



Being epic after Homer: the episodic structure of Quintus of Smyrna's *Posthomerica*¹

Ser épico após Homero: a estrutura episódica das Pós-homéricas de Quinto de Esmirna

Rafael de Almeida Semêdo

Universidade de São Paulo (USP), São Paulo, São Paulo / Brasil

rafsemedo@usp.br

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6423-8235>

Abstract: This article investigates the plot structure of Quintus of Smyrna's *Posthomerica*, a late antique epic that covers the Homeric lacuna in dactylic hexameters (c. 3 AD). The unmistakable influence of Homer has often led to disparaging views about the quality of Quintus' poem, which was deemed problematic by many scholars in the 20th Century. After the turn of the century, however, more positive outlooks on the *Posthomerica* have been gaining momentum, and some previous views have been put into perspective. An explanation for the negative responses elicited by the poem may have to do with an arguable aesthetic of the tension of opposites, here discussed in terms of the poem's plot, pointing to a "symmetrically asymmetrical" structure. Moreover, the article questions the readily disparaging views against episodic works, which are usually considered lesser pieces in comparison to those with a unified plot.

Keywords: *Posthomerica*; narratology; Late Antiquity.

Resumo: Este artigo investiga a estruturação da trama das *Pós-homéricas* de Quinto de Esmirna, um épico da antiguidade tardia que aborda a lacuna homérica em hexâmetros datílicos (aprox. III d.C.). A evidente influência de Homero normalmente levou a opiniões depreciativas sobre a qualidade do poema de Quinto, o qual foi considerado problemático por muitos estudiosos do século XX. Após a virada do século, contudo, perspectivas mais positivas sobre as *Pós-homéricas* têm ganhado força, e algumas das visões anteriores têm sido relativizadas. Uma explicação para as experiências negativas suscitadas pelo poema pode ter a ver com uma estética da tensão de opostos, aqui discutida em relação à trama do poema ao se apontar para uma estrutura "simetricamente assimétrica". Ademais, o artigo questiona perspectivas prontamente depreciativas contra obras episódicas, as quais são normalmente consideradas inferiores em comparação com aquelas que contêm uma trama unificada.

Palavras-chave: *Pós-homéricas*; narratologia; antiguidade tardia.

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Quintus of Smyrna's *Posthomerica* is a peculiar poem, probably more well-known for its flaws than its qualities. In the 20th century, it received much negative criticism, being called, for example, an "anemic pastiche [...] utterly devoid of life" by Lloyd-Jones (1969, p. 101), and a "barren parroting [of Homer] (öde Nachplappern)" by Wilamowitz (1905, p. 216). In the last two decades, however, it has been gradually viewed in a more positive light by scholars who have tried to go beyond the heavy criticism it attracted in the past in order to assess its merits and find different degrees of skill and artistry within it². My research follows the latter trend.

As Maciver (2012, p. 24) states, it has become a cliché for recent scholars to present their readers with past negative reviews on the poem only to criticize them and show how a more sensible scholar like the one writing may be able to see the work's beauty. This is, in fact, how this paper will seem, as every attempt to understand the *Posthomerica* with a favorable view inevitably leads to a sort of defensive posture against the attacks it previously suffered. It is important for me, however, not to readily dismiss the negative perceptions of previous scholars, since I admit that I myself had a hard time reading Quintus' poem for the first time for many of the reasons expressed in negative reviews: monotony, loose connection of the episodes, exaggerated use of similes etc. It seems indeed that for most readers the *Posthomerica* is not an easy poem to like right away. It is a puzzling piece, not to say a weird one. In fact, I am currently of the opinion that this is more a work to be deciphered than enjoyed. And, although challenging, this can be quite a fun exercise in itself – which in turn leads to a more pleasant experience when dealing with the poem.

In this article, I wish to discuss one of the aspects for which the *Posthomerica* has been deemed problematic, its narrative structure – its *sui generis* division into 14 Books, episodic plot structure and lack of a central narrative thread. I begin by presenting what I have been calling the *Posthomerica*'s poetics of "tension of opposites", a general principle behind the poem's aesthetics that may be one of the reasons for its negative reviews. Afterward, I illustrate how the poem's plot structure has

² For example: James; Lee (2000), Baumbach; Bär (2007), Maciver (2012), Ferreccio (2014), Scheijnen (2018), Tsomis (2018a), Tsomis (2018b), Carvounis (2019).

been specifically criticized by previous scholars, proceeding thereafter to present one of the more recent attempts at understanding its organization (SCHMIDT, 1999). I then present Maciver's (2012) observations on how the poetic ideals of Late Antiquity actually prescribe many of the characteristics of Quintus' epic, including its episodic structure. To conclude, I elaborate on the idea that while such historical context may play an important role in the aesthetics of the *Posthomeric*, there may be more to the story than that. I argue that Quintus' epic, in fact, magnifies the episodic aspect of epic poetry itself, one that has always been there since the times of Homer, but which is usually overlooked. This is because there is a tendency to a) take the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* as the sole role models of what Ancient epic should be, ignoring the much vaster background of the genre, and b) to assess both poems mostly through the lenses of plot unity, playing down much of their episodic characteristics.

