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Homer. Blackwell Introductions to the Classical World [book review]

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Barry B. Powell, *Homer. Blackwell Introductions to the Classical World*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004. Pp. 176. ISBN 0-631-23386-5. \$24.95 (pb).

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Word count: 1967 words

Powell's *Homer* is the first entry in Blackwell's welcome new series, *Introductions to the Classical World*.¹ In keeping with the goal of the series, P. presents a concise introduction that seeks to answer the question "what do we really know about Homer?" (p. viii). P. defines his audience as those who have read the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and wish to consider further the literary and historical aspects of the poems. Although P. takes care to make it accessible to the curious non-academic, the book will likely be of greatest interest to advanced undergraduate and beginning graduate students. This is a valuable introduction to Homeric scholarship and provides a useful summary and comparative analysis of the two epics.

Observing that "all things pertaining to Homer can be argued or are argued by someone somewhere," P. makes clear that he does not intend to be paralyzed by constantly reciting alternative theories and viewpoints.² Instead, when discussing scholarship and the poems, he focuses on "superior thinkers about Homer, whom [...] most Homericists take to be reasonable" and "does not hesitate to present conclusions that [he has] reached after decades of reflection" (p. viii). As a result, some of P.'s comments may strike the specialist as overly simplistic or idiosyncratic. In a survey on an author such as Homer, however, a selective presentation is inevitable. While scholars will undoubtedly find many minor points in this work that are intriguing or disagreeable, P. admirably wrestles an almost impossible amount of material into a coherent presentation for his target audience.

P. divides his book into three sections. Part I, "Background," contains three chapters that investigate different approaches to the Homeric texts: "The Philologist's Homer" (ch.1), "The Historian's Homer" (ch.2), and "The Reader's Homer" (ch.3). Part II, "The Poems," consists of a running summary and commentary on the *Iliad* (ch. 4) and *Odyssey* (ch. 5), which highlight and elaborate the themes addressed in Part I, and a "Conclusion and Summary" (ch. 6). Finally, P. includes a lengthy and useful section on "Further Reading" (p. 164-72).

P.'s brief introduction explains why he has limited the scope of the book to the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* and asserts his belief that the discussion of "Homer" must begin with the texts. P. will return to this point -- that the Homeric text is a physical thing created by a dictating poet --

throughout the book. As is appropriate for a survey, P. mentions that the idea of a historical Homer writing both poems is debated but makes his position clear from the outset, stating, "by 'Homer' and 'Homer's poems' I mean in this book the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* attributed to Homer from the earliest times" (p. xv).

Chapter 1, the longest in Part I, examines how philologists have sought to unravel "what that text first looked like, how it read" (p. xv). In rehearsing the major stages of the Homeric Question -- antiquity, F.A. Wolf, the Analytic school, Oral-formulaic theory, Neo-analysis -- P. lucidly introduces the non-specialist to manuscripts, scholia, boustrophedon, Homeridae, vulgate, epithet, formulae, guslars, and other technical terminology related to the study of Homer. Noting the small variations in papyri, P. rejects the possibility of different redactions of the poems and believes that the immense length of the works was facilitated by the process of dictating the poems to an amanuensis.³ This chapter bears the mark of P.'s previous work on the Greek alphabet, and several pages are devoted to the nature of writing and how and why early Greek script differed from its West Semitic predecessors. This may prove a little off the beaten path for the non-academic reader, but it does serve to reinforce one of P.'s major themes, the influence of the Near East on the Homeric poems. P. places the creation of the texts firmly in the eighth century BC and, pointing to historical circumstances, favors a Euboean Homer. All in all, this chapter is a clear exposition of the technical issues of the Homeric text and the development of Homeric scholarship.

Chapter 2 investigates Homer's relationship with the Bronze Age, the classical polis, colonization, art, the Near East, and religion. Although supplemental information from the archaeological record occasionally appears, P. approaches the question of Homer's world and the world about which Homer wrote almost exclusively through the text of the poems. His focus on the Homeric text and what it reveals about "what Greeks in the eighth century BC thought about the world and about themselves" (p. 50) follows naturally from his belief that "we can never get real 'history' out of the poems" (p. 50). Thus, comparatively little is said about the historical Troy, and the recent debate over the nature of the ancient city is omitted entirely. P. repeatedly looks to the Near East to explain such phenomena as the epics' trivial gods and many of the poem's plot elements. P. carefully directs his writing at the non-specialist, although some terminology occasionally slips through without comment (e.g. the reference in the chapter's summary to the Dorian invasion).

In Chapter 3, the shortest chapter of Part I, P. discusses "the stories that everyone loves and loves to talk about, swept along in the trance of song" (p. xvi). P. begins by explaining the differences between a modern reading audience and the ancient audience, who experienced the works aurally. His discussion of Homeric style examines the function of epithets and Homer's interest in "leisurely" delaying pre-ordained outcomes rather than in cultivating suspense. Throughout this work, P. employs a conservative reading of the poems without an overt theoretical or ideological program. At times, however, P.'s interpretation is perhaps too restrictive. For example, in his analysis of the link between simile and narrative, P. maintains that the simile of the ravening lion (Il. 20.164-75) only elaborates Achilles's ferocity, since "Achilles has not been wounded (the lion has) and Achilles has not been at first indifferent, then angry towards the enemy" (p. 56); yet, the simile seems related in all of its points to the situation it describes: Achilles was indifferent to the Trojan attack until, wounded by Patroclus's death, he

returned to battle. Nevertheless, P.'s cautious and balanced assessment of the epics befits the introductory nature of his work. Finally, P. addresses the plot of the poems, which he sees as having tripartite structure, and credits Homer with the invention of the modern conception of plot.

