

BOOK REVIEW

Homeric Durability: Telling Time in the Iliad. By LORENZO F. GARCIA JR. *Hellenic Studies* 57. Washington, DC: Center for Hellenic Studies, 2013. ISBN: 9780674073234.

The first four chapters of this study explore what happens to things in the *Iliad* as time goes by: ships and corpses decay; walls are destroyed; tombs disintegrate. The final chapter looks at how the everlasting gods are subject to time too. Garcia asks, "How are we to determine the durability Homer envisions for his poetry when every other entity in his work is depicted as temporally conditioned, such that even the gods themselves appear as caught up in mortal temporality?" (235). He argues that epic poetry is cast as "possessing great durability—but that durability is not meant to imply any concept of the 'eternal'" (236–237).

Previous Homeric scholarship has considered the questions Garcia takes on by thinking in terms of nature versus culture. Nature deteriorates; culture endures; epic composition is a cultural act; accordingly, epic poetry renders its subjects enduring and itself endures. Garcia neatly makes use of a different frame, temporality, as he seeks to interrogate and ultimately qualify that final proposition. The study may in fact have benefitted from a more explicit engagement with the previously deployed "nature vs. culture frame." For instance, Naomi Rood's 2008 essay ("Craft Similes and the Construction of Heroes in the *Iliad*" [*HSCPh* 104: 19–43]) would have made a good sparring partner. In any event, Garcia's intervention makes an important contribution to a matter of significance: epic poetry's self-representation.

Garcia's book will, then, be of most use to Homerists as it is aimed squarely at them. Yet it also joins the larger ongoing discussion of time in ancient literature: one thinks of Irene de Jong and René Nünlist's *Time in Ancient Greek Literature* (Brill 2007) and especially of Alex Purves's *Space and Time in Ancient Greek Narrative* (Cambridge UP 2010). Scholars interested in time in ancient texts should consult Garcia's book as well.

The Introduction presents the study's goals and theoretical underpinnings, focusing in particular on different ways to think about the concept of time that are informed by, for example, the theorizing of Husserl and Heidegger. Already here key points are anticipated: above all, Iliadic *kleos aphthiton* means "unwithered fame," in the sense of "not yet withered"; it does not mean the fame is "imperishable (forever)."

Chapter 1 first investigates Agamemnon's test of his soldiers in book 2. Agamemnon juxtaposes "a temporally continuous Zeus" with men: "our future is not entailed in our enduring present status, but must be continually renegotiated one decisive moment at a time" (52). Moreover, Agamemnon's reference to the decaying Achaean ships functions as a metaphor for the men's "loss of cohesion through waiting" (55).

The second portion of the chapter investigates how Odysseus counters by offering a different temporal vision: on the one hand, "[i]nstead of introducing change through a decisive present, Odysseus suggests that the extent of the past itself is the strongest reason to continue waiting; change now, with nothing accomplished, would only be failure" (61); on the other hand, by referring to Calchas's interpretation of the omen at Aulis as having occurred "either yesterday or the day before" (2.303), he "seeks to undo the disintegration of the Achaeans' emotional resolve, deteriorated by the long years of waiting, by eliding that very temporal expanse" (63). Yet Odysseus cannot completely obscure that temporal gap: a space remains between the past and the present, however vividly the past is re-presented, and into that space "time can creep and work its ruin" (64). This failure mimics the failure of epic to maintain the memory of its protagonists forever.

Chapter 2 studies the gods' preservation of the corpses of Sarpedon, Patroklos, and Hektor. In attending to the diction of these scenes—*tarkuein*, *ambrosia*, *empedos*, and *nektar*—Garcia argues that the gods can only temporarily halt each corpse's decay. An analogy emerges between the temporal limits of this work and the work of the epic poet: "the preservation implied by the κλέος ἀφθίτον of the tradition is itself conceived of as only a temporary preservation from the forces of time—Achilles' fame can only be 'not (yet) withered'" (67).

Chapter 3 looks first at the wall built to defend the Achaean camp and then at the walls of Troy. Destined to be destroyed by the gods after the war, the Achaean wall "functions as an image of the tradition itself and its view of its own temporal durability" (106). Like Achilles, for whom the wall becomes "a stand-in" (106), the wall's impending fate renders it "both here and gone at once" (110). For its part,

the Trojan wall resembles the corpses investigated in Chapter 2: "the wall is preserved for the time being" (119).

Chapter 4 turns to the burial mounds and grave markers of the Trojan landscape. Again, the main point is their inevitable deterioration and its implication. Toward this end, the chapter's first section reviews Homeric funerary practices and argues that they function "as a system for creating something more permanent out of what is wholly transitory" (142). The second section reviews the evidence linking the tomb itself to the concept of *kleos*, and the third explores the several moments in which a tomb eventually fails to accomplish this task. Once more, this rendition "functions to foreshadow the potential demise of the oral epic tradition itself" (148).

Chapter 5 brings the gods into the discussion. The central argument holds "that Homer's gods themselves come to be conditioned by time," and this fact compels us to reconsider "our notion of permanence itself," especially the notion that epic can preserve a hero's fame (161). Building on the conclusion of the chapter's first section—"gods too must be able to become caught up in that mortal time" (174)—the second section rehearses those moments in the *Iliad* in which gods experience physical pain: "for pain enmeshes its victim in mortal temporality" (178). Likewise, the third section explores episodes in which gods suffer pain at Zeus' hands. At these moments, "Homer introduces the possibility of the rebellious god's 'death'" (188). The fourth and final section presents the misadventures of Ares "for whom Homer does not merely point to possible 'equivalent' deaths, but explicitly raises the specter of death itself for the war god" (211).

The concluding Epilogue summarizes the book's findings. An appendix, "The Semantic Field of 'Decay' in Homeric Epic," reviews *phthiô/phthinô/phthinuthô*, *sêpô*, *puthô*, *skellô*, *karphô*, and *azô*, each of which "is used to indicate a temporally conditioned experience of degenerative change over time" (239).

In a work comprising close readings, not all will garner assent. In Chapter 2, Garcia writes, "For Homer, the application of *ambrosia* to a corpse likewise appears to render it ἄφθιτον" (73). The "likewise" refers to Pindar *Olympian* 1.59-63 wherein the gods make Tantalos *aphthiton* by giving him nectar and ambrosia. But Garcia cannot provide proof of that equation's existence in either of the two Homeric epics—hence, the "appears."

Regarding the equation posited in Chapter 4 between the deliquescence of tombs and oral epic, one notes that it is true that, if a tomb deteriorates, the traditions that it serves to prompt may deteriorate as well. Yet performers as depicted

in the epics (e.g. Demodokos) are not dependent on such prompts, and the deterioration of a tomb is nowhere seen to stop these guys from singing. Homeric poetry does not emphatically link its own fate to that of tombs. In Chapter 5, Garcia touches on Zeus's declaration to Hera that he will take no thought of her anger even if she were to "wander" (*alômenê*) to Tartaros in her rage (*Il.* 8.477-483). Garcia suggests, "[I]t is implied that her 'wandering' to Tartaros may be construed as being thrown there by Zeus, as indeed he threatened to throw any god who disobeys him" (210). It seems rather that Zeus alludes to the motif of the angry, withdrawn divinity (cf. A. Kelly, *A Referential Commentary and Lexicon to Homer, Iliad VIII* [Oxford UP 2008], 97–98): Demeter of the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* comes to mind (see *alalêmenê* at verse 133).

These minor differences aside, I learned a great deal from Garcia's book and I am confident that others (especially Homerists) will benefit from their time with it as well. Indeed, because it is so well written, they will move through it at a comfortable pace.

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