

Alexander Shewan's "Homeric Games at an Ancient St. Andrews"

Alexander Shewan's "Homeric Games at an Ancient St. Andrews, an Epyllion Edited from a Comparatively Modern Papyrus and Shattered by Means of the Higher Criticism" (1911) is one of the more curious documents of classical (meta)philology, a fictitious commentary on a fictitious papyrus, with barbs aimed squarely at real contemporary scholars, scholarship, and commentaries. Putatively a Jebb-esque commentary on a fragment of a hexametrical poem on golfing, with a facing English translation, "Homeric Games" skewers a whole host of scholarly fetishes, including

- 1) A predilection for sweeping ethnographic characterizations (in this case, of the ecstatic race of φιλόγυφοι, 'golf-lovers,' and 'bridge players,' γεφυρισταί, l.3)
- 2) overzealous textual criticism ("it is hard to have to jettison so interesting a description, but the Higher Criticism has to steel its heart against all emotion except spite against the text" (p. 24))
- 3) loopy philological exegesis (on a sand trap's similarities to Hades: "Αιδός τε δόμος πολυδέκτης, πολυδέκτης not in Homer. See *Hym. Cer. 9*. Here, no doubt, 'that engulfs many balls.' Hades had many titles." (p. 75))
- 4) dubiously apt contemporary allusions ("now we can see the real meaning of Homer's ἀντιάνερα; [these Amazons] were suffragettes 'to a man'" (p. 40))
- 5) and, especially, scholarly infighting ("And is the flight of the ball to the clouds a reminiscence of ancient rain-making by the Phosil Medicine-Man Melanippos? Or is it one more instance of King-killing? If so, it will be welcome by Mr Frazer and Mr A. B. Cook, with whom instances do not abound" (pp. 34-35))

Recent work on the classical commentary—especially in the volumes *Commentaries – Kommentare* (ed. Glenn Most, Göttingen, 1999) and *The Classical Commentary: Histories, Practices, Theory* (ed. Roy K. Gibson and Christina S. Kraus, Brill, 2002)—has emphasized the genre's extraordinarily high status and importance within classical studies, and the evolving discourse that Kraus wittily dubs "commentese" (20); Shewan's parody demonstrates that even by 1911, such discourse was ripe for parody. In addition, Shewan's work—besides being a *tour-de-force* of Homeric composition—indicates as well the codification of the commentary *form* into discrete units, including running *lemmata*, *prolegomena*, *scholia*, *apparatus criticus*, and several ridiculous appendices ("Goff or Gowf," "Bridge," "Smoking," and a curse tablet, "ΣΙΔΗΡΕΟΙ ΣΤΙΧΟΙ, 'hard lines on an iron,' with accompanying figure for the interested archaeologists).

In short, Shewan's masterful parody, composed by a well-published Homeric scholar, functions as effective satire because the classical commentary was already ingrained as an essential part of the education of an Oxbridge scholar and thus had a built-in community of philologists both as audience and as targets. The epyllion's extended length (573 lines!) allows the author wide latitude in his choice of topics while generally engaging with the major issues of Homeric studies, particularly the debate between Unitarians and those who posit an *Ur-Ilias* (p. 40). Sadly, this work was published only in a limited run (by James Thin, 'publisher to the university') and thus has not received the attention it so demands, and deserves.