts his attitude with that of Odysseus, who, she says, greeted Telemachus as his "sweet light" (*γλυκερὸν φάος*, *Al.* I 97.23–25); the normal father-son relationship has, Anna suggests, been destroyed by politics. However, Anna is so eager to make this point—and thereby to discredit Nicephorus—that she loses sight of the fact that the words quoted are not those of Odysseus, though he is present, but of Eumaeus the swineherd.[14]

Homer's rascals provide Anna with telling comparisons for Alexius' enemies. For instance, Anna's allusive art makes each of the loquacious Frankish counts with whom Alexius must negotiate into a

[14] *Od.* 16.23; Penelope uses the phrase of Telemachus at 17.41. Note also that Anna's error was facilitated by the use of *γλυκερὸν φάος* as a common proverbial phrase, as attested in Eustathius' commentary on the *Odyssey* (1792.52). Another possibility, which seems to me less likely, is that she regarded comparison of the noble Nicephorus to a mere swineherd as a violation of *τὸ πρέπον* and consciously altered it.

Thersites (*Al.* III 163.6–8): μυριάνδρου γὰρ οὔσης τῆς διαλέξεως πολλὰ μὲν ἕκαστος ἐλάλει καὶ ἀμετροεπῶς ἐκολώα καθ' Ὅμηρον. The reference is, of course, to *Il.* 2.212: Θερσίτης δ' ἔτι μοῦνος ἀμετροεπὴς ἐκολώα. In fact Anna can reduce Alexius' enemies to a level even lower than the basest of Homeric characters. Thus, she applies to Alexius' would-be assassin Nicephorus Diogenes the Homeric tag "a trembling seized his limbs and a pallor his cheeks" (*Al.* II 170.25: ὑπό τε τρόμος ἔλαβε γυῖα ὠχρός τέ μιν εἶλε παρειάς). In its original setting (*Il.* 3.34f) the phrase is used to compare Paris' reaction at the sight of Menelaus to the fright of someone who spots a snake in a mountain glen. But in the *Alexiad* the cowardly Nicephorus reacts in this fashion (and postpones his attempt) merely on seeing the little girl assigned to fan away mosquitoes from the imperial couple while they sleep.

Besides stereotyped phrases, Buckler counted a total of sixty-six Homeric reminiscences in the *Alexiad*, of which two are composite, forty-seven refer to the *Iliad*, seven to the *Odyssey*, and ten to both poems.[15] The predominance of the *Iliad* conforms with general Byzantine preferences as reflected *e.g.* in the disproportionately larger mass of scholia preserved on the Trojan epic and in the fact that Eustathius' commentary on the *Iliad* is roughly double the length of that on the *Odyssey*, even though the *Odyssey* is about 77% the length of the *Iliad*. But Anna's martial subject is also a factor. One is not surprised to see her husband Bryennius compared to Heracles (*Al.* II 224.18), the archery of the Byzantine youths compared to that of Teucer (II 224.13f), *etc.* But there are interesting deviations from the expected apportionment of black and white. Anna compares to Achilles not only her husband (II 91.16ff) but also Robert Guiscard, the leader of a Norman force invading Byzantine territory (I 38.11ff);[16] so, too, both Alexius (at I 85.22, in a speech attributed to members of the Ducas family) and Robert's son Bohemund (II 17.14) are awarded Menelaus' epithet ἀρηΐφιλος. Less surprisingly, in Homeric fashion Anna compares her husband's grandfather (and her father's enemy) Nicephorus Bryennius to Ares (I 20.20; *cf.* the Homeric ἀτάλαντος Ἄρηϊ at *Il.* 2.627, *etc.*). There is even an encomium of enemy courage, though the compliment is barbed. She singles out the case of Gaita, wife of Robert Guiscard, who not only joined her husband on campaign but, when she spied the troops in retreat, shouted after them "How far will you

[15] Buckler (*supra* n.6) 197.

