THE PRAISE OF FOLLY and Other Writings

Desiderius Erasmus



SELECTED, TRANSLATED, AND EDITED BY ROBERT M. ADAMS



A NORTON CRITICAL EDITION

Desiderius Erasmus THE PRAISE OF FOLLY AND OTHER WRITINGS

A NEW TRANSLATION WITH CRITICAL COMMENTARY

Selected, translated, and edited by ROBERT M. ADAMS

LATE OF UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA AT LOS ANGELES

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Editor's Preface

As modern curricula divide up the teaching of literature according to the language in which it was written, there isn't much room for a displaced person like Erasmus. He always described himself as a citizen of Rotterdam, but in fact his mother moved there only to conceal the birth of a son whom his father could never acknowledge because he was already in holy orders. Whether Erasmus could ever speak fluent Dutch is in question; he certainly never wrote in that tongue, and never resided in his native city—if it was his native city—any longer than he had to. Before he was out of his teens, his guardians had stuffed him into a monastery, where Latin became as much of a native tongue as he ever had. But Latin was not a language that came naturally to anyone in the fifteenth century. It amounted to a composite tongue, based on the literary Latin of Horace, Virgil, and Cicero, but twisted into new shapes by centuries of theological discussion and dispute, enriched and perhaps vulgarized by its use in the law courts and marketplaces of Europe. Erasmus used it brilliantly and taught others to use it; in the early sixteenth century, before most of the vernacular languages had established themselves as capable of varied literary effects, Erasmus's sort of Latin really was the lingua franca of Europe, his best means of reaching an international audience. But the future lay with the vernacular tongues; and it's been a permanent hobble on Erasmus's reputation that he must be reached, everywhere, through the second-best medium of translation.

His prestige, if irregular, and always more learned than popular, has been persistent. If no country can claim him as a true native son (for he lived in Belgium, Switzerland, Italy, England, and Germany, as well as Holland, and rarely for long in any one place), his real home has always been in the republic of letters. Wherever the values of literary scholarship are prized, Erasmus has found a welcome. No doubt the world holds values deeper than those of literary scholarship, and for periods of time these deeper currents have drowned out the clear, quiet, intelligent voice of the first and greatest humanist. But after almost half a millennium, Erasmus's power of survival has defined itself in its own distinctive way. The keenness of his intelligence, the gaiety of his wit, and the independence of his judgment have not faded with time, and don't seem likely to. That Erasmus can continue to accomplish this in a language completely alien to most of his readers suggests how much more deeply "style" is settled in the mind than a mere knack for verbal arrangement could be.

It would be an idle, artificial exercise to arrange the works of Erasmus in some formal, predetermined scheme, even something as arbitrary as a chronological sequence. He did not write his books in any clearly developing order, but settled on topics as they suggested themselves or were suggested to him by bishops, potentates, or friends. He never hesitated to repeat himself, or to work his convictions about one matter into his arguments about another. He was, with kaleidoscopic, quick-change virtuosity, now a scholar, now a journalist, now a moral instructor, now a political adviser, now a malicious satirist, now a devoted friend and (sometimes simultaneously) a reptilian enemy—but always and everywhere an entertainer. To read through the entire body of his writings from beginning to end would be a fearful chore; but from selected facets of his different works the imaginative reader can assemble a vivid picture of the man in his full, fallible, but often inspiring humanity. That is the purpose of this collection. But, not wishing to scorn formal arrangements entirely, I include on pp. 339-40 a chronology of Erasmus's life, which enables the various writings of this collection, as well as numerous others and some related historical events, to be placed in the context of the author's biography.

The illustrations peppered through the *Praise of Folly* text are very early work done by Hans Holbein the younger shortly after his arrival at Basle in 1515. Holbein went on to become a polished painter of important portraits in the courts of Europe; but his little sketches for *Folly* are in a more popular vein. In their very crudeness, they capture the rowdy

jocosity of Erasmus's free-spirited carnivalesque caper.

The critiques of Erasmus which follow his writings were chosen not only for their own sake and as illuminations of Erasmus, but to introduce the reader to some major currents of modern thought about this still-vital figure. Though many times written off as a dead letter, neither Erasmus nor his creed of humanism has succumbed over the centuries to dusty obsolescence. The past is most exciting to investigate as it reveals not only its authentic pastness (in which we too will all too shortly participate) but imaginative resources for dealing with problems vital to us that in the past took very different forms. For the thoughtful reader this book of selections, critical as well as textual, may serve as the start of many further intellectual explorations; and I hope it will do so.

