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ABSTRACT FOR FIEC 2009

PREFERRED PANEL: **LITERATURE OF KNOWLEDGE**

**'The Poet Teaches Us': How to Read Homer as a Didactic Writer**

(20 mins.)

A significant part of the ancient reception of Homer was to consider his poetry to be the fount of various kinds of knowledge, ranging from skills and crafts (like fishing and farming) to higher learning (such as arithmetics or geography), to politics, religion, and especially ethics. In spite of all criticism, first and foremost on moral grounds, Homer's poetry was frequently attributed the status of an 'encyclopaedia'. But how was this claim put into practice, that is: by what means was it possible to 'convert' stories into didactic texts?

The purpose of this paper is to analyse the specific reading-strategies that enabled the utilisation of Homer's poetry as a source of knowledge. Two major objectives can be distinguished. The first, in response to the criticism guided by moral concerns, is to mitigate those effects of Homer's poetry that were considered to be 'harmful'; strategies intended to counter-act these undesired effects were especially proposed by Plutarch (*De audiendis poetis*). The paper will address these strategies; greater emphasis, however, will be on the second objective, that of finding 'useful' elements in Homer's poetry. Several strategies are applied. One, providing the basis for all interpretation of Homer as source of knowledge, is to point out that Homer was the first to have knowledge of a certain subject; the treatise *De Homero* is representative of this strategy. Another one is that of selecting, i.e. abandoning the narrative context altogether and focusing on parts of the poems that (supposedly) contribute to various areas of knowledge. The most interesting one, however, is that of superimposing traits on Homer that are typical of didactic poetry and wisdom literature. Its application in the context of a continuous reading of Homer as provided by the scholia will form the final, and most extensive, part of the paper.