1 The poem's title and the tension of opposites

One possible explanation for the distaste of many scholars for the *Posthomeric* may have to do with the readers' difficulties in appreciating the poet's aims and aesthetics. What was Quintus trying to achieve with his poem? Did he mean to emulate Homer? Did he envision his epic as a seamless continuation of the *Iliad* and a prelude to the *Odyssey*? These questions seem in place when we consider that Quintus deals with material directly connected to the Homeric poems in terms of both theme and form, and, most importantly, that his poem is called the *Posthomeric* ("τὰ μεθ' Ὀμηρον" or "τὰ μετὰ τὸν Ὀμηρον"), "the things after Homer". A few words about the title are in order, as it may be the cause of some of the frustrations of many readers and, consequently, their negative experiences.

We do not know whether this title was given by Quintus himself or not, as it is only present in some of the medieval manuscripts containing the poem (VIAN, 1963, p. vii-viii). That it may not be the best possible name is illustrated by the alternative titles that some translators have chosen for their editions, from the more straightforward *The Fall of Troy* (WAY, 1913), *Der Untergang Trojas* (GÄRTNER, 2010), and *The Trojan Epic: Posthomeric* (JAMES, 2004) to the more flamboyant *The*

War at Troy: What Homer Didn't Tell (COMBELLACK, 1968). But the fact is that "Posthomerica" is the title handed down to us by the tradition, the name that stuck over the ages, and the one that is present in most editions to this day. In Loeb's most recent translation, for example, which replaced Way's 1913 *The Fall of Troy*, the editors have retrieved the original "Posthomerica" title (HOPKINSON, 2018). This traditional, more well-known name may arguably be the cause of a few problems for the poem's overall bad reputation, as it automatically leads the reader to think that the piece is directly related to Homer, a fact that is only partially true, and that is both a blessing and a curse.

A blessing because it attracts the attention of the public – it seems fun to read an epic rendition of the famous episodes which Homer did not cover directly. But it is also a curse for the same reason, as it may lead to erroneous and, consequently, frustrating expectations. Quintus is definitely not Homer, and the *Posthomerica* is not merely an emulation of the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*. When one decides to read the poem with those assumptions in mind, the experience will most likely be frustrating. When one approaches it with a more open mind and the right expectations, however, there are greater chances of a pleasant experience. And the most important matter is knowing beforehand that even though in many ways the *Posthomerica* is Homeric, in many other ways it is also not Homeric. In this sense, a broader meaning of the title could be appreciated, not literally pointing to a work that follows the *Iliad*, or an epic composed by a Homeric wannabe, but to a poem that follows later aesthetics, one that comes after Homer not only in terms of narrative content and metrics but also of characteristics and style. The *Posthomerica*, thus, as contradictory as it may sound, is at the same time Homeric and also non-Homeric – a striking characteristic of the poetics of the tension of opposites in the poem.

I first came across the idea of conflicting opposites coexisting in the aesthetics of the *Posthomerica* in Calum Maciver's 2012 book *Posthomerica: Engaging Homer in Late Antiquity*. In his study of the poem's characteristics, he states:

The *Posthomerica* is long and episodic, very Homeric and non-Homeric, post Alexandrian and Alexandrian, anti-

Callimachean but also Callimachean, given to extremes but at times subtle with its vocabulary, and obvious in its intertextuality and demanding of its reader. It is extremely difficult to tie down the *Posthomeric* with definitions and labels, and equally difficult to give the poem an easily definable aesthetic, let alone an aesthetic that can be readily applied to other poems of an approximate era. (MACIVER, 2012, p. 24)

Such remarks are a fine representation of the puzzling nature of the poem, of the difficulty of checking it against its predecessors, contemporaries, and successors, and establishing where it fits in the genealogy of ancient epic. This may be part of the reason for many of the frustrated expectations and negative reviews about it – including my own appreciation during my first contact with it. The poem is at times disconcerting because we expect it to go a certain direction or to conform to some pre-established (for the most part, Homeric) norms, only to see Quintus subsequently breaking them. This creates a tension in the experience, leading those who come with prior expectations to feel uneasy about it. The title may be a big part of the problem, because it creates the assumption of a succession to Homer that is not entirely delivered. Yet if we understand the “post-” prefix as the mark of something subsequent not only in terms of narrative content and form but also of subsequent aesthetics, the problem can be mitigated. The *Posthomeric* should thus be understood as a poem that goes *beyond* Homer in that in spite of its Homeric elements, it is not exactly Homer – so it comes after him also in the sense of bringing new characteristics into its making.

2 Length and Book division

Maciver (2012), in the lines of the “tension of opposites”, mentions that Quintus’ poem is both long (which usually points to a single long story) and episodic (which points to the idea of a sequence of short stories). Both seemingly contradicting characteristics certainly

coexist in the *Posthomeric*. But claiming that it is long is a relative question. With circa 8,770 lines divided into 14 Books, its length stands in a limbo between the minimalistic ideals of the “Callimachean epic”, represented in extant form by the *Argonautica* of Apollonius Rhodius (5,835 lines, 4 Books), and the longer extension of Homer’s *Iliad* (15,693 lines, 24 Books) and *Odyssey* (12,109, 24 Books)³. It is also considerably shorter than the late antique ideals of grandeur exemplified by Nonnus’ *Dionysiaca* (20,426 lines, 48 Books). In verse-length, thus, it stands in an intermediate place when compared to its canonical counterparts in Ancient Greek epic, outside of the scope pre-established by its predecessors in hexametric poetry (SCHMIDT, 1999, p. 139). Its 14-Book division is also noteworthy, different from any of the other extant works in the genre of Greek heroic epic, all of which are divided into multiples of four: *Argonautica* (4), *Iliad* (24), *Odyssey* (24), *Dionysiaca* (48). When compared to its counterparts, thus, the *Posthomeric* stands as an outcast due to its intermediary length and irregular number of Books.

