

BOOK REVIEW

Homer on the Gods & Human Virtue: Creating the Foundations of Classical Civilization. By PETER J. AHRENSDORF. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014. Pp. x + 278. Hardcover, \$45.00. ISBN 978-0-521-19388-7.

In famously pitting Homer against Plato—“this is the complete, the genuine antagonism”—Nietzsche suggests an irreconcilable conflict between poetry and philosophy. This is precisely the false dichotomy that Peter Ahrensdorf sets out to overcome by rehabilitating Homer as a philosophical poet, the “theoretical founder of classical civilization” (2).

Ultimately, the problem lies not with Nietzsche—who, in fact, celebrated Homer’s tragic philosophical worldview—but with Giambattista Vico (1668–1744). Through his new historicist approach, Vico established the first principles of modern Homeric scholarship: Homer likely did not exist, and the epics attributed to him embody, at best, a primitive philosophical tradition. In his introduction, Ahrensdorf critiques this “Analyst/Oralist” tradition (Wolf-Wilamowitz-Parry-Lord-Nagy) at its root by questioning the quality of Vico’s scholarship. We have good reason, it turns out, for revisiting the poems themselves—which is exactly what the Analysts/Oralists generally fail to do. In trying to answer *how* the poems were composed, they neglect to ask the more fundamental human question: what do the poems teach us about the heroic life, about the nature of divine and mortal virtue?

In Chapter One, Ahrensdorf explores Homeric theology. He agrees in substance with the long line of critics who judge Homer’s anthropomorphized deities to be “unpredictable, whimsical, and capricious beings” (57). Ahrensdorf’s real contribution here lies in the close, literal reading that he gives of the heroes’ own religious convictions. In so doing, he highlights the troubling gap between heroic belief and religious reality. Whereas the heroes display sincere piety and trust in the divine pantheon, the gods themselves evince little concern for mortals. Rather than explain this gap away, Ahrensdorf finds in it the core tenet of Homer’s theology: the poet wants his epic audience to place its trust not in divine, but in human, virtue. By slowly loosing mortals from their religious awe and piety, Homer erects the twin pillars of classical civilization: a “singularly question-

ing posture toward the divine” and, with it, an “unabashed glorification of human excellence” (72).

The rest of the work unfolds as a provocative study of that human excellence. In Chapter Two, Ahrens Dorf complicates the familiar characters of Achilles and Hector. Initial impressions and surface-level readings easily deceive. Achilles is not the selfish destroyer of the Achaians, nor is Hector the paragon of selfless duty. Ahrens Dorf compellingly makes this point with a devastating threefold charge against Hector: his unquestioning loyalty to Priam prevents him from seeking peace for his people; his self-interested pursuit of glory spurs him to adopt—against Andromache’s sage advice—a reckless offensive position; his overconfidence in the gods and fear of disgrace deafen him to repeated appeals for retreat.

Achilles, on the other hand, succeeds where Hector fails, for he has the courage to question whether or not heroic glory is worth the price of his own life. Chapter Three traces the existential crisis that shakes Achilles after his opening quarrel with Agamemnon. The Embassy highlights the contradiction at the heart of the hero’s life: virtue demands personal self-sacrifice for the community and yet merits communal recognition—which ultimately lies outside the hero’s control. Heroic virtue, then, cannot attain its own reward. This contradiction in the nature of virtue turns into a catastrophic conflict between friends at that “pivotal moment” of the epic when Achilles sends Patroclus into battle (161). The death of Patroclus, of course, further stokes Achilles’ savage rage; but, with the funeral games and Priam’s supplication, Achilles discovers the height and depth of his own humanity.

The *Odyssey*, by contrast, concludes on a strikingly discordant note, with the brutal slaughter of Penelope’s suitors. In Chapter Four, Ahrens Dorf once again challenges our “initial impression” of the hero (217). A close reading of the text shows that Odysseus is not the suffering traveler, longing innocently for his *nostos*. Instead, he himself bears the primary responsibility for his delayed homecoming. Insatiable curiosity and flawed leadership skills, a competitive thirst for glory and an unjustifiable confidence in divine providence: these are the heroic shortcomings that lead to Odysseus’ misfortunes. Unlike Achilles, however—but very much like Hector—he refuses to consider or acknowledge these deep character flaws. This pattern of unreflective action culminates in the massacre of the suitors, likely unnecessary and highly problematic. In the end, then, despite his reputation, Odysseus shows himself to be anything but a “hero of the mind” (202).

Ahrens Dorf's work, of course, is not without its shortcomings. Many Homerists will understandably resist both his oversimplified generalizations ("Analysts/Oralists") and unexplained assumptions (wholesale Unitarianism). Likewise, philologists will lament the paucity of Greek text and the surprising number of pesky diacritical errors (the absence or slight misalignment of breathing marks on pages 30, 85, 89, 90, 118, 134, 135, 143, and 200). Finally, with a short conclusion of just under four pages, the work limps to something of a disappointing finish. The analysis would benefit from a more robust conclusion, separated from the final chapter. Ahrens Dorf could wisely use that extra space both to revisit the pivotal figure of Hector (who currently goes unmentioned) and to seal the important connection between Homeric epic and "the foundations of classical civilization."

Despite these shortcomings, Ahrens Dorf's work contributes much to our understanding of Homeric gods and heroes. His deep, thoughtful character studies unleash the sapiential power of the poems. In so doing, Ahrens Dorf reminds us all that Homer truly is a singer of "humane enlightenment" (64), inviting his audience on an "intellectual odyssey" of great philosophical consequence (5).

BRYAN Y. NORTON, S.J.

Xavier University, bnorton@jesuits.org