In Part II, "The Poems," P. provides a running summary of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Dividing the poems into sections that more or less conform to the traditional book divisions (e.g. his *Iliad* has 27 sections), he comments "on issues that have attracted the attention of literary historians" (p. 61). P.'s commentary is always interesting, sometimes provocative, (e.g. the *Doloneia* is authentic and "a splendid piece of work" (p. 87)), but never unfounded. P. repeatedly comments on the humorous elements of the *Iliad* (e.g. "false dream" in Book 2 is "meant to spark laughter;" the dual in Book 3 is "ludicrous slapstick"; P. sees most scenes involving female gods as comic) and discusses them in relation to his conception of the original audience of aristocratic Greek warriors. As in the earlier chapters, P. carefully notes non-Greek influence on the poems, such as the possible relationship between the image of Zeus's scales and the Book of the Dead and the similarity between Patroclus's ghost and Enkidu's appearance before Gilgamesh. P.'s conclusion presents the *Iliad* as the earliest example of a tragic story, in which Achilles's anger leads to personal isolation and an eventual "deep moral vision" (p. 113).

P. begins Chapter 5 ("The *Odyssey*") by noting that "everything about the *Odyssey* is different from the *Iliad*." Although the *Odyssey* is treated as a poem in its own right, P. often draws comparisons with the characters and plot of the *Iliad*. As the *Iliad* "defines the West's preoccupation with the philosophy of value [...] the *Odyssey* defines its relentless quest for discovery of new things" (p. 114). P. sees this difference as the most compelling argument that one poet is responsible for the two "literary opposites" (p. 114). As with his summary/commentary on the *Iliad*, the vast majority of P.'s analysis is enlightening and unobjectionable, although when P. discounts the possibility that Demodocus is Homer's self-portrait on the grounds that the poet's "extraordinary visual sense makes this unlikely," we can ponder the counter-examples of Milton and Jorge Luis Borges. P.'s analysis is particularly strong when discussing the folkloric traditions in which the *Odyssey* participates and in examining how various episodes complement and supplement one another. This chapter contains this carefully edited book's only significant typographical error: "some commentators, ancient and modern, have thought that the *Odyssey* originally ended at line 24.296." The correct reference, of course, is 23.296.

Chapter 6, "Conclusion and Summary," makes a final comparison of the two epics before looking briefly at some of the epic successors to Homer: Cyclic Poems, Apollonius, Vergil, Lucan, Statius, Dante, and Milton. P. presents the poems as the unique product of a Greek warrior aristocracy influenced by the traditions of Mesopotamian storytelling. P. views the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* as forming parts of a paired whole in which the *Iliad* questions and the *Odyssey* confirms traditional values of human life "in all its terror, sweetness, and complexity" (p. 158).

P.'s final section, "Further Reading," should prove most useful for the student and academic non-specialist. In culling suggestions from the "gigantic" Homeric bibliography, P. sought out easy-to-find books in English "that will aid the beginning student to explore the endless maze of Homeric studies" (p. 164). He includes approximately half-page sections on "Translations, Texts,"

"General Studies," "Commentaries," "History of the Text," "Homeric Question, Parry/Lord," "Technical Background, the Alphabet," "Homer and History," "Homer and Art," "Near East," "Religion," "Readers, Style, Similes," "The *Iliad*," and "The *Odyssey*." Keeping the novice reader/scholar firmly in mind, P. includes a summary sentence for nearly every work, often indicating a work's strength or weakness and its position within Homeric studies. P. does include popular and important works with which he personally disagrees, although he does indicate his dissent (e.g. "Kirk's notion of a 'memorized' oral text is a fantasy" (p. 165)).

The book's helpful chronological chart (4000 BC - 925 AD) further demonstrates P.'s interest in linking the Homeric works with the literature of the Near East (p. x-xii). Of the two maps that stand at the end of the preface (p. xii-xiv), "The ancient Mediterranean," which includes only major localities mentioned in the book, is more accessible than "Greece, the Aegean Sea, and Western Asia Minor," whose clutter of information may confuse readers who do not already know a city's location. The book contains 11 endnotes, most of which contain interesting digressions or clarifications (e.g. how paper is made, the phalanx tactic of Shaka Zulu, the expanse of the 'Levant'). The book's accurate index (p. 173-76) omits only a few major (e.g. Athena (!)) and minor desiderata (e.g. Dorians, Melantho).

With the exception of the one error noted above, the work is commendably free from all but minor typographical errors (e.g. "crete," p. 138). The paperback is well produced with a handsome cover featuring the wall painting of Achilles and his shield from the House of Paccius Alexander in Pompeii. Its glued spine withstood several readings without unusual wear. A hardcover version is also available.

All told, P.'s work has much to commend it. The annotated bibliography in "Further Reading" alone makes the book a worthwhile purchase. The summary of Homeric scholarship and the section on the development of writing and its relationship with the Homeric texts are commendable, as is P.'s discussion of the influence of Near Eastern cultures. It is well written in a clear and accessible style. Honest in his aims, P. admirably introduces the genius and challenge of the Homeric works.

Notes:

[1. Book website.](#)

[2.](#) I have adopted a similar stance for this review. Readers of BMCR are no strangers to the passionate debates that continue to rage of many aspects of the Homeric works. Therefore, I have attempted to summarize P.'s approach without pausing to give every contrary opinion.

[3.](#) Although both Perry and Lord suggested an orally dictated text (Perry, *Making of Homeric Verse*, p. 451; Lord, "Homeric Originality: Oral Dictated Texts," *TAPhA* 94 (1953) 124-134), the nature of this dictation remains controversial; see [BMCR 98.5.20](#) and [BMCR 98.7.14](#), RESPONSE: Nagy on Janko on Morris/Powell.

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