This, however, is a view that needs to be put into perspective, as many other epic poems are missing from the list above. The ones quoted are simply those considered the canonical representatives in the lineage of Ancient Greek heroic epic, but they do not stand for the totality of epic poetry. Consequently, they do not represent what ancient epic is in reality, nor are they the only ones from which Quintus may have drawn his inspiration, or with which he may be establishing his intertextuality. To begin with, there are other heroic poems that existed outside the aforementioned canon, mostly because they did not make it to our days in complete form. The Cyclic poems, of which we only know via fragments (WEST, 2003), are good examples: *Cypria* (11 Books); *Aethiopis* (5 Books), *The Little Iliad* (4 Books), *The Sack of Ilion* (2 Books), *The Returns* (5 Books), *Telegony* (2 Books). The *epyllia* (“short epics”) and their short, one-Book structure, such as the *Posthomeric*’s

³ It is known that the Homeric poems were not originally divided into Books, and this process was carried out by the Alexandrian scholars in the Hellenistic period. I do not, however, refer here to possible “original/oldest works”, but rather to the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* as they were traditionally handed down across the centuries to our days, that is, to the form in which we see and interpret them today.

possible contemporaries *The Rape of Helen* and the *Sack of Troy* could also be mentioned. Going beyond the heroic variety, there also exists a plethora of other types of epic poetry, from which we could quote, for example, Hesiod's famous cosmogonic *Theogony* and didactic *Works and Days*, which have never been divided into Books. To the same poet are also attributed fragmentary poems, the *Catalogue of Women*, divided into five Books, and the *Shield of Heracles*, the first representative of the *epyllion* genre in one Book.

A vast list of Latin poetry could also be added to the pool of examples above, but the Latin question⁴ is not addressed in this paper in order not to broaden its scope. The Greek poems mentioned should suffice nonetheless to illustrate the following point: there is a whole other reality outside of the canonical works of Greek heroic epic, with several different poems of varying themes, lengths, and Book divisions. This means that the *Posthomeric*'s overall structure, as far as length and Book count are concerned, can only be considered awkward when compared against the "multiple of four" canonical poems. But when we place it against the broader universe of ancient epic, it simply becomes just another ancient hexametric poem that existed among many others with a great variety of structural possibilities.

This does not mean that comparisons with the canonical poems should be put aside. They can certainly yield productive results, and we shall discuss the *Posthomeric*'s relation to Homeric poetry in this very article. This comparison, however, should not be used as a reason to readily dismiss the merits of Quintus' poem or judge it as a flawed piece. The 14-Book division may only seem like a problem when compared to the works of Homer, Apollonius, or Nonnus (to quote only the canonical ones), but it exists in a vaster universe of possibilities. In this sense, evoking the imagery of the tension of opposites, in terms of overall structure the *Posthomeric* can be considered both canonical

⁴ The "Latin question" in the context of the *Posthomeric* encompasses the questions about whether Latin poetry had a big impact on Quintus' poem or not. The most up-to-date work discussing the matter is Gärtner (2005). To sum up the conclusion: we cannot be certain, as both the Latin works and Quintus could simply be drawing their inspiration from the same pool of Greek sources.

and anti-canonical. It is considered part of the canon because it deals with heroic themes in hexametric style, but it is also an outsider when compared to its counterparts due to its unusual, intermediary length and 14-Book division. This is only considered a problem when trying to fit the poem within pre-existing frames, but should not hinder the experience of one who approaches it with a more open mind. Let us now turn to the contents of the poem and how these 14 Books are structurally organized.

3 The plot structure

In an article entitled “Quintus of Smyrna - the worst poet of Antiquity? (“Quintus von Smyrna – der Schlechteste Dichter des Altertums?”), Schmidt (1999) presents a broad overview of negative criticism on the *Posthomerica* from previous scholars. Among these, I select two that specifically point to a negative appreciation of the poem’s narrative structure: 1) “Even an overall more well-disposed critic [Dihle]⁵ reproaches Quintus for a “lack of monumentality [*Mangel an Monumentalität*]”; and 2)

In this sense, Heinrich Wagner⁶, the first to reflect on the structure of the *Posthomerica*, wrote: “Quintus’ power was not sufficient for him to master his material thoughtfully. In his arrangement, he was not able to establish a sense of unity [*Einheit*], nor an artistic disposition [*kunstreiche Anordnung*] to the whole or to each individual part”, he goes on, “Almost every Book forms a small epic in itself”. (p. 143)

Both quotations illustrate how previous scholars have felt the lack of a unifying principle to tie the poem together, of an underlying strength to encompass its stories and connect them to one another or to obtain an overall sense of a whole. The *Posthomerica*, it seems in their view, is thus Quintus’ somewhat careless juxtaposition of different episodes with no attention to how they are actually organized.

⁵ DIHLE, A. Die griechische und lateinische Literatur der Kaiserzeit: von Augustus bis Justinian. Munich: Beck, 1989, p. 406.

⁶ WAGNER, H. Über den griechischen Epiker Quintus Smyrnaeus. Darmstadt: Programm Darmstadt, 1866, p. 9.