ROBERT M. ADAMS

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Selections from THE WRITINGS

The Praise of Folly

Author's Preface

Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam to his friend Thomas More¹ Greetings

Recently when I was on my way from Italy to England, instead of wasting all the time I had to spend on horseback in idle chatter and empty gossip, I tried occasionally to think over some of the things we have studied together, and to call to mind the conversation of my most learned and agreeable friends from whom I was then separated. Among those friends, you, my dear More, were the first whose name occurred to me, since I find just as much pleasure in thinking of you when we are apart as I do in your company when we are together. And, upon my soul, nothing in life has ever brought me more pleasure than your friendship. Well, since I felt I must be doing something, and the circumstances were hardly proper for serious study, I thought I might occupy myself with the praise of folly. What put such a notion in my mind? you may ask. My first hint came from your family name of More, which is just as close to Moria, the Greek word for folly, as you are remote from the thing itself. In fact, everyone agrees that you're as far removed from it as possible. Besides, I had a suspicion that this joke would be agreeable to you because you particularly enjoy jests of this sort—that is, if I don't flatter myself, jests seasoned with a touch of learning and a dash of wit. For that matter, you enjoy playing the role of Democritus in all the common business of life.² Though as a result of your searching and original mind you're bound to hold opinions very different from those of common men, yet by virtue of your warm and sincere manner you

and state. Their first meeting was in 1499, when Erasmus visited England at the invitation of a former pupil, Lord Mountjoy, whom he had known in Paris; it was therefore inevitable that when Erasmus came north again in 1509, he should stay with More.

^{1.} The son of a London judge and a practicing attorney himself, More in 1510 was about thirty-three years old, thus some ten years younger than Erasmus. In sharp contrast to his older friend, who remained celibate all his life, More had committed himself to a secular career and had married; he was already the father of three children. Intellectually and socially, More and Erasmus were immediately and deeply sympathetic. Both were scholars in the humanist tradition with a special interest in Greek, both were witty ironists, both recognized the need for liberal reforms in church

^{2.} Though primarily significant as a physicist and mathematician, Democritus (of the fifth century B.C.) was popularly known as the "laughing philosopher" in contrast to Heraclitus, the "weeping philosopher."

can get along with all sorts of people at any time of day, ³ and actually enjoy doing so. Will you then accept this little declamationlet of mine as the keepsake of a friend, and take it under your protection? For now that it is dedicated to you, it is properly yours, not mine. I don't doubt that there will be busybodies to condemn the book, some saying that it's composed of trifles too silly to befit a theologian's dignity, others declaring that it's too sharp of tooth ⁴ to accord with the modest behavior of a Christian—they will thunder out comparisons with the Old Comedy and the satires of Lucian, ⁵ they will say I snap and slash at everyone like a mad dog.

Well, will the people who are offended by the frivolity of the argument and the absurdity of the jokes kindly reflect that I'm not setting the style here? The same thing has been done before, again and again, by famous authors of the past. It was centuries ago that Homer toyed with his "War Between the Frogs and the Mice," Virgil with his "Gnat" and his "Garlic Salad," Ovid with his "Nut." Polycrates wrote in praise of Busiris the tyrant, and Isocrates, though no friend to Polycrates, did the same thing; Glaucon spoke up for injustice. Favorinus praised Thersites and the quartan ague, Synesius had words to say in favor of baldness, and Lucian wrote panegyrics on a fly and a parasite. Seneca ridiculed Claudius in his *Pumpkinification*, Plutarch wrote a dialogue in which Ulysses disputed with a hog, Gryllus, both Lucian and Apuleius wrote about life as seen by an ass, and some anonymous author wrote the last will and testament of a hog named Grunnius Corocotta, of which Saint Jerome preserved a recollection.

