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S.E. Bassett and the Pragmatics of Homeric Poetry

Samuel Eliot Bassett (1873-1936) was among the twentieth century's most prolific and insightful contributors to Homeric scholarship. Although he received significant recognition in his lifetime, including invitation to deliver the Sather Lectures in 1937, after his death Bassett's legacy as a Homerist lay largely unclaimed. As a professor at the University of Vermont from 1905 to his death in 1936 he trained no Ph.D. students to carry on his work, and his sole book, the posthumously published Sather lectures which he completed but could not present, went out of print after its appearance in 1938. Yet quite unexpectedly, *The Poetry of Homer* and Bassett's many articles began to influence Homeric scholarship in the mid-60s, with rapid acceleration since the mid-80s, as evinced by acknowledgements in the work of many scholars. Bassett's Homeric scholarship was verifiably "ahead of its time" and its methodology and further potential deserve reexamination.

Bassett's approach to Homeric poetry derives from the rhetorical criticism transmitted in the bT scholia to the *Iliad* and in ancient writers such as Aristotle and Longinus. For Bassett the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were to be prized and studied first and foremost for the powerful emotional effects that they stirred in audiences and readers. A methodical philologist, he investigated the "spell" of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* in a wide range of aspects and with impressive technical rigor. In *The Poetry of Homer*, his culminating publication, Bassett bequeathed to Homeric scholarship original analyses of--to mention a mere sampling of topics--the Homeric narrator's presentation of the story, his techniques of evoking character through direct speech and other means, how Homeric speeches and passages of description are organized into scenes, and how the narrator cues emotional response to the story by means of similes and other interventions.

Bassett's work on the rhetoric of Homeric poetry anticipates many of the concerns and solutions found in current research on the pragmatics of discourse. His pages include numerous insights into matters such as "information management," "intonation units," continuity, salience, word-order, and vividness, although without the terminology now in use. Herein lies the momentum of his current and future influence in Homeric studies.