Different scholars have advocated against such claims with different analyses of possible patterns in the poem's structure (SCHENK, 1997; SCHMIDT, 1999; MACIVER, 2012, p. 21-23). In this paper, I elaborate on Schmidt's (1999) observations, in which he questions the idea that the poem lacks careful structuring, and argues for an underlying logic to Quintus' composition. The structure of the poem, he proposes, is carefully thought out and planned according to a certain design. Where others have seen a haphazard stitching of individual episodes, Schmidt points to their systematic organization. To this idea, I add that their thoughtful and orderly placement may be seen as a solid structure that creates the idea of a whole behind it. In other words, the overarching structure achieved by the careful array of different episodes could be responsible for providing a sense of the poem's unity, in the same way that a skeleton forms the base of a body with its many limbs, or that the beams provide support to a building with many rooms.

To begin, Schmidt compares how the structure of the *Posthomeric* is in a way comparable to that of the Homeric poems themselves. He argues that the *Iliad* can be understood as a poem comprised of three major blocks:

Table 1 – A possible division of the *Iliad*'s overall structure

- | |
|--|
| <p>(I) Books 1-8: the beginning of Achilles' wrath, its first consequences to the Achaeans;</p> <p>(II) Books 9-16: the embassy's failed attempt to placate the wrath; the Achaeans' definitive attempts to fight without Achilles, their struggles against the Trojans, the death of Patroclus;</p> <p>(III) Books 17-24: remission of the wrath, Achilles' return into the fray, the death of Hector, Priam's recovery of his body.</p> |
|--|

Thus, the *Iliad* could be understood within a symmetrical frame divided into an 8-8-8 scheme of Books.

The *Odyssey*, in its turn, could be divided into two major blocks:

Table 2 – A possible division of the *Odyssey*'s overall structure

- | |
|--|
| <p>(I) Books 1-12: Odysseus' homecoming</p> <p>(II) Books 13-24: Odysseus' vengeance against the suitors</p> |
|--|

The poem is thus symmetrically divided into a sequence of 12-12 Books.

Following the same principle, elaborating on the considerations of Keydell (1963), Schmidt argues that the *Posthomerica* can be divided into three major thematic blocks, to each of which I am attaching a title:

Table 3 – A possible division of the *Posthomerica*'s overall structure

- (I) Books 1-5:** "Achilleid" – Arrival of Penthesilea (Book 1); arrival of Memnon (Book 2); death of Achilles (Book 3); funeral games of Achilles (Book 4); suicide of Ajax (Book 5).
- (II) Books 6-10:** "The Little Iliad" – Arrival of Eurypylus (Book 6); Arrival of Neoptolemus (Book 7); death of Eurypylus (Book 8); arrival of Philoctetes (Book 9); death of Paris (Book 10).
- (III) Books 11-14:** "Sack of Troy" – Stalemate before the Trojan walls (Book 11); the wooden horse (Book 12); the sack of Troy (Book 13); the returns (Book 14).

The block division, thus, is one of 5-5-4 Books. A comparison with the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* reveals a lack of symmetry in the organization of the arcs of the *Posthomerica*, as two of them are comprised of five Books, while the last one has four. Nonetheless, as contradictory as this may seem, following the reasoning of the "tension of opposites", it is possible to find a symmetrical principle governing this asymmetry, as discussed next.

When analyzing the narrative content of the episodes in each block, Schmidt identifies some similar patterns between how they are connected. The first one is that in each of the three blocks there is a "build-up phase" in the first two Books, which leads in turn to a climax in the third one:

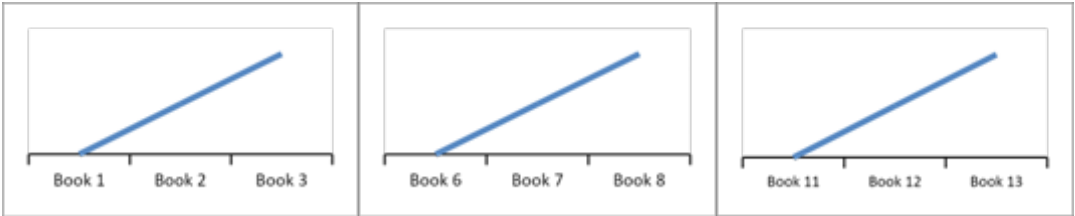
Table 4 – Build-up and climax in the plot of the *Posthomerica*

- (I) Build-up: Books 1-2** (Arrival of Penthesilea, killed by Achilles; Arrival of Memnon, who kills Antilochus and is slain by Achilles) | **Climax: Book 3** (Achilles' death)
- (II) Build-up: Books 6-7** (Arrival of Eurypylus, ally of the Trojans who takes on the role of their main champion, left empty after Hector's death and the failed attempts of Penthesilea and Memnon; Arrival of Neoptolemus, who rises as the substitute of Achilles as the best of the Achaeans) | **Climax: Book 8** (Neoptolemus faces Eurypylus and kills him, a sort of doublet of Achilles versus Hector)
- (III) Build-up: Books 11-12** (stalemate before the walls of Troy; The wooden horse ruse) | **Climax: Book 13** (Sack of Troy, death of Priam and Astyanax, rape of Cassandra)

It is possible to understand the construction of each block visually as an ascending line. While they tell stories of self-contained episodes, there is an unmistakable development of the plot between such episodes,

with one Book leading into another in an ascending movement, and thereafter culminating in a climax. Such a development is illustrated in the following tripartite graphic:

Figure 1 – Graphics of plot development by blocks in the *Posthomerica* – build-up and climax



Placing the plot development lines of each block side by side provides the first visual cue of how the poem holds a careful planning and some degree of symmetry.

