

BOOK REVIEW

Homeric Speech and the Origins of Rhetoric. By RACHEL AHERN KNUDSEN. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014. Pp. x + 230. Hardcover, \$49.95. ISBN 978-1-4214-1226-9.

This book has two ambitions. It seeks to demonstrate that persuasive speeches in the *Iliad* deploy rhetorical craftsmanship with strategies and devices actually later defined by Aristotle in his *Rhetoric*. Nor is this Homeric deployment some sort of untutored power of persuasion, but “a systematic and strategic practice of rhetoric” (20). The book then argues that, since deliberate rhetorical practice originates much earlier than previously argued (in the fifth or even fourth century), and since archaic poetry provides continued evidence of formal rhetoric, Aristotle’s privileging of prose over poetry as the proper medium for persuasive argumentation cannot be considered a foundation of the narrative of how the dominance of poetry as the source of authoritative knowledge yielded in the classical period to that of prose. But the lineage of rhetoric from early epic to Aristotelian philosophy is not persuasively established, in part because the archaic evidence is inconsistent. The argument is also weakened by decisions—stated and unstated—about which fifth-century evidence to consider.

After a summary introduction the book has two sections with three chapters each. In “Rhetoric in Homer,” the first chapter surveys modern and ancient assessments of Homeric rhetoric. The second illustrates how Aristotelian rhetorical tropes and techniques appear in those Iliadic persuasive speeches whose aim is to influence listeners’ behavior or opinions, of which Knudsen finds only 58 in the epic. Eighteen are analyzed in this chapter (the rest in an appendix) according to a “rubric”—a suite of Aristotelian strategies for successful persuasion (42). The third chapter then examines possible meaningful patterns in Homer’s deployment of such rhetoric.

Aristotelian rhetorical terminology casts a thought-provoking new light on well-known Iliadic speeches. For instance, with Andromache’s plea that Hector remain in the city (*Il.* 6), the focus is on the components of the enthymeme she uses to influence her “addressee” (55). The technical language is distancing: it

feels odd, although true, to call Hector his wife's addressee. This perspective also ignores the effects of speech genre on argumentation. Andromache's speech has been seen by others as modeled on women's lament, but the present analysis does not consider that she may deploy rhetoric so skillfully (if unsuccessfully) because she is tutored in women's mourning rituals. So too with other examples that have been assigned to speech types with specific conventions: such generic influences are overlooked by an emphasis on Aristotelian techniques as the measure of rhetorical effort.

The book's second section, "The Genealogy of Rhetoric from Homer to Aristotle," begins with the fourth chapter, which disposes of other possible explanations for the "remarkable points of correspondence between the