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Assignment 6

Discuss the role of the Homeric epics in education in classical Greece.

In this essay I will discuss, in part, the education system of classical Greece. I will consider certain aspects such as who received an education, what that education may have consisted of, and in particular, the role that the Homeric epics played within that education. The essay will also consider the roles the educated would have been expected to partake in after their education and how that reflects the use of the skills that they were taught.

The main role of the educator in classical Greece was that of imparting of morals. The development of a character that was, ultimately, to be of benefit to their society, and their deme¹. The initial education of young children would have been to learn the Greek language. This would have been taught by a *paidagogos*, a chosen slave of the particular child's household².

Those who had a 'formal' further education, on from that of learning Greek, would have been exclusively males from wealthy families. That is not to say that poorer members of society did not have an education, though, their education would have consisted of knowledge and life-skills being passed down from their elders³. The formal education would have consisted of many aspects such as reading, writing, music, rhetoric, philosophy, history and gymnastics⁴. It must be noted, education systems would have differed across classical Greece. For example, that system already described maybe a particularly Athenian example, where as a Spartan education, essentially state sponsored, relied mainly on the instruction of physical fitness, the distilling of an obedience of the law and the mechanics of warfare. This was geared toward moving those who had completed their education into the military⁵. That said, the Homeric epics would have played their part⁶. We can also see from this evidence that however the system was implemented the education of its citizens was considered of great importance throughout Greece.

The use of such stories as the Homeric epics would have been a key part of this education and within the epics there were many educational tools⁷. From the Homeric epics students would have learned the art of poetics and rhetoric, there would have been lyric aspects to added to that of their most important role, the moralistic aspects. With this said, the Homeric epics value to the education of Ancient Greece, and also their cultural significance to the Ancient Greek society, cannot be overestimated.

¹ Thu. Hist. 2. XXXIX

² Christes, 2006, 'Paidagogos', Brill's New Pauly

³ Christes, 2006, 'Education', Brill's New Pauly

⁴ Saunders, 2004, Plato 'Laws', p.XXVI

⁵ Christes, 2006, 'Education', Brill's New Pauly

⁶ Pl. Rep. 606e

⁷ Xen. Sym. 3. 5.

Plato sets out in 'Laws' a proposed, 'ideal', educational system of a mythical state, Magnesia. Within this work a great deal of importance is stressed on the method of teaching, and the learning, of this proposed state's laws. Within the utopia of Magnesia, as with the Athenian education system, a great deal of importance rests on imparting a decent moral grounding⁸. Morals such as virtue and courage being the basis to creating good citizens. A good citizen would be willing to lay down their lives for the protection and the furtherment of the states in which they reside⁹. With this said, perhaps, another factor the Iliad and the Odyssey were used in real-world ancient Greece was not only because of the educational merits already explored, but also because of the heroic aspects within the epics. There is a glut of heroic episodes in both stories that could be used upon the young impressionable minds of ancient Greece, eager themselves to win the favour of the gods and lasting fame. This promotion of bravery would have been acknowledged by, and deemed necessary by, the elder elite of Ancient Greek society to be important for the youth to buy into, to ensure the survival of the way of life/society that had been created thus far. Without the creation of Law, and the application of the Law, the proposed society would breakdown, this stresses that the correct education was vital to the societies of Ancient Greece¹⁰.

The repetition of learning and the method in which students learnt was key, recitation would not only enable a student to learn their history (mythical or otherwise) but would have been especially useful in the aiding the skills of rhetoric¹¹. These skills would have assisted the student greatly as a key aspect of citizenship would have consisted of roles within the courts or before the courts, and in the assembly where the giving of speeches, correct in form and language, were held in high regard¹². Speeches and rhetoric are key aspects in both the Iliad and the Odyssey and certain parts of each of the stories would have no doubt been used as learning aids in the writing and giving of such speeches¹³.

There is a wealth of evidence to suggest that the Homeric epics were cemented into the minds of the formally educated of classical Greece. Not least, in a modern sense, the fact that the works of both the Iliad and the Odyssey survive in written form today having been translated into a multitude of modern languages, originally, having been originally passed on orally as was the tradition, is proof in itself of the importance of the works in Ancient Greece. Their regular use of the two epics in education aided in preparing the youths of a particular deme for their future roles in society¹⁴. On another note, undoubtedly part of the reason the Homeric epics survive today is down to the use of the epics in the education of the elite of classical Greece.

Word count 981

⁸ Thu. Hist. 2. XXXIX

⁹ Saunders, 2004, Plato 'The Laws', p. XXXV

¹⁰ Saunders, 2004, Plato 'The Laws', p. XXXVI-XXXVIII

¹¹ Plu. Mor. 2a-2b

¹² Plu. Mor. 6c-6d

¹³ Hom. Il. XIX. 20-40

¹⁴ Latacz and Pressler, 2006, 'Homerus' Brill's New Pauly

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