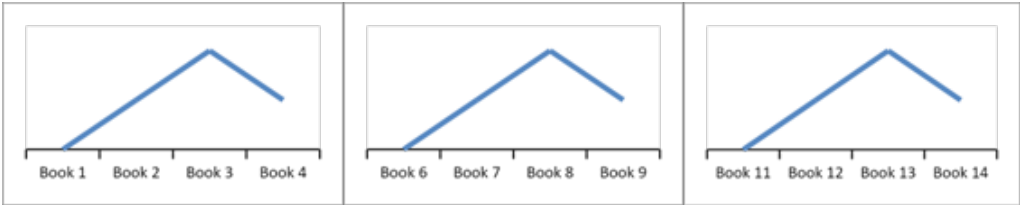
After the climax in each narrative block, there is an episode of aftermath that portrays its consequences, presenting what happens after such major events:

Table 5 – Aftermath episodes in the plot of the *Posthomerica*

(I) Aftermath: Book 4 (The funeral games of Achilles)
(II) Aftermath: Book 9 (After killing Eurypylus, Neoptolemus visits the tomb of Achilles, Greeks rescue Philoctetes)
(III) Aftermath: Book 14 (After the sack of Ilium, Greeks prepare for their returns and leave Troy)

In graphic display, combining all the phases so far, the plot structure can be thus updated:

Figure 2 – Graphic of plot development by blocks in the *Posthomerica* - aftermath



The symmetrical aspect of poem's structure gets thus more refined and better visualized with the ascending lines of the build-up, the vertices of the climax, and the descending movement of the aftermath. This leads us to a discussion of the last leg of each block, which is where the more asymmetrical characteristics are observable.

Both blocks (I) and (II) have a sort of second part of the aftermath, yet these are characterized by more striking events that can be understood as a sort of second climax – the tragic deaths of major characters. Block (III) has no such succession, as the poem ends after the returns in Book 14 – the point in which the fabula (plot in chronological order) of the *Odyssey* begins.

Table 6 – Tragic episodes in the plot of the *Posthomeric*

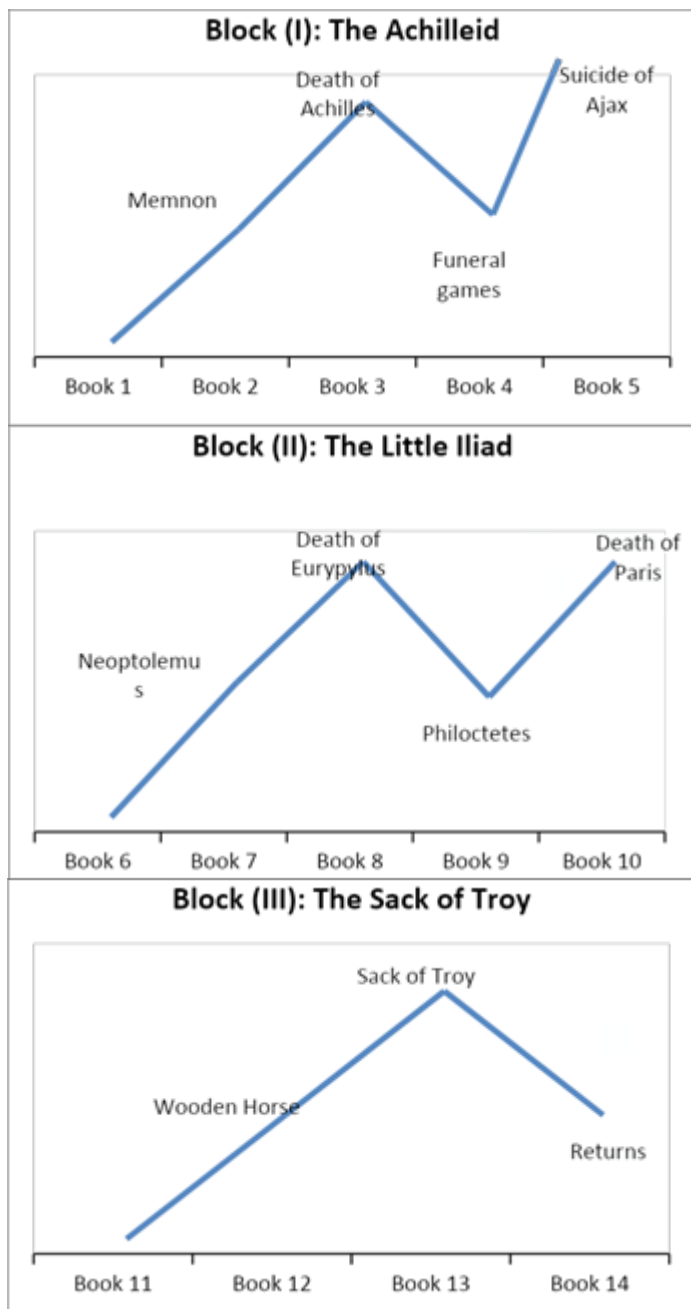
(I) Tragic episode: Book 5 (Judgment of the arms, suicide of Ajax)

(II) Tragic episode: Book 9 (Paris shot by Philoctetes, healing refused by Oenone, his former wife before Helen, death of Paris, suicide of Oenone at his funeral pyre)

(III) -

In this table, the asymmetrical aspect of the plot becomes evident, as block (III) lacks the tragic ending that sections (I) and (II) have. Let us turn, then, to a visual representation of the plot structuring with these additions, now with a more complete graphic detailing the events and the plot progression, and then discuss its consequences.