If it makes them any happier, let the complainers imagine that I spent my travel-time playing chess or riding on a hobby-horse. Every other profession is entitled to a bit of leisure—what's so terrible if scholars take a little time off for play, especially if their foolery leads to something slightly more serious? Some jokes can be managed in such a way that a

- 3. The Latin is omnium horarum hominem agere, and it is adapted from the "Life of Tiberius" (42) by Suetonius. Its meaning there is distinctly disreputable; it implies a man who can drink night and day. Erasmus applies it with a very different meaning to More, and a man named Whittinton translated it in 1520 as "a man for all seasons"—hence the title of a popular play by Robert Bolt (1966) where the implications are not only laudatory but saintly.
- 4. More is concerned that his jest not be thought excessively cynical in spirit; the cynical philosophers got their name from the Greek word for dog, kune. The talk about sharp teeth and snapping at people all plays on the basic metaphor of a vicious dog.
- 5. Old Comedy (as in Aristophanes) attacked people by name; New Comedy (as in Menander) represented general types. Erasmus's Praise of Folly could not possibly be compared with Old Comedy; but it does come very close to the dialogues of Lucian, known as "the scoffer," and sometimes as "the atheist." By joining an absurd charge with one

that might have some substance, Erasmus is able to dismiss them both.

- 6. Among his predecessors Erasmus mingles examples of the mock-epic with those of the mock-panegyric. The examples attributed to Homer, Virgil, and Ovid were in fact by later parodists of the great poets. Busiris was a semimythical tyrant (i.e., Pharaoh) of Egypt, Isocrates the greatest Greek orator of his day. Claucon was the brother of Plato, who in Republic 2 makes him speak for injustice in order to set up Socrates' rebuttal.
- 7. Thersites was the ugliest and least heroic of all the Greeks at Troy; Aulus Gellius (Noctes Atticae 17.12.2) tells how Favorinus wrote mock-orations praising both Thersites and the quartan fever, which we now call malaria. Seneca's piece mocking the deification of Claudius is really quite funny. The fantasies of Plutarch, Lucian, and Apuleius, all involving metamorphosis, have only this in common with the other works cited, that they are written in a "low" comic style. The will of Grunnius Corocotta the swine is a real oddity of the subliterature, a third-century joke for school children.

reader who isn't altogether thick of nose can profit by them—more, perhaps, than from the pompous formal arguments of certain people we know. I have in mind some paltry fellow who patches up an oration in praise of rhetoric or philosophy, or another supple rascal who's set on flattering his prince, or some agitator who wants to rouse up everyone to go off and fight the Turk. There are fools who pretend to predict the future and others who strain to settle some subtle and difficult point that doesn't matter a fraction of a trifle either way. Just as it's the height of triviality to treat serious matters in a trivial way, so there's nothing more delightful than finding that some trifles have been managed so that they turn out far from trivial. About my own performance it's not for me to judge; but unless I'm completely misled by 'self-love,' my praise of folly hasn't been performed altogether foolishly.

Now let me answer those cavillers who object to what they call biting satire. Good wits have always been allowed the liberty to exercise their high spirits on the common life of men, and without rebuke, as long as their sport doesn't become savagery. That's why I'm so impressed by the delicacy of modern ears which can scarcely endure anything but formal titles of honor. You can even find some religious men so topsy-turvy in their values that they listen more complacently to real blasphemies against Christ than to the mildest of jokes about the pope or the local prince, especially if the joke might 'touch them in the pocketbook.' But if someone attacks the vices of human kind without mentioning any individual by name, is he harming people or rather teaching them, admonishing them? Consider in addition on how many scores I attack my own self. Besides, when men of every different sort are censured, it's clear that vice in general is the target, not a particular person. So if anyone complains that he's been harmed, it's either his conscience that accuses him or his guilt. Saint Jerome wrote in this vein much more freely and bitterly, sometimes not even suppressing personal names. 8 I have not only avoided naming people, but have softened my style so that any intelligent reader will understand my intention was to divert, not to insult. Unlike Iuvenal, I made no effort to rake in the sewer of hidden crimes; 9 my aim was to ridicule absurdities, not to catalogue sins. And if there's someone who can't be calmed by these reflections, let him recall that it's a kind of compliment to be attacked by Folly; when I chose her as my spokesperson, I was bound to observe the proprieties of her character. But why do I say all these things to you, who are so skilled an advocate that even in causes that aren't the best, you can put up the best defence? Farewell, most learned More, and defend your Folly faithfully. From the country, June 9, 1510.1

impossible, since Erasmus could not have described his sojourn in More's house before he arrived there in the second half of 1509. The date may be an accident, a joke, or a deliberate misstatement; but if the preface was written under the circumstances it describes, 1510 is the first possible date. Nobody knows where "in the country" was.

