STRATEGIES FOR ENCOMIUM IN DIO OF PRUSA,
ORATION 53*

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ABSTRACT

Dio Oration 53 presents certain problems. First it does not appear to be an altogether
elegant or successful encomium of Homer (in comparison with examples available in
other authors), and second the speech itself seems to comprise two unrelated halves.
Closer examination, however, reveals that Dio is actually presenting an exercise in
epideictic invention, and identifying innovative strategies for praising Homer from the
very attacks of the poet’s most notorious critic, Plato. Dio uses arbitration as a
device to explore ways in which he can settle the ancient dispute between Plato and
Homer. The second half of the speech, which at first might appear to contain a
haphazard catalogue of facts and observations designed to rehabilitate the poet, is
actually an exploration of how Plato’s criticisms can be gently countered within the
new social and geopolitical environment represented by Dio’s own era.

Among the surviving works of Dio of Prusa is a short prose piece,
numbered 53 in von Arnim’s edition of the corpus, entitled On Homer. That
Dio should have devoted a laudatory speech to Homer is not surprising.
Homer features in several other speeches by Dio, as he does in the work of
most authors of the Second Sophistic. Encomia of the poet whom all Greeks
regarded as the progenitor of their entire literary tradition were a common
practice. Yet Dio’s is a strange piece because it displays a somewhat provi­sional aspect, resembling a sketch or plan of a speech more than a fully deve­loped and polished oration. But I would prefer to see it as a preliminary

* I am grateful for the critical remarks of the anonymous readers of an earlier draft
of this article.

1 Cf. the famous statement in Orat. 18.8 that Homer is καὶ πρῶτος καὶ μέσος καὶ
δότατος παιδί παιδί καὶ ἀνδρὶ καὶ γέροντι. In Orat. 55 he tries to demonstrate
that Socrates was actually a student of Homer, while in Or. 11 (Troikos), an ἀνασκευή
or refutation exercise, through an Egyptian priest he argues that Homer’s account of
the Trojan War was false, and that the Achaeans had to withdraw without capturing
the city; see G. Bolonyai, “The uses of progymnasmata: the case of “refutations” and
outline for a potentially fuller oratorical treatment of its subject – an encomium of Homer. Of course, there may be no serious objection to classifying it as a completed speech: the 5th and 4th centuries BC provide several examples of short epideictic exercises of this kind, particularly paradoxical encomia (such as Gorgias’s Helen),² and as the self-conscious inheritors of the oratorical legacy of the Classical period the sophists of the 1st and 2nd centuries AD would have sought to emulate all discursive forms from the earlier period. Yet Dio’s piece is uncharacteristically restrained in its use of ornamentation, the transitions from one topic to the next are strikingly abrupt, and the speech itself concludes rather suddenly. Taken together, all of these features lead one to take ‘oration’ 53 as an exploration of possible approaches to a subject that could be worked up into a fuller oratorical treatment.³

The present paper will seek to argue that Oration 53 is an exercise in invention, as opposed to an extended specimen of epideictic oratory, and that it presents an innovative strategy for an encomium of Homer in that it deliberately creates, and subsequently confronts and resolves, a dilemma which challenges the cultural and literary loyalties of Dio’s own age: Homer vs. Plato. This interpretation of Dio’s technique goes some way, I believe, to explaining why the text appears to consist of two rather mismatched halves. I hope that my examination will show that the second half of the ‘oration’ is an elaboration of an encomiastic strategy constructed in the first half.

From a first reading of Dio’s speech, particularly if one starts from the assumption that it is designed as a complete and polished oration, one might form the impression that the orator is rambling somewhat, even floundering. The piece may be divided roughly into two halves: an opening doxographical section, where the opinions of several ancient philosophers and critics on Homer are assembled, and a second half where a variety of topics are covered which might be considered appropriate in an encomium of this subject: Homer’s international reputation (6-8), the virtues of the man himself (9-10), the moral, practical, political, and even theological usefulness of Homer’s poetry (11-12).

The proem begins in a manner unremarkable enough for an encomium⁴ with a strong recommendation of Homer’s excellence from the Presocratic philosopher Democritus. This positive evaluation of the poet is continued

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² Dio himself composed an Encomium of the Parrot (now lost), and an Encomium of Hair, half of which is devoted to references to hair in Homer!
³ Praise is one of the fourteen progymnastic exercises in Aphthonius’s textbook.
⁴ Cf. Aristotle’s observations for epideictic prooemia in Rh. 1414b 19-39, especially prooemia drawn from praise and blame.
with the aid of several more witnesses, drawn from the long tradition of Hellenistic Homeric scholarship, from the literary work of Aristotle, and even Heracleides Ponticus. Dio could have continued in this manner indefinitely — testimonies to Homer’s excellence from respected authors of the past abound — but instead, he next elects to introduce in summary form the opinions of Plato, mainly drawn from the Republic. While, Dio finds, Plato acknowledges that Homer’s poetry produces pleasure and charm, he censures him for the content of his poetry and its potentially corruptive influence on the young guardians of the model city which Socrates describes in the Republic. In particular, Homer’s account of the afterlife and the Underworld might threaten the courage and resolve of the warriors of this ideal state.