Figure 3 – Graphics of plot development by blocks in the Posthomerica



As the graphics show, the lines of plot development within each block follow very similar directions during the entire poem: the build-up phase that leads to a climax followed by an aftermath, which in turn is followed by a tragic event that marks a second climax, with the exception of the last block. In fact, the lack of a second climax in the last block can be easily explained. Firstly, if it was not the case, the plot of the *Odyssey* would overlap with that of the *Posthomerica*, while Quintus seems careful enough to avoid doing so. Secondly, after the major climax of the sack of Troy, an aftermath seems like a fitting event to end the poem, as it brings forth a perfect sense of closure to the story.

In any case, the lack of the last leg in the final block brings forth the asymmetrical touch to the structure of the *Posthomerica*, while not hindering its overall symmetry if we consider the general flow of the plot lines as represented above. Regardless of the ending, the movement in all three blocks follows the same exact direction, and the overall dynamics remain the same throughout the entire poem. Even considering that the last line is missing, the contours of how the plot is developed remain unaltered, and, as such, it is arguable that the *Posthomerica* is still a symmetrical piece, even if with an asymmetrical touch. It is in this sense that, in line with the “tension of opposites”, it is possible to state that the narrative structure of the poem is symmetrically asymmetrical.

4 The episodic plot

At this point, we have seen that the structure of *Posthomerica* and the Homeric poems can be divided into well-defined narrative blocks. In this sense, they all share an element in common – their plots develop in the same manner in different arcs. As we have seen, though, the Homeric poems have a symmetrical division in each of their blocks, while the *Posthomerica* is “symmetrically asymmetric”. A more substantial aspect in which they differ is the interrelation between the narrative blocks within each poem. All of the arcs of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are well tied together because of their close relation to the overall narrative pillar of each poem (the wrath of Achilles and the return of Odysseus). The themes of each of the blocks of the *Posthomerica*, however, presents a greater variety, and a looser connection between them – bringing the

feeling of a more paratactic sequence (horizontal succession of events, one coming after the other) than a hypotactic one (vertical succession of events, one being the cause of the other). Each block has different protagonists and different central events, all of which share the common background of the last year of the Trojan War, but are not subordinated to a single central pillar.

In the *Posthomerica*, the narrative focus shifts from block to block, and when one of them ends, such a part is clearly over for the next one to begin. Surely there are elements of continuation, and the timeline goes on chronologically, but there is a clearer element of closure after each arc, with the next one starting a new phase in the storyline, bringing different protagonists and different events to the spotlight. In our division, the poem's blocks of the *Achilleid*, the *Little Iliad*, and the *Sack of Troy* represent three different stages of the story, which are only loosely connected by a common background.

This may be an important reason as to why the plot of the poem has been regarded as problematic, and the cause of the impression of its lack of "monumentality" or "sense of unity". One segment begins, takes off, has its climax(es), and is then ended. Then the next one starts anew, with a new beginning and new developments. Here, the spirit of Aristotle's *Poetics* can be evoked in order to understand the critiques. Even if his work precedes that of Quintus' by centuries, the same kind of criticism carried out by the philosopher in his appreciation of Homeric vis-à-vis Cyclic poetry seems pretty much alive in the mind of some critics of the plot of the *Posthomerica*⁷. A famous part of the *Poetics* is worth quoting in order to illustrate the question:

Clearly the story must be constructed as in tragedy, dramatically, round **a single piece of action**, whole and complete in itself, with a beginning, middle and end, so that like a single living organism it may produce its own peculiar

⁷ Addressing the "Cyclic Question", an investigation on the importance of the cyclic poems for the *Posthomerica*, is outside the scope of this paper, although it could yield interesting material about Quintus' plot construction. The poet seems to consciously manipulate the order of some events depicted in the cyclic poems (namely, the arrival of Neoptolemus and Philoctetes) in order to maintain the symmetrical aspect of his plot.

form of pleasure. [...] So in this respect, too, **compared with all other poets Homer may seem**, as we have already said, **divinely inspired** [...]. As it is, he takes **one part of the story only** and uses **many incidents** from other parts, such as the Catalogue of Ships and **other incidents** with which he diversifies his poetry. The others, on the contrary, all write about a single hero or about a single period or about a single action **with a great many parts**, the authors, for example, of the *Cypria* and the *Little Iliad*. (1459a20 - 1459b5, translation by Fyfe, 1932, emphasis added)

ὅτι δεῖ τοὺς μύθους καθάπερ ἐν ταῖς τραγωδίαις συνιστάναι
 δραματικούς καὶ περὶ μίαν πρᾶξιν ὅλην καὶ τελείαν [20]
 ἔχουσιν ἀρχὴν καὶ μέσα καὶ τέλος, ἵν' ὥσπερ ζῶον ἐν ὅλον
 ποιῇ τὴν οἰκείαν ἡδονήν [...]. διὸ ὥσπερ εἵπομεν ἤδη καὶ
 ταύτῃ θεσπέσιος ἂν φανείη Ὅμηρος παρὰ τοὺς ἄλλους
 [...] νῦν δ' ἐν μέρος ἀπολαβὼν ἐπεισοδίοις κέχρηται αὐτῶν
 πολλοῖς, οἷον νεῶν καταλόγῳ καὶ ἄλλοις ἐπεισοδίοις [δὲς]
 διαλαμβάνει τὴν ποίησιν. οἱ δ' ἄλλοι περὶ ἓνα ποιοῦσι
 καὶ περὶ ἓνα χρόνον καὶ μίαν πρᾶξιν πολυμερῇ, οἷον ὁ τὰ
 Κύπρια ποιήσας καὶ τὴν μικρὰν Ἰλιάδα

Such famous praise of the uniformity (“single piece of action”) of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* while criticizing the plots with “a great many parts” of the *Cypria* and *Little Iliad* seems comparable to that of the critics of the *Posthomeric*’s storyline. In this particular point, Aristotle (and the critics) are judging the poems’ merits from a single criterion, and a single point of view, the unity of the central plot. The ancient scholar concedes that Homer can use episodes (“many incidents”) to diversify his narrative, but they are rather momentary departures, which eventually lead back to the same master plot behind each poem – differently to what happens in the poems of the Cycle (and the *Posthomeric*). While the argument is valid and well explained, it seems unfair to deem works with different characteristics as inferior or flawed for that fact alone. Aristotle and the critics of episodic poetry are in their right to feel more pleased when reading works with a central plot, but to disparage other poems

for the lack thereof seems more like a matter of taste and opinion rather than of objective fact.