^{8.} Saint Jerome, most erudite and least saintly of the early church fathers, was noted, if not always admired, for his strident polemical tone.

Juvenal, of the first century A.D., bore the reputation of a harsh and biting satirist of ancient Rome, by contrast with his predecessor Horace, who wrote more light and amusing verses.

^{1.} Early editions give the date as 1508, which is

The Praise of Folly

FOLLY SPEAKS: 1

However people commonly talk about me—and I know perfectly well what a bad name folly has, even among the biggest fools—I'm the one, the one and only, let me tell you, who have the power to bring joy both to gods and to men; in proof of which, you can see for yourselves that as soon as I stood up to speak in this crowded hall, all your faces lit up with a sudden and quite unaccustomed hilarity, your brows cleared, and you expanded in such smiles, chuckles, and applause that I suddenly felt myself in the presence of so many Homeric divinities well laced with nectar, and nepenthe too—whereas before you sat solemn and grum-



[Folly Presents Herself]

1. Note on the annotations: For some years before the writing of Folly (1509), Erasmus had been compiling, augmenting, and publishing in successive editions (1500 and 1508) a collection of adages or pithy sayings, mostly from classical sources. He had over three thousand of them, and scattered them through The Praise of Folly with a liberal hand. I have indicated their presence, and the presence of certain other catchwords not taken directly from the Adages, by single quotation marks in the text. But it has not seemed worth the clutter to trace every verbal tag down to its source, or more

frequently, its sources. More scholarly editions, like that of Professor Clarence Miller (Yale, 1979) can be consulted if specific details are needed.

With regard to biblical citations, Erasmus quotes largely from memory, and by allusion to the Latin Vulgate, which differs frequently both in verbal details and in its numbering of verses from most modern Bibles. To make things easier for the modern student, I have modified most quotations and some citations to conform to the King James version. Obviously the anachronism is gross; I hope the added convenience justifies it.

faced as if you had just been let out of Trophonius's cave.² But as it happens when the sun first shows his radiant golden face over the land, or when the fresh south wind wafts a breath of spring after a bitter winter so that all things put on a new face and a fresh color, and youth itself seems to return—so, when you laid eyes on me, you were quite transfigured. And thus what various mighty orators could hardly accomplish with their long and laborious speechifying—that is, to dispel the gloomy shadows of the soul—I brought about instantly just by my appearance.

As for why I come forth today in this unusual costume, you will soon learn if you'll just lend me your ears—not those, to be sure, that you bend toward preachers of the holy word, but the kind that you commonly bring to street-performers, comedians, and buffoons, the style of ears that my friend Midas once displayed to the god Pan.³ For it's now my pleasure to act the sophist for a while in your company—not the sort whose daily bread is cramming the minds of schoolboys with painful trivialities or who teach the tricks of quibbling with more than female



[Midas with Ears]

^{2.} Nectar, nepenthe, and (not mentioned here) ambrosia are food and drink for the classical gods. After descending into the legendary cave of Trophonius in search of truth, an ancient Greek traditionally emerged with a bad case of the blues.

^{3.} Because he had the bad taste to prefer the pipe music of the rural goat-god Pan to the majestic melodies of the solar deity Apollo, King Midas (unfortunate as well in the matter of his "golden touch") was fitted with ass's ears.