Plato is a reputable witness, and one of the most important models for prose in later antiquity. His testimony cannot be dismissed summarily. Dio is thus faced with a dilemma which he represents by having recourse to an analogy drawn from Greek civic practice, private arbitration (διαίτησι):

οὐ γὰρ ἰόδιοι διαιτήσαι τὸ τοιοῦτον, καθάπερ ἀίμα δῶ ἕλον ἄνδρων, ἀμφοτέρων σεμνῶν, τοὺ ἐτέρου τῷ ἐτέρῳ ἐγκαλοῦντος, εἰνας αὐτῶν καταγνώιαν. (Or. 53.3)

It is not easy to arbitrate in such a matter, just as, I assume, when you have two men, both of them worthy of respect and the one is accusing the other, it is not easy to judge against one of them.

Homer and Plato, he says, are like two dear friends engaged in a quarrel; both of them deserve the highest respect (ἀμφοτέρων σεμνῶν). Dio, a friend to both, has been ‘selected’ by them to decide their dispute, to try to get them to settle before their case comes before a formal court. The analogy is

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5 In the context of forensic rhetoric, Aristotle uses the term μάρτυρες for quotations from ancient authors whose judgements are deployed as aetechnic proofs in Rh. 1375b28-35. Aristotle goes on to assert (1376b14-17) that ancient witnesses (as opposed to contemporary ones) are more credible in circumstances where the quality (as opposed to the mere incidence) of an action is at issue because they are incorruptible.

6 See A. Gangloff, Dio Chrysostome et les mythes. Hellenisme, communication et philosophie politique (Grenoble 2006) 71-72 on the Platonic dialogues to which Dio is probably alluding.

suggestive: Dio thereby signals his own affection and respect for both authors, and deftly manages to transform Plato from a witness into a litigant engaged in a dispute with Homer. There is a further irony in that the analogy allows Dio to encroach on the territory of forensic oratory, whereas encomium traditionally belongs to the genus of epideictic.

Plato’s objections are, in turn, set against the Stoic methods of exegesis, anticipated by the Socratic Antisthenes, which sought to differentiate Homer’s own beliefs from the opinions that are merely represented in the poems and not endorsed by the poet himself: an attempt to separate the values of the author from those of the characters in the author’s work.

Even Plato concedes that Homer displays some qualities which could be taken as virtues, and in another place appears to imply that Homer must have enjoyed divine favour (οὐκ ἄνευ θείας τύχης οὐδ’ ἄνευ Μονόσων τε καὶ Απόλλωνος ἐπιμνησθείς) to produce such poetry (Or. 53.6).

Yet the refutation of Plato is not fully convincing because it is not sufficiently persistent or extensive. On the other hand, the lost To Plato in Defence of Homer, which is recorded in the Suda, ran to four books. It is as if Dio has taken seriously his role as arbitrator in the disagreement between these two titanic figures of the Greek literary, rhetorical and intellectual tradition and is unwilling to offend either one of them. Dio represents himself (and us, the audience) as being in the strange position of being forced to judge between them. The irony of this dilemma was presumably not lost on Dio’s audience. It was an accepted commonplace that epideictic oratory (of which encomium is a part) is to be differentiated from the other practical or civic forms of oratory in that while civic oratory requires its audience to make a decision of some kind (to act as κριτής), epideictic expects none from its audience, they are merely spectators (θεωρός).

Although it may be true that rhetoric always assumes there exists an opposing point of view, Dio could have pursued a very different strategy in his encomium of Homer so as not to have emphasised the challenge to the

and for a survey of the practice throughout Greek antiquity, D. Roebuck, Ancient Greek Arbitration (Oxford 2001).

8 J.F. Kindstrand, Homer in der Zweiten Sophistik. Studien zur Homerlektüre und dem Homerbild bei Dion von Prusa, Maximus von Tyre, und Achilles Aristas (Uppsala 1973) 140, remarks that there is no explicit defence of Homer at this point simply because the great poet did not require one.

