

## BOOK REVIEW

*The Poetics of Consent: Collective Decision Making and the Iliad*. By DAVID F. ELMER. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013. Pp. x + 313. Hardcover, \$55.00. ISBN 978-1-4214-0826-2.

David Elmer's book addresses two interpretive strands of the *Iliad*: one that explores its politics, the other the poetics of its transmission. Noting the fluidity of the "collective dynamics" of decision making, Elmer contends, "The formalization of these dynamics is rather a matter of the language and conventions of Homeric poetry," conventions that permit the reader to see "more deeply into the process of collective decision making than the actors themselves seem capable of doing" (2–3).

Elmer addresses attempts to situate the *Iliad* in a particular historical context, critiquing the view of the poem as providing some window into, or reflecting on, the archaic or pre-*polis* world (9–10). Elmer, instead, draws on Nagy's evolutionary model to understand the processes of "composition and textualization" (11) that both extend the poem's composition into the sixth century and suggest the importance of this later reception in organizing the theme of consensus in the *Iliad*. The *Iliad*'s "representation of politics," Elmer claims, does not reflect any particular historical context but is the result of a "long-term collective decision-making procedure" by which the poem is itself shaped by different audiences and performers. That is, the politics of the *Iliad* reflects its "implicit theory of reception" (12). To the extent that there is a political context, it is the Panhellenic festivals that provided "a real-life occasion for the assembly of large groups of people with divergent interests" (12).

The book is divided into three sections. The first section (comprised of four chapters) focuses on the formulaic conventions that govern scenes of collective decision making. In the first chapter, Elmer identifies five constituent elements of what he calls the "grammar of reception," that is, the collective responses of others: silence, approval (by Achaeans), shout (by Achaeans), shout (by Trojans), and praise (26). Elmer situates these phrases within broader linguistic and cultural patterns to identify how formulaic discourse reveals ingrained patterns of speech and thought. Elmer extends the analysis in Chapter 2, focusing on the importance of

*epainos* as not just a statement of praise, but also connected to notions of consensus.

In the third chapter Elmer argues that the opening scene frames the importance of collective decision making. In this chapter, provocatively titled, “Achilles and the Crisis of the Exception,” a reference to both Schmitt and Agamben in their respective discussions of the “state of exception,” Elmer contends that the opening scene operates as an exception to “traditional norms of decision making” (67). Elmer argues that while the state of exception does not apply to the politics since there is not “a formally constituted set of legal rules and governmental powers” that can be suspended, it does apply to the suspension of “the grammar of reception” (67).

In the suspension of a rule, the norm is reasserted (68–9). But in the meantime there is a crisis of interpretation: in how to respond and how to interpret those responses. Imposing “the state of exception” on the epic feels strained at times. Elmer, for example, contends that the “initial state of exception is, at its core, a failure of language” that extends to the disruption of poetic language “to the point that the ability of the formulaic medium to communicate the meaning of political action is undermined” (77). But the poetic language is doing exactly what it’s supposed to do; namely, communicating the disruption of political understanding and, most of all, trust. And it is doing so in a way not uncommon for social dramas, which function by revealing tensions or breakdowns in norms that are then reaffirmed or critically reassessed.

In the final chapter of this first section, Elmer reads the turmoil of Book 2 as a narrative trajectory for the crisis of the poem as a whole. There are moments where Elmer’s fusion of the poetic with the political leads him to treat the formulae as the foundation of community life. For example, Elmer argues that the “danger posed by Thersites” is “not just that he will undermine the stability of the Achaean confederacy but that he will undermine the poetic conventions that support the narrative of their expedition against Troy” (95). One of Elmer’s interesting insights in this chapter is a political (more than a poetic) one, though. He argues that quieting the “noise” of someone like Thersites is a precondition for opening up a space for “properly political speech” (97).

In the second section, Elmer explores the development of the *epainos* motif in the context of the *Iliad*’s three political communities: the Achaeans (Chapter 5), the Trojans (Chapter 6), and the gods (Chapter 7). He argues that consensus is never reached in the Achaean community but is displaced to the Trojans (in which there is consensus about an innovation that seals the fate of the Trojans) and the

gods, who, Elmer suggests, function as “a kind of stand-in for the poem’s real-world audience” (173). It is this “fourth community,” the real-world audience, onto which “the *Iliad* projects the ultimate fulfillment of the *epainos* motif” and “which bears ultimate responsibility for the Iliadic narrative, just as the gods appear to do within the narrative itself” (173).

In the final section, Elmer seeks to provide evidence of how the *epainos* motif is resolved. In Chapter 8, Elmer interprets the final scene of Trojan mourning as “some indication of the perfected experience it projects onto its implied audience, but it cannot situate it among those [the Achaeans] who must remain imperfect” (203). It is “only in the later world of the *poleis* that their potential is fulfilled” (203).

In the final chapter, Elmer provides evidence for how we are to understand the audience or the dynamics of the transmission of the text, which is what the argument largely hinges on. Elmer explores aspects of the *Iliad* as a Panhellenic epic: the role of “passive tradition bearers” (206) as a check on tradition as performed, as well as what traditions go forward; interesting allusions in Plato to the *epainos* motif as referring to the role of collective values in the reception (and shaping) of the poem; and some suggestions about how this motif plays itself out in the *Odyssey*.

The book is remarkably well written and engaging, always seeking clear explanations of complex concepts. The book also synthesizes and extends the current state of scholarship on the *Iliad*, addressing, as well as any recent book, the different (often divergent) approaches to the politics and poetics of the epic. The argument is ultimately about the politics of poetics in which the *Iliad* appears as a meta-poem, reflecting more on the act of making poetry than on organizing political communities. To that extent, the analysis (and the themes) might be applied to all performances. Elmer even notes, “From this point of view, any performance can be thought of as a collective decision, insofar as its success—its ability to embody the tradition and so to shape future performances—requires the approval of the audience” (207). The claim is true in many respects, underlying how both politics and poetics are types of performances. But it is a much stronger claim to argue that the poetic themes of the *Iliad* emerge as a reflection on its own transmission. The reader will judge the plausibility of that connection but will be stimulated by the claim.

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