stubbornness—rather I want to imitate those men of old who in order to avoid the odious designation of "Sages" (Sophi, wise men) preferred to be known as "Sophists." Their function was to crown with highest praises the gods and the noblest of men. Praises you shall hear, therefore, but not of Hercules or Solon, 5 but my own praise of myself, that is, of Folly. Nor do I care a rap for those wise fellows who say it's the height of stupidity and insolence for a person to praise himself. Let it be as stupid as they like, they will have to admit it's in my character. Indeed, what's more appropriate than for Folly to sing her own praises, and, as they say, "blow her own horn"? Who can explain me better than I can myself unless, perhaps, someone who knows me better than I do? Actually, I think what I am doing here is more decent than what the common ruck of pundits and patricians do when, under cover of a certain perverse mock-modesty, they hire some servile rhetorician or limber-tongued poet, and bribe him literally to pour forth their praises, praises that are nothing but flat-out lies. While the recipient of all this adulation spreads his borrowed plumes and raises his crest aloft like a peacock, the barefaced orator expatiates, comparing his good-for-nothing subject to some god or other, and proposing him as the absolute model of all the virtues. especially those of which they both know he doesn't possess 'a single grain.' Still, the speaker doesn't hesitate to deck his crow in borrowed plumes, to 'whitewash his Ethiopian,' or finally to 'puff up his gnat to the size of an elephant.' In any case, I'm following the advice of that trite old proverb that says a man is entitled to praise himself when there's nobody else to do it.6

And here let me pause a moment to wonder at the ingratitude—or is it, perhaps, the laziness?—of mankind, since of all those who have followed in my path and partaken of my generosity, not one over all these centuries has undertaken to speak up in public praise of folly. Yet there was no lack of people to burn the midnight oil and rack their brains composing elaborate disquisitions in praise of Busiris and Phalaris, of quartan agues, flies, baldness, and other misfortunes of that sort. From me you can expect only an extempore and unlabored—but for that reason a more truthful—oration. I know you won't suppose I made it up to show off my wit, as the common herd of orators do. For, as you well know, after they've been sitting on a speech for thirty years or so—and sometimes it's not even their own work—they will tell you it's a mere trifle, tossed off in the last three days, not written down at all, just dictated. But I've always preferred just to say 'whatever pops into my head.'

tease a reader with the resemblance between Erasmus and his puppet.

^{4.} Sophists, who taught the way to make the worse appear the better cause, had an ill repute as pseudowise men; but from Folly's point of view, they are better every way than the truly wise.

^{5.} Hercules as demigod and Solon as one of the earliest and best legislators would be worthy subjects of true encomia.

^{6.} Folly scatters proverbs and proverbial expressions through her discourse in the same way that she sprinkles scraps of Greek; both are devices to

^{7.} Mock-encomia on these and similar topics, many written in classical times, no doubt had something to do with suggesting to Erasmus a mock-praise of Folly. Busins was another name for the Egyptian pharaoh, and Phalaris, who roasted his victims alive in a brazen bull, was the subject of a mock-encomium by Lucian.

But now don't let anyone expect that, like the common lot of speech-makers, I'm going to begin with a definition and then go on to divide up my topic—that least of all. Either procedure would be inappropriate; circumscribing a power whose genius extends everywhere is as absurd as dividing up a force in whose service all the orders of being agree together. Besides, what's the point of setting before you by verbal definition what can only be the copy or shadow of me, when you have me, in person, here present before you? I am, as you can plainly see, that true and proper 'giver of divine gifts' whom the Latins know as STULTITIA and the Greeks as MORIA.

Of course there was no real need for me to tell you this, as if it wasn't written large across my features and in my very bearing who I am. A single good look would be enough to convince anyone who had supposed I might be Minerva or the goddess Sophia, 8 even without hearing me talk, though speech is the least deceptive mirror of the mind. I use no makeup. I don't wear one expression on my face and hide another in my heart. I'm always exactly like myself, so that even those who most aspire to the name and reputation of wisdom cannot hide my presence even though they strut about 'like apes in scarlet robes or asses in lions' skins.' However carefully they disguise themselves, somehow those protruding asses' ears will give away the Midas in them. 9 An ungrateful lot of men, these rascals, who though they're entirely of my faction, yet in public are so ashamed of my proper name that they hurl it against others as a term of ultimate insult. Don't you think we could best call these people, who are actually superfools but want to look like wise men. by the title of 'foolosophers'?1

For in this respect too I've thought best to imitate the rhetoricians of our day who consider themselves as good as gods if like horse-leeches they can seem to have two tongues; in their view it's a mighty accomplishment to work a few Greek vocables into the texture of their Latinity, like chips stuck in a mosaic, whether they're appropriate or not.² Then if they still don't have enough foreign terms, they dig out of their moldy old manuscripts four or five obsolete expressions with which to thicken the darkness of the listener's mind. If anybody understands, he's impressed with his own erudition; those who don't understand are impressed even more. We fools have a particular trick of liking best whatever comes to us from farthest away. But if they are a little more pretentious than the rest, they will smile wisely and applaud, 'waggling their ears' in true asslike fashion so that everybody else can see that they understand. 'And so much for that.' ³

^{8.} Sophia: wisdom (Gr.). Minerva (known to the Greeks as Athene) was Olympic goddess of intelligence.