9 Cf. Aristotle’s famous categorisation in Rh. 1358b12-29.

10 Anaximenes, for example, in his list of seven εἴδη τῶν λόγων, pairs ἐγκωμιαστικόν and ἰσχύος (1440b12-14). Aristotle notes how epideictic orators often give the impression that their statements will be disputed or judged (Rh. 1391b15-16); see also D.A.G. Hinks, ‘Tria genera causarum’, CQ 30 (1936) 173-74.
supremacy of the expressed target of his encomium. A strategic omission of Plato’s testimony, or a briefer and more dismissive acknowledgement of it, would have sufficed to avoid the difficulty. Encomium usually proceeds, as several rhetoricians in antiquity tell us, from an assumption of general agreement as to the virtue of the subject of the encomium. If one examines other specimens of Homeric encomia or even works which are not formally encomia but contain encomiastic elements one can see the general strategies that Dio had available to him (amplification, auxesis, of the topic of praise introduced at the beginning of the speech).

Quintilian, at the beginning of his sweeping survey of Greek and Roman literature, provides a convenient illustration of the standard encomiastic themes which could be deployed when an orator had occasion to speak of Homer:

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\text{igitur, ut Aratus ab Iove incipiendum putet, ita nos rite cooptari ab Homero videmur. hic enim, quem ad modum ex Oceano dicti ipsi amnium fontiumque cursus initium capere, omnibus eloquentiae partibus exemplum et orationem dedit. hunc nemo in magnis rebus sublimitate, in parvis proprietate superavit. idem latus ac pressus, incandes et gravis, tum opia, tum brevitate mirabilis, nec poética modo, sed oratoria virtute eminensius. (Inst. orat. 10.1.46)}
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This is standard encomiastic fare, adapted to the circumstances of Quintilian’s immediate project. Quintilian confines himself in this preface to Homer’s unrivalled competence in all fields of artistic discourse.

A more ambitious and hyperbolic strategy is to be found in a work from the 2nd or 3rd centuries AD attributed to Plutarch, an Essay on the Life and Poetry of Homer. This substantial piece represents the kind of text that was designed to accompany the study of Homer in the schools of the grammaticoi. Its purpose is primarily informative and didactic. It contains, for example, a review of standard opinions on Homer’s date, family and place of origin, dialectology and the linguistic peculiarities of Homer’s poetry, figures and tropes. But there are encomiastic elements too. Extravagant claims are made in a systematic fashion. Homer is found to have anticipated all aspects of theoretical discourse (later divided and developed by the philosophers into physics, ethics, and dialectic) as well as a variety of fundamental disciplines, such as civic discourse (under which rhetoric itself is listed), military science,

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12 The reference is to II. 21.195-97.
13 As Aristotle observed, amplification (auxesis) employs comparison or contrast (relative superiority, ἐπιστοχή, Rb. 1368a22-26).
medicine, divination, drama, epigram, and even painting. Plato finds a place in all of this, but the author of this essay is highly selective in what he includes: he confines himself simply to remarking that Homer’s depiction of fate is comparable to Plato’s doctrine (120), and that the poet anticipated Plato on the non-material nature of the soul (128). The reader is given no overt invitation to recall Plato’s strident objections to Homer’s epics and the errors which he claimed were contained therein.

So by giving such prominence to Plato’s censure and by reacting to it in the aporetic manner in which he does, Dio would seem to have spoiled the opportunities for amplification which the earlier witnesses he cited had provided. The particular form then of the dilemma with which Dio presents himself is certainly one of his own creation. We should assume there is a reason for this. If one of the main goals of epideictic rhetoric is to display the orator’s talent, then that talent will be revealed more impressively if he acquires himself well on a challenging subject. And where is the challenge in praising Homer to a Greek-speaking audience? Hence the epideictic orator frequently claims that he is faced with a difficulty. Half a millennium before Dio, Isocrates, himself a model for epideictic oratory, reported in his Praise of Helen (12) that the paradoxical encomium (where the subject is bumble-bees or salt) is an easy enterprise (οδέες πάντοτε λόγων ἡπόρησαν), whereas all those who undertake praise of universally accepted goods complain about the great shortage of possibilities (πολὺ καταθέσαν τὰν ἱπαρχόντων).

If no challenge exists, one has to be invented. Dio deploys the device of aporia on one occasion (Orat. 53.11) in a typically standard way. However, he has drawn unnecessary attention to the dilemma he faces by employing in elaborate fashion the analogy of arbitration, and as a consequence we are justified in expecting this dilemma to play a rather more significant role in the process of invention which is revealed by this text.