[16] Note, however, that while the comparison is applied to Bryennius in a general way, Robert is like Achilles only in respect of his vocal powers.

flee? Stay! Be men!" (*Al.* I 160.8). Anna betrays, by the way, no awareness of the ironic twist that the Homeric exhortation ἀνέρες ἔστε (*Il.* 5.529, *etc.*) acquires on a woman's lips. As a final touch, we are told that Gaita seized a spear and chased after the cowards. Anna comments that the Celtic (*i.e.*, Norman) woman qualifies, albeit not as an Athena (the historian reserves this comparison for her mother, the empress Irene, at I 112.7ff), yet as a second Pallas, an evident allusion to the etymology of Pallas παρὰ τὸ πάλλειν καὶ κραδαίνειν τὸ δόρυ.[17] One suspects that the incident has been, if not invented out of whole cloth, at least embellished in detail (the grasping of the spear) for the sake of the *bon mot*. By comparing Gaita to a goddess intervening to incite troops to battle (*cf. e.g. Il.* 5.793ff), Anna combines praise of a single individual with censure of the Norman warriors in general.[18]

Once a Homeric phrase has been transplanted from its original context and taken root in the writer's imagination, it takes on a life of its own. Thus the phrase ἄχθος ἀρούρης appears twice in a deprecatory sense in Homer (*Il.* 18.104, in Achilles' speech to Thetis after the death of Patroclus, and *Od.* 20.376–79, in a suitor's complaint), while Anna employs it encomiastically of Tancred's great bulk (*Al.* III 147.27f): καὶ ὥσπερ τινὰ γίγαντα μέγαν καὶ ἀννπόστατον καὶ ἄχθος ἀρούρης ἑστῶτα τῇ γῇ.[19]

Characteristically, Anna uses Homeric allusion as a vehicle for some of her most personal statements about herself and her work.[20] In speaking of the restraint that she must impose upon herself as a historian, she says that she must pass over her father's misfortunes without rhetorical elaboration; if she wanted to earn a reputation for filial piety, she would rather have sworn, like Telemachus,[21] by her father's sufferings:

> ἀλλ' ἵνα μὴ ῥητορεία κομψή τις ᾖ κατὰ τὸ μέρος ἐκεῖνο τῆς ἱστορίας, ὥσπερ τις ἀπαθὴς ἀδάμας καὶ λίθος παρατρέχω τὰς τοῦ πατρὸς ξυμφοράς, ἅσπερ ἔδει κἀμὲ καθάπερ ἐκεῖνον τὸν Ὁμηρικὸν

[17] *Et.Gen.* (AB) *s.v.* Παλλάς; Σ D *ad Il.* 1.200; *Etym.Magn.* 649.54; Buckler (*supra* n.6) 200.

[18] *Cf.* the censure for indiscipline implicit in Anna's comment that the nine shouting Homeric heralds (*Il.* 2.96f) could not have restrained the barbarian host (*Al.* II 228.22).

[19] Buckler (*supra* n.6) 199 misses the point when she stresses that the passage in the *Alexiad* "does not necessarily prove ignorance of the fact that Homer uses it in a contemptuous sense."

[20] On analogous phenomena in the visual arts *cf.* K. Weitzmann, "The Classical in Byzantine Art as a Mode of Individual Expression," *Byzantine Art: an European Art* (Athens 1966) 149–77.

[21] *Od.* 20.339: οὐ μὰ Ζῆν', Ἀγέλαε, καὶ ἄλγεα πατρὸς ἐμοῖο; [Hermog.] *Meth.* 436.6ff (Rabe) cites this among examples of ὅρκος ἠθικός, calling it "tragic."

> *νεανίσκον εἰς ὅρκον προφέρειν (οὐδὲ γάρ εἰμι χείρων ἐκείνου τοῦ λέγοντος "οὐ μὰ Ζῆν', 'Αγέλαε, καὶ ἄλγεα πατρὸς ἐμοῖο") πρὸς τὸ εἶναι καὶ λέγεσθαι φιλοπάτωρ* (I 166.21–27; *cf.* III 173.24f).