^{9.} See above, p. 7, n. 3.

^{1.} Sir Thomas Chaloner in 1549 first found this fine equivalent for *morosophos*, an inversion of which is the common word *sophomore*, a wise fool.

^{2.} In making fun of Greek phrases, Folly takes care to use a lot of them. Greek was not just a flashy

cultural possession in Erasmus's day, but a highly prized key to the interpretation of the New Testament

Two Greek tags terminate the attack on Greek tags. For all the snowstorm of Greek snippets, it's worth knowing that Erasmus, when alluding to the text of Plato, consulted the Latin trot of Marsilio Ficino.

Now let me get back to my main point. You know my proper name. then, you gentlemen most—let's see, what epithet should I apply to you?—gentlemen most asinine. For what more fitting and forthright title could the goddess Folly use to rally her followers? But since not many people know the stock from which I spring, with the help of the Muses I will now try to set the matter straight. My father was not Chaos. nor Orcus, nor Saturn, nor Iapetos, nor any one of that set of obsolete and moth-eaten deities. Rather, he was Plutus himself, god of riches, who, in spite of what Hesiod and Homer say, and in spite of Jove himself, was 'father of gods and men.' At the mere nod of his head, all institutions both sacred and profane are turned upside down—so it always was and is nowadays. His decision controls wars, truces, conquests, projects, programs, legal decisions, marriage contracts, political alliances, international treaties, edicts, the arts, matters serious and silly-my breath is giving out—in short, all the public and private business of mortal men is under his control. Without his help the entire populace of poetic divinities—or let me put it more strongly—even those twelve loftiest gods who live atop Olympus would either not exist at all or would live in meager retirement and 'eat in the kitchen.' 5 If anyone has Plutus for an enemy, not even Pallas Athene will be able to help him; and, on the other hand, if Plutus favors him, he can tell Jove himself, thunderbolt and all, to go hang. "I'm proud to be the child of such a father." And he did not give birth to me out of his brain, as Jupiter did with that sullen sourpuss Pallas, but begot me on Neotes [Youth], the most beautiful of all the nymphs and the lustiest as well. What's more, they weren't cramped into the dreary bonds of matrimony, such as produced that limping blacksmith, 7 but in a manner more agreeable by far, "entwined in ardent love," as our Homer likes to say. But don't get the wrong impression, the Plutus who begot me was not that decrepit person who appears in Aristophanes, half-blind and completely senile. 8 but a young man flushed with youth, and not just with youth but with several draughts of nectar that he had drunk off at a recent banquet of the gods, in goodly quantities and quite unmixed. If you want to know where I was born since nowadays people think it's a major point in making up your pedigree to know where you uttered your first infant mews and squalls well, I was not born on wandering Delos or rocked on the bosom of the restless ocean nor yet raised in any hollow-resounding caves, 9 but rather I was born on the Fortunate Isles, where all things grow 'unsown and uncultivated.' In that part of the world nobody works, grows old, or

offspring of Juno and Jupiter, not the most congenial of couples.

^{4.} Traditional progenitors of the pagan gods were Chaos, Orcus (or Pluto), and Saturn (or Cronos); Iapetos was a Titan who begot sundry giants, and Plutus is the money-god. Hesiod wrote a very early poem on the genealogy of the gods, the *Theogony*.

^{5.} Satirists like Lucian had made the point that without burnt offerings from humans, the gods would have only lean fare.

^{6.} The phrase is Homeric. Pallas Athene is goddess of wisdom.

^{7.} Lame Vulcan was the legitimate but deformed

^{8.} Probably the last of Aristophanes' eleven surviving plays, *Plutus* puts on stage a very decrepit deity.

Apollo and Diana were born on Delos, Venus from the ocean itself, and Jove was reared in a cave on Mount Ida in Crete. The Fortunate Isles, though a very old concept (mentioned by Hesiod and Pindar), are not Homeric.