

BOOK REVIEW

The Art and Rhetoric of the Homeric Catalogue. By Benjamin SAMMONS. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. Pp. x + 233. Cloth, £45.00/\$74.00. ISBN 978-0-19-537568-8.

Benjamin Sammons has taken on one of the thorniest problems of Homeric scholarship: why should anyone be interested in epic catalogues, which are, on the face of it, the ugliest and barest of Greek poetic forms? As Günther Jachmann puts it, a catalogue is “ein dichterische Unding,”¹ while in the words of Pietro Pucci, “[c]ataloguing constitutes ... no *mêtis* ... no connotations, no rhetoric, no fiction. Almost no poem.”² Sammons acknowledges such criticisms, but aims to show that Homeric catalogues are capable of carrying out positive functions in spite of their unpromising appearance.

Sammons’ major innovation is to treat the catalogue as a mode of persuasive speech, rather than simply a narrative form. To demonstrate the rhetorical capabilities of catalogues, he opens with discussions of those that are voiced by characters in an attempt to win over their interlocutors, and then goes on to discuss the Catalogue of Ships in the same vein, treating it as a speech-act of the poet. Characters use catalogues tendentiously, to prove a point through a series of paradigms, or to suggest the course that the narrative should take. More importantly, they allow the bard to comment on the identity of his own poetry by pointing up contrasts between their threadbare form and other, more artistically satisfying species of epic verse.

Sammons’ first chapter focuses on catalogues’ paradigmatic function in characters’ speeches, but also considers their role in bards’ explorations of Homeric value systems. In *Od.* 5, for instance, Calypso attempts to save face after Hermes has ordered her to release Odysseus. By cataloguing goddesses who have been stripped of their mortal lovers, she suggests that any goddess is powerless in the face of divine directives. Her catalogue also implies that the gods are

¹ Günther Jachmann, *Der homerische Schiffskatalog und die Ilias* (Cologne, 1958), cited by Sammons on p. 5.

² Pietro Pucci, “Between Narrative and Catalogue: Life and Death of the Poem,” *Mêtis* 11 (1996) 21.

leading Odysseus to his death: the gods kill the mortals who figure in her list; similarly, were Odysseus to leave her, rejecting her offer of immortality, he would suffer old age and death. In this way, Sammons argues, Calypso criticizes Odyssean *kleos*, the *kleos* that is achieved through *nostos*. Her criticism, however, is unconvincing: the mortals of her catalogue are killed while they are still in the company of goddesses. The poet of the *Odyssey* thus puts an ineffective criticism of his poetic value system into the mouth of a character, and thereby reaffirms the validity of that system.

In chapter 2, Sammons argues that Homeric poets employed catalogues to cast Hesiodic poetry in an unfavorable light. In one such catalogue, Zeus lists his former lovers (*Il.* 14.315-28), perhaps intending to advertise his sexual prowess to Hera. His rhetorical aims are, however, undercut by the form and content of his catalogue, which recall the Hesiodic *Catalogue of Women*. In this way, he unwittingly echoes and strengthens Hera's Hesiodic-style challenge to the course of the Iliadic narrative, revealed early in Book 14 through allusions to cosmic instability that are reminiscent of Hesiod's *Theogony*. With his reassertion of control in Book 15, Zeus re-establishes the primacy of the Homeric narrative. He sets out a plot for the rest of the epic, a plot that is un-Hesiodic in its orderliness and unity.

Chapter 3 explores the narrative potential of Homeric catalogues, but also demonstrates that the types of narrative related by them serve to diminish their status relative to other species of Homeric verse. For instance, Agamemnon suggests a storyline to Achilles with his catalogue of gifts in *Il.* 9: the catalogue recalls Achilles' sacking of cities prior to the *Iliad*, and anticipates a "happy ending" in which the Greeks take Troy and Achilles returns home laden with booty, married to Agamemnon's daughter. Like Hera in *Il.* 14, Agamemnon has provided a rival plot to that of the bard, but his attempt to shape the narrative is bound to fail, since he is unaware that Achilles is fated to die at Troy. Moreover, his efforts to encompass the whole war recall the Cyclic poets, and contrast with the Homeric bard's selection and deep exploration of a particular episode—the anger of Achilles.

The fourth chapter considers the Iliadic Catalogue of Ships, again focusing on the ways in which the *Iliad* defines itself against Cyclic poetry. After exploring the catalogue's fulsome praise of Agamemnon as an allusion to his pre-eminence in the Epic Cycle, Sammons considers the implications of the poet's invocation of the Muses at the opening of the catalogue. The bard's profession of inability to name the *plethos* of warriors is an act of false modesty, masking his creative input—to shape the boundless, undigested information offered to him by the

Muses into a geographical survey of the Greek world. The poet Thamyris, whose ill-fated challenge to the Muses is alluded to in the catalogue, serves as a foil to the Iliadic bard. References to Thamyris' journeying alongside his punishment for overstepping human limitations suggest that his song—like the poems of the Epic Cycle—attempted too great a range of place and time. Homer's pious acceptance of the Muses' superior knowledge allows him to direct his poetic skills to the crafting of a better, more selective poem.

Sammons' book is a literary study for literary scholars, and as such I would recommend it. He has demonstrated with great persuasiveness why we as modern readers of Homer should be interested in Homeric catalogues: if we accept his arguments, the catalogues' unpromising appearance would mask a role in defining what Homeric poetry is, of showing why epic should be considered superior to other genres. Sammons has thus explained the functions of Homeric catalogues *qua* text, of epic catalogues in their modern instantiation.

Sammons has not, however, explained satisfactorily why ancient audiences should have been interested in the Homeric catalogue. His readings, whose ingenuity and complexity I hope to have suggested above, require the opportunity to study, review and slowly digest a text that is available to modern philologists, but not to early audiences experiencing the poems in the moment of performance. What is more, his arguments seem inconsistent with what we know about the diffusion of early hexameter: by archaic times both Homeric and Hesiodic poetry appear to have achieved Panhellenic popularity, and so we can assume that the same archaic audiences enjoyed both genres. Since Sammons believes that Homeric catalogues achieve their effects largely in spite of and not because of their structure, he is unable to explain why the same early audiences not only enjoyed epic poetry but also relished catalogues enough for their own sakes to sit through performances of Hesiod's *Theogony*.

For explanations of the appeal of catalogues to ancient audiences, we must turn to studies of their performativity. Recent work has shown that catalogues are effective as performance poetry: Elizabeth Minchin, for instance, has suggested that audiences would have been impressed by the bard's feat of memory in reciting an extended catalogue,³ while David Elmer has argued that the entries in a

³ Elizabeth Minchin, *Homer and the Resources of Memory* (Oxford 2001) 73ff, "On Working under Pressure: The Performance of Lists and Catalogues."

catalogue act as “the captioning of an implied image”—an image formed in the minds of bard and audience.⁴

Sammons’ study has shown that, even if we as modern readers find Homeric catalogues ugly, we cannot dismiss their importance to Homeric aesthetics. Further studies of their performativity will, I hope, demonstrate that their ugliness and awkwardness are modern misperceptions.

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⁴David Elmer, “Helen *Epigrammatopios*,” *Classical Antiquity* 24 (2005) 1–39.