A whole vast world exists outside of stories with a unified plot that evolve around a single narrative event. One could think of many TV series with diversified plots – *American Horror Story*, for instance, in which every season brings a different plot, eventually with some recurring characters and cast of actors; *Game of Thrones* (both the books and TV series), with different storylines that eventually intertwine; *Friends* – and many other sitcoms for that matter –, in which every episode has a beginning, a middle and an end, but there is also a common background that is developed across different seasons. Examples also abound in other different media, such as books, comics, and so on. Circling back to Ancient Greek, we can think of other episodic genres – such as drama, epyllion and mythography. The list could go on, but these examples should suffice to make a point: it is possible to find several qualities in episodic works, and their merits should not be readily dismissed for the lack of a unified plot. When this episodic characteristic enters epic poetry, it may seem disconcerting because it strays from the models of Homer, but it should not automatically lead to the conclusion that it makes for bad epic.

Aristotle seems to place too strong a verdict that good epic poetry should have a unified plot alone – with eventual episodes here and there –, based solely on the models of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Many of the negative views on the *Posthomeric* seem to follow the same direction. As we have seen, however, a vast reality exists in Ancient Epic outside of the Homeric poems, and maybe these other works, as well as those from other literary genres, are also part of Quintus' stock of inspiration. Again, the title *Posthomeric* may misguide the reader to look for Homer while Homer is not the only one who is there. But as many flaws as Quintus' poem may have, the episodic plot seems like an unfair one to point out, because these negative views are tied to a narrow appreciation of what ancient epic is. Deeming episodic epic automatically bad is the result of a conservative view that takes the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* as the sole role models of great heroic poetry, disparaging poems that have different characteristics.

5 Late Antique Aesthetics

Calum Maciver (2012), inspired by the analysis of late antique Latin poetry by Roberts (1989), notes that the *Posthomeric* is usually approached from the wrong angle, from that of Classical aesthetics, while the taste in Late Antiquity has changed. If Aristotle suggests that the mere succession of different episodes results in inferior poetry, the artistic ideals of Late Antiquity actually embrace such a kind of juxtaposition. Roberts thus writes about the criticism of a previous scholar called Alan Cameron⁸ to the work of Claudian, a poet active during the shift between classical and late antique aesthetics:

His [Cameron's] criticism of the poet's [Claudian's] descriptive purple passages depends on the classical aesthetic of unity of the whole, the proportion of the parts, and the careful articulation of an apparently seamless composition. Late antique poetry is not like this. The seams not only show, they are positively advertised -nonclassical certainly, but not necessarily evidence of deficient technique. These are precisely the qualities the poets aim for. Taste has changed. To appreciate late antique poetry properly, it is necessary to view it on its own terms rather than from the perspective, conscious or not, of classical aesthetics. (ROBERTS, 1989, p. 3)

The quotation involves two arguments: 1) late antique aesthetics is mostly focused on the parts, and not so much on the unity of the whole, a matter he explores in the remainder of his book; 2) this should not necessarily be considered a flaw or degradation in style. Regarding the first point, Roberts brings the very illustrative image of seams to describe the episodic ideals of late antique epic. The sometimes stark transitions between independent episodes are not a mere accident, they are intentional. And they are not seen as a flaw, but as a desirable quality – maybe the Cyclic epics, deemed inferior by Aristotle, would have fared very well in Late Antiquity. In this sense, it seems no wonder that the

⁸ CAMERON, A. Claudian: Poetry and Propaganda at the Court of Honorius. Oxford: Clarendon, 1970, p. 264-265.

Posthomerica embodies their spirit. Whether they were still extant in Quintus' time is a moot point – the Cyclic question, not addressed in this paper –, but the fact is that the multiplicity of events depicted in them would fit perfectly within the aesthetics of Late Antiquity, and, thus, are a fitting material for the poet to revisit.

Regarding the second point in Roberts' remarks, that the aesthetics of Late Antiquity are often seen as decadent, it seems that the *Posthomerica* suffers from the same kind of prejudice of the Latin poems he addresses in his research. When Quintus' poem is compared to its predecessors, it is usually presented as another step in the degrading lineage of epic poetry that succeeds Homer. To exemplify this point, I quote part of an article by Means (1951, p. 338):

we may safely range Quintus well below Homer, more or less over against Apollonius yet more monotonous; and, by the same tokens I am told, he must be superior to that prolix and horrendous dactylomaniac, Nonnus, whose 21,279 lines on Dionysus fail to out-weight the 1,392 lines of the Bacchae of Euripides on somewhat the same topic.

