

Reviews of Two Introductions to Homer

Homer: A Beginner's Guide: By ELTON BARKER and JOEL CHRISTENSEN. One World Publications, London, 2013. Pp.vii+233. Paperback, \$14.95. ISBN978-1-78074-229-8.

Homer: A Guide for the Perplexed. By AHUVIA KAHANE. Bloomsbury, London, 2012. Pp. vii+211. Paperback, \$24.95. ISBN978-1-4411-0010-8.

These two engagingly written brief introductions to Homer will attract seasoned Homerists and rank beginners alike. Having both books appear at approximately the same time will stimulate interest in and appreciation for Homer. The moderate prices of these books, moreover, will facilitate their acquisition by a broad audience that will appreciate the embarrassment of riches that they both provide.

I will consider first the book by Barker and Christensen. Their lively and wide-ranging Introduction subtitled "O Homer Where Art Thou?" pulls readers right into the vast impact of Homer on our own world. Anyone needing to justify the reading and study of Homer should read this Introduction. Well-selected photos and boxed-in material supplement the text without distracting the reader here and throughout the book. (In this Introduction, for instance, there is boxed in material on dactylic hexameter.)

Chapter 1 has the challenging title "Homer's epic cosmos: a world full of gods, heroes and men". We are told that the ancient Greek religion was not a "dogmatic centralized hierarchy that propagate official doctrine" but rather a "loose decentralized association of rituals, stories, and beliefs that permeated and dominated everyday life through the power of tradition and cult" (39). Many additional insights are provided in this chapter. For example, we are told that gods who have genealogical relations to certain mortals cherish these mortals all the more because of their frailty. Thetis is then the paradigmatic mother who has to face the impending doom of Achilles and mourns the loss of his life all the more because of her own immortality (52).

Chapter 2, “The Iliad: the poem of politics”, covers how for eight books Homer removes from the scene Achilles whose wrath “disrupts the political status quo”. When he returns in the embassy scene in *Iliad* 9 “it is not physical action that drives the day, but speech”, i.e. politics (77). There are rich textured and insightful comments on the embassy scene.

Chapters 3 and 4 deal with Troy. Barker and Christensen talk about the similarities between the Greeks and the Trojans. Readers might be a little surprised by their statement that Trojans and Greeks “speak the same language” (88). The description of Hector is especially penetrating, in my opinion. We are told that Homer depicts Hector as “one of the poem’s most complex and sympathetic characters” (107). The authors provide elucidating comments on the laments on Hector’s death by Helen, Hecuba, and Andromache (121).

In Chapter 5 we are told that in many ways the *Odyssey* is everything that the *Iliad* is not. Fundamentally, the *Odyssey*’s gaze takes in various folk tale elements from fantasy alongside one-eyed monsters, witches, and the ungrateful dead (125). Barker and Christensen set about showing that Odysseus is known for his endurance and cleverness. Where the *Iliad* begins in “wrath” the *Odyssey* begins with “man”. This distinction is explained well at some length (128).

Chapter 6, “Odysseus, singer of tales”, covers the three books where the hero (9–12) answer Alcinous’ inquiry about the identity of Odysseus. We are told that here is one more example of what Homer can do. First he denies the audience a view of the hero. Next the hero passes incognito through the world between men and gods. Then the telling of the tale itself is handed over to Odysseus (146). The recounting of the encounter of Odysseus with the Cyclops is especially detailed and interestingly presented. Chapter 7 is titled “Ithaca, home”. We learn that the theme of recognition is important since it provides “what is essentially a roller-coaster ride of adventure, romance and action with depth and complexity” (169). The *Odyssey*, we learn, is playing a complex game testing whether we are picking out the right signs and putting them together correctly (177).

There is a substantial Epilogue that makes many engaging interconnections between and among Homer and later literature and art. For instance, there is a good discussion of the Tabula Iliaca Capitolina as well as a picture of it from the Capitoline Museum. This discussion is illustrative of the many extra tidbits of Homeric that this book provides despite its brevity.

The penetrating and perceptive nature of Barker and Christensen’s comments on the influence and *Nachleben* of Homer is intriguing and captivating. They describe, for instance, how the TV show *Battle Galactica* uses musical cues

for certain Cylons which act like Homeric epithets in bringing to mind the character's past actions and feelings (216). There is discussion about how artists of different schools and periods have been influenced by Homer. The small reproductions of works of art help readers to appreciate what is being said.