With this in mind, it would be impressive if Dio were able to develop an encomium out of the very words of Homer’s most vociferous opponent, Plato. Dio hints that this will be his strategy when he claims that Plato’s attacks on the charm of Homer’s poetry effectively entail admiration of the poetry’s author — for, as Plato himself said — only a man blessed by the gods (particularly the Muses and Apollo) could produce poetry of this quality (Orat. 53.6). What I shall try to suggest in the remainder of this paper is that

14 Dio himself indulges in extravagant claims for Homer’s encyclopedic abilities in Or. 12.68.
Dio creatively develops routes for an encomium of Homer from opportunities discovered in Plato’s remarks and that this method accounts for the material which comprises the second half of the speech, which otherwise appears quite unrelated to the ‘doxographical’ first half.

As Dio reminds us, though Plato acknowledges the superficial beauty of Homer’s poetry, he effectively denies him citizenship of his ideal city (2) and in one famous passage from Book 3 of the Republic sends the visiting poet (whom Dio assumes is Homer) on to some other city wreathed with wool and smothered in myrrh (5). The rejection is polite and the poet is treated with due reverence but, as Dio realises (µάλα εἰρωνεύω), the ejection is quite determined. Where does such a poet go after being expelled from Plato’s city? In sections 6 to 8 we find that Homer enjoys a high reputation even among non-Greeks. Even if barbarians who have commerce with Greeks have no acquaintance with any other aspect of Greek culture, they are familiar with Homer’s verses. Particular attention is given to Homer’s standing with the Indians. On the one hand the Indians are an understandable choice, since they represent the most famous illustration of those barbarians whom he has mentioned as being scattered far abroad (6). The Indians cannot understand Greek, they only have access to Homer through translations into their own language. In fact, they are so far removed from direct contact with all things Greek that they inhabit a part of the world where even the stars they gaze upon in the night sky are different from the heavenly bodies which the Greeks observe (7). They are then unable to appreciate the expressive form of Homer’s poetry, since they are deprived of the qualities inherent in Homer’s poetic deployment of the Greek language, the synthesis so to speak of Homer’s poems. All they have access to are the stories as recounted in Homer’s epics. Yet this narrative material, the dianoia or pragmata of the story as it were, is also the result of Homer’s artistry and his creative invention, and this is sufficient to hold them under its spell. As Dio goes on to remark, Homer thereby surpasses even Orpheus and the Sirens in his ability to affect entities which have no comprehension of poetic (here specifically Greek) language (7). One should note that Dio has contrived an amusing inversion of the generally-held doctrine that it is the sound, not the content which charms the audience. This is more like the kind of hyperbole we might expect in the amplification of an encomiastic theme.

16 The reference is to Rep. 3.398a1-8.
17 Gangloff (note 7) 87 feels that comparison with Sirens and Orpheus unavoidably raises the issue of poetry’s power to delude men.
18 Cf. in Orat. 36.29 it is claimed that the inhabitants of Borysthenes study both Plato and Homer. W.W. Tarn, The Greeks in Bactria and India (Cambridge 1951) 379,
But the Indians have not only been chosen because they are a convenient example of a remote barbarian nation. By the time that Dio was composing this speech, the Indians had increasingly been viewed as a particularly wise and philosophical people.\(^{19}\) Their favourable reaction to Homer's poems, even in the imperfectly transmitted form in which they are compelled to hear them, serves as an endorsement of Homer's excellence. Whether Plato was right or not to send the poet on his way, the ejection of Homer from the philosopher's ideal state turned out to be a necessary condition of his travel to, and acceptance by, an entire nation of philosophers, or at least this is the kind of exaggeration which Dio's strategy makes available.

The theme of exile is continued in the next section of the speech. The widespread tradition that Homer was a wanderer and earned a frugal living from his poetry is co-opted to render the poet courageous and great-hearted. As an individual he makes so little impact on his world that he even refrains from mentioning his own name in his poems. How unlike, Dio remarks, authors like Hecataeus, Herodotus and especially Thucydides who constantly reminds the reader of his authorship. This silence on Homer's part is taken as indicative of virtue. In fact, in Dio's view, this anonymity makes Homer resemble the prophets of the gods who utter their oracles and advice from within the recesses of sanctuaries (10).\(^{20}\)

Dio conveniently avoids, through the device of praeteritio, giving details of Homer's pronouncements on virtue and vice (πολύ ἄνεργον εἴη, 11), but turns to focus on the poet's attitude to kingship. For Homer, Dio tells us, Zeus the supreme Olympian serves as the model of good kingship. All good kings are cherished by Zeus (διὸ τρεφέας ἀπαυγασ),\(^{21}\) and king Minos, whom all Greeks acknowledge as the most just of kings, learnt his civic craft from Zeus himself, as Homer tells us. Homer's characterisation of Zeus's rule as paternal provides the correct paradigm for all kings who should display the same fatherly attitude, goodwill, love and providence (12). Homer sensibly denies any possibility of the truth of Dio's claims of an Indian audience for translations of Homer.

\(^{19}\) E.g. Strabo's account of Onesicritus's conversation with Indian sages (15.1.63-65) during Alexander's campaigns, and critical discussion of the incident in T.S. Brown, Onesicritus. A Study in Hellenistic Historiography (Berkeley 1949) 39-46. Diogenes Laertius records a tradition that even Democritus visited the Indian Gymnosophists (9.35), well before those philosophers (Pyrrho and Anaxarchus) who supposedly associated with these Indian sages after Alexander's conquests (D. L. 9.61, 63).

\(^{20}\) Perhaps the alert reader would recall that Plato was another author who preserved his anonymity in the dialogues.

thus emerges as a pious thinker who has the interests of a just polity at heart. Yet Dio’s conception of polity is more ambitious in scale than Plato’s.

The passage on the ideal king has, undoubtedly, a Stoic complexion and recalls the doctrines from that philosophical school which were utilised earlier in the speech in response to Plato’s attacks.22 The conclusion also succeeds in echoing the opening claim, attributed to Democritus, that it was because Homer enjoyed a nature particularly akin to the divine that he was able to compose the kind of poetry he did, which Dio took to mean that Homer produced such fine and wise things because of a divine nature. But Dio has avoided explicitly attributing these notions to a Stoic source in this context. Instead, he appeals to the notion of a universally accepted evaluation (Minos was the best king ever) to underpin his argument. The strategy at this point, the closing section of the speech, is relevant to the Platonic doctrines which Dio rehearsed earlier and which seemed, initially, to present an obstruction to the encomium. Dio has not availed himself of an allegorical reading of Homer’s poems in order to rescue him, but has instead opted for a quite literal interpretation of selected phrases and passages. Zeus is ‘father of men and gods’ in every sense of the word; kings are quite literally ‘beloved of Zeus’. In this he is surely conscious of Plato’s objection to the allegorical exegesis of Homer’s texts and other early poetry, where the point is made that a young audience is incapable of such a subtle reading.23 More importantly, Dio’s mention of Minos is surely intended to recall that Plato too would have counted himself among those who have a high regard for Minos as king and judge.24

Hence a reconciliation between Plato and Homer, the representatives of philosophy and poetry, is hinted at even if it is not explicitly articulated. Plato has indirectly provided Dio with the sources of invention for his encomium, and the orator could have reminded his audience at this point that Plato had allowed two kinds of praise-poetry to remain in his ideal state: hymns to gods and encomia of good men (Rep. 607a4). The speech constitutes an oblique reply to Plato’s objections executed within a context characterised by different political, social, and economic circumstances from those of Plato’s day.25 Dio’s Homer must serve not only a fourth-century city-state, but an empire ruled by a monarch, and, as the speech intimates, ultimately the entire human oikoumene. The Greeks constitute only one element of this oikoumene.

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25 Epideictic rhetoric, unlike its deliberative and forensic siblings, is preoccupied with the present (not the past or the future), as Aristotle recognised (Rh. 1358a17-19).
but through godlike Homer the spirit of Hellenism is assured of its eventual cultural and political hegemony.26

It has been rightly remarked that in epideictic oratory invention is as much on display as style and ornamentation.27 Dio’s *On Homer* is a fine example not only of the self-conscious process of invention but also of how epideictic rhetoric need not be confined to ‘mere’ display. In this particular epideictic exercise, Dio has employed the metaphor of arbitration not only to produce strategies of praise, but also to signal the progymnastic character of the work. Arbitration concerns matters which have not yet come to court or been subjected to formal scrutiny before an objective jury. Dio has not composed an extended and formal defence of Homer. Instead, Dio effectively performs for us the very process of encomiastic *inventio*, as a preliminary exercise for a defence which he hopes he will never have to deliver.

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26 Cf. the figures of Chronos and Oikoumene depicted crowning the figure of Homer on the remarkable Archelaos votive relief (BM 2191), dated from the late third to middle second centuries BC, thus ‘endorsing the universality and ubiquity of Homer’s poetry as an everlasting possession for all’; F. Zeitlin, ‘Visions and revisions of Homer’, in S. Goldhill (ed.), *Being Greek under Rome: Cultural Identity, the Second Sophistic and the Development of Empire* (Cambridge 2001) 199.

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