In this passage, the scholar points to, in his view, a diachronic degradation of heroic epic: Homer sits on top, Apollonius comes “well below” him, followed then by Quintus, who is worse, and is in turn followed by the even worse Nonnus. This illustrates a common line of thinking that the further epic poetry moves away from Homer in time, the lesser quality it has. Whatever is different from Homer is generally frowned upon because it does not follow the Homeric role models to the letter.

When it comes to the *Posthomerica*, the deviation from the so-called superior model of plot unity is part of this derogatory movement. I have argued that it seems unfair to judge a poem as inferior for this fact alone, and that episodic works of literature across different media can be great. Now a new layer has been added to the discussion: episodic structures are actually much appreciated in Late Antiquity, and apparently that is what Quintus was aiming for. While that seems like a fitting argument, one that is aptly investigated by Roberts in his book on Latin poetry, and cited by Calum in his *Posthomerica* one, I believe that there is more to the story. In the last part of this article, I wish to argue

that the episodic trend has *always* been part of epic poetry – even Aristotle conceded so –, and while such aspect may be amplified in Quintus’ poem and in late antique aesthetics in general, it has been there since the times of Homer, but is usually played down or overlooked by modern scholars.

6 Episodic Homer

So far I have advocated that we should understand the *Posthomerica* as the things coming after Homer not only in terms of closing the narrative gap between the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, but also as far a style and aesthetics is concerned. There are certainly Homeric elements in Quintus’ poetry, but there are also different ones. So there is some Homer there, but there is also more. Now I wish to turn back to the Homeric presence in the poem, but to explore an angle that is not usually acknowledged as such. In other words, I wish to explore “the dark side of Homer”, so to speak, that is magnified in Quintus’ poem.

Aristotle himself mentions in his *Poetics* that Homer places episodic events around his poems, such as the catalog of ships, to diversify his composition. Both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* certainly have a major underlying theme from beginning to end, but they also bring many independent stories – such as *Iliad* 10 (the night incursion of Odysseus and Diomedes), or *Odyssey* 1-4 (the Telemachy). The (arguably wrong) idea that these events are disconnected from the main plot of each poem has famously led many scholars, the most famous of which are probably the so-called analysts from the 19th century onwards, to try to excise them from the poems. They consider such parts spurious interpolations that do not befit the ingenious unified plot of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, and therefore could only have been subsequently added in by less apt minds to the original, pristine pieces. In their argument, they mention that if those episodes were removed, the poems’ main storylines would remain unaltered, and both of them could exist regardless of their excision. In doing so, they miss several ways in which these episodes are very important for each of the pieces, as narratological analyses have shown.

The analyst view goes against the entire centuries-old tradition that passed down the Homeric works in their current full form with all 24 Books. This shows that scholars from the last recent centuries probably

had more trouble with the episodic parts of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* than everyone else throughout the long way of the text transmission. It seems that the Aristotelic praise of plot unity has been pushed to an extreme by these scholars – who probably overlook or disagree with him that it is fine for the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* to have episodic parts here and there. In this sense, the analysts' attempt to excise the episodic parts of Homer is part of the same movement that disregards the *Posthomeric* because of its multipart plot, one that judges everything that is episodic is intrinsically inferior.

To illustrate the point, let us briefly discuss *Odyssey* 24, a generally puzzling and underappreciated Book (the parallel with the *Posthomeric* is evident in such statement), and also a constant victim of suspicions of interpolation. Book 23 ends with a magnificent *grand finale*, the reunion and extended night of love between Odysseus and Penelope. The protagonist's return is consolidated – he has killed his enemies, reclaimed his palace and his possessions, and has reunited with his son and finally his wife. But after all that, we still have Book 24, and its “awkward” episodic structure: the second *nékuia* (1-204); Odysseus' reunion with Laertes (205-412); the fight against the suitors' relatives (413-548) with an assembly of gods embedded within (472-88). This is thus a Book lacking overall unity, in the sense that it contains subsequent, loosely connected events, which happen more by succession rather than cause and effect, and, therefore, can be called episodic. This is probably part of the reason why this Book is deemed weird or inferior, but it is simply a manifest example of how episodes are actually a constituent of Homeric poetry.

De Jong (2001, p. 565-566) points to how *Odyssey* 24 has been suspected since antiquity, but advocates for the importance of such a Book as a proper and admirable closing chapter for the poem. Her more positive outlook probably has to do with the fact that her primary concern is with the text's narrativity, with the story being told and how it is being told, and not with problems of source, of the text's historicity or authorship, or textual criticism, the classic preoccupations of classicists. Her narratological methodology has guided her in noticing, for example, how the assemblies of Ithacans and gods in Book 24 form a perfect

conclusion of the poem in ring composition, as a counterpart to the same kind of assemblies in Book 1. She also mentions how many characters from the poem and the myth of the Trojan war get a proper curtain call: Odysseus, the ghost of Achilles and Agamemnon, Laertes, Telemachus, Athena, among others. She also compares Zeus' words in 486 ("let them have peace and prosperity in abundance") to the traditional "happily ever after" ending of fairy tales. She views thus *Odyssey* 24 not as a lesser part of the poem or as a spurious interpolation, but as a fitting closing chapter for it.

I believe that the *Posthomerica* suffers, in many ways, from the same kind of prejudice against *Odyssey* 24, and some previous scholars may have missed many of its qualities because of a narrow view of both later poetry ("the further from Homer, the worse") and of episodic poetry. Recent authors have been using narratology to fine results in their investigations on Quintus' epic (MACIVER, 2012; SCHEIJNEN, 2018, for instance), shedding light on interesting aspects that have been overlooked by eyes that were not trained to see them. It is my hope that this article has brought a contribution to this cause.

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