Kahane's short book appears in the series *Guides for the Perplexed* that proposes to introduce major figures and works to students and general readers and to explain challenging and difficult aspects of these works. The purpose of the series has particular significance in the case of Homer as Kahane notes (vi).

In the first chapter (The figures of Homeric Poetry) Kahane leads us through the many Homers of literary history including, James Joyce, Derek Walcott, and the Coen brothers who made the film *O Brother Where Art Thou*. Chapter Two (Homeric histories) discusses the necessity of history, the role of the Trojan War among the ancients, modern insights on Troy and the Bronze Age, the representation of culture and society, and Homer's historical voices. I found his discussion of the short but very ancient inscription known as the Nestor's Cup intriguing (37) especially because it is written mostly in dactylic hexameter and perhaps refers to the great golden "cup of Nestor" described in the *Iliad* (11.632—7). The inscription contains the wish that who drinks from the cup will be seized by sexual desire.

Chapter Three deals with the poet and the making of the poet. In the discussion of Milman Parry and oral formulaic theory (52 et seq.) Kahane explains scansion in clear terms for the non-specialist. His use of the Roman alphabet for extended passages of Greek may concern some but seems in keeping with his efforts to make his book accessible readily to non-specialists.

In Chapter Four (Homer's poetic language) Kahane moves beyond the more technical aspects of Homer's text (e.g. formulaic language and repetitions) to the level of style, poetry and meaning (60). To convey certain points Kahane uses translations that retain in English the exact word order of the Greek original. He comments extensively and perceptively on Homer's use of exact repetition of lines and passages. His description of Homeric ring composition (69 et seq.) is clear and engaging.

Chapter Five is on proems, tales and plots. Kahane says that both poems start with formal introductions, proems. The proem of the *Iliad* consists of Book 1, lines 1–6. The proem for the *Odyssey* consists of Book 1, lines 1–10. Here the poems' themes are condensed ultimately into a single word, *menin* in the case of the *Iliad* and *andra* in the case of the *Odyssey*. The proems introduce thus not only

the narration but also the narrator. This chapter ends with a discussion of outlines and plot structures.

Chapter Six focuses on the *Iliad*. There is discussion of the withdrawal of Achilles, prizes and fame, Achilles' dilemma, the death of Patroclus, the death of Hector, the ransom of Hector's body, and the end of the *Iliad*. Here Kahane provides only an English translation of text rather than providing transliterated Greek text and English translation as he has done elsewhere in the book. I frankly missed the Greek here and think that other readers will too!

Chapter Seven focuses on the *Odyssey*. The narrative, we are told, like Odysseus himself goes "island hopping". It oscillates between Ithaca, Olympus, Calypso's island, the Cyclops' island, Circe's island, and the land of the Phaeacians (121). Kahane raises interesting questions regarding the ending of the *Odyssey*. Can we ever be completely certain about the identity of a trickster like the man just united with Penelope with Penelope and say that his homecoming is now complete? Is the secret of the bed secure beyond a shadow of a doubt? Odysseus and Penelope may guard it jealously yet it is also safe in the hands of a handmaid whose appearance here and nowhere else has puzzled commentators (148).

Chapter Eight is on "Boundaries and social worlds: Men and women." Kahane underscores that despite the martial and heroic content of Homer's poetry and despite the fact that the *Iliad* is a poem about men's fighting and the *Odyssey* is a poem about a singular man, the most prominent actions and plot movements in both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are motivated by women and are centered on the relations between men and women and on what the ancients called conjugal *homilia* (152).

Chapter Nine is titled "Mortality and the divine." Kahane tells us that death is an essential presence in Homer. The Homeric gods do not inspire the kind of reverence, internalized notions of faith and love toward the deity that the Abrahamic religions do. We, the audiences and readers of the Homeric poems, are mortal, Kahane tells us, "yet we too like the gods can live vicariously through the poems." (183).

There are suggestions for further reading including detailed commentaries on portions of Homer and translations. Readers wanting to do further reading on particular sections of Homer will find these helpful and convenient.

What is the reader to make of Kahane in comparison with Barker and Christensen? I think that we have here two excellent introductions to Homer. Since they are both inexpensive, I suggest that seasoned Homerists and beginners alike try to read and perhaps own both books. They provide valuable slants and in-

sights that will be much appreciated in so many ways. Homer is an inexhaustible fountain of literary and cultural riches that may daunt beginners and seasoned readers alike. These short books provide pleasant gateways to the great poet.

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