Finally, in a despondent mood Anna writes that it is nearly time to light lamps, she feels weary, words escape her; she finds herself constrained to use foreign names and to describe events one after the other, so that the continuity of the narrative is broken. Yet in a burst of pride she asserts *οὐ νέμεσις*: this is no cause for anger in unprejudiced readers (III 109.6–13); she thus implicitly compares her history to the fairest of women. Here Anna cloaks in a Homeric veil an idea that might offend if expressed directly. Allusion thus circumvents the delicate rhetorical problem of self-praise (*περιαυτολογία*).[22]

Anna's Homeric allusions display, on the whole, greater verbal accuracy than her biblical ones—that is, in spite of some slips, she checked them more regularly against the text.[23] This shows that she was on less sure ground in her Homeric citations, but also that she thought them important enough to take pains over. She evidently read the Homeric text with little or no attention to metre, for at *Al.* II 228.12 she substitutes *γίνεται* for the *γίγνεται* of *Il.* 2.468, at I 33.15 *ἐξέπεσε τῆς χειρός* for *ἔκπεσε χειρός* (*Il.* 3.363, *etc.*). She also occasionally substitutes, whether consciously or not, a prose paraphrase for the poet's *ipsissima verba*.[24] The Homeric reminiscences serve various rhetorical functions within the *Alexiad*. Some are merely proverbial phrases or clichés, but most are a conscious part of Anna's literary arsenal. The world of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* has become a standard against which the present is to be measured. Alexius consistently measures up to, if he does not exceed, this standard; his adversaries generally do not. But attention to the allusive subtext yields surprises in the case of Robert Guiscard and his son Bohemund. Moreover, Anna's Homeric reminiscences are not mere rhetorical ornament but enable her to pursue encomiastic ends without sacrificing the appearance of historical objectivity.

[22] *Cf.* Plutarch's preserved essay on the subject (*Mor.* 539A–547F).

[23] *Cf.* Buckler (*supra* n.6) 195–98. Notable examples are *Al.* II 218.21f, *μὴ θίξῃς, μὴ γρύξῃς, μὴ ἅψῃ· ἱερωμένος γὰρ εἶ*, where *γρύξῃς* ('grumble') is an odd mistake for *γεύσῃ* at Coloss. 2.21; *Al.* III 61.8ff, *οὐδὲν γὰρ ἐχώριζεν αὐτὸν* (*sc.* Alexius) *τῆς τῶν Χριστιανῶν ἀγάπης, οὐκ ἀλγηδόνες, οὐχ ἡδοναί*, with its substitution of 'Christians' for 'Christ' and the resulting construction of the genitive as objective, rather than subjective, as in Rom. 8.35 (*τίς ἡμᾶς χωρίσει ἀπὸ τῆς ἀγάπης τοῦ Χριστοῦ; θλῖψις ἢ στενοχωρία . . .*).

[24] *Cf.* Buckler (*supra* n.6) 198 and n.13 (though, if that is the case, the paraphrase used differs somewhat from that published at *Scholia in Homeri Iliadem*, ed. I. Bekker [Berlin 1825] 651ff).

More than fifty years ago Paul Maas wrote, "Die Schicksale der antiken Literatur in Byzanz sind noch nicht beschrieben und werden schwerlich in absehbarer Zeit befriedigend dargestellt werden können."[25] In spite of some recent progress,[26] the goal remains a distant one. Reaching it will involve continued persistence in tracing the fates of books and identifying allusions; the result will shed new light on the fructified Byzantine product. If the present paper illustrates this point, it will have served its purpose.[27]

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[25] *Einleitung in die Altertumswissenschaft* (Leipzig/Berlin 1927) Nachträge 2.

[26] Notably N. G. Wilson's *Scholars of Byzantium* (Baltimore 1983); *cf.* my review in *Speculum* 61 (1986) 484–86.

[27] A version of this paper was read October 26, 1985, at the Eleventh Annual Byzantine Studies Conference in Toronto; I am grateful to various participants for their interest and encouragement and to the editors and anonymous referee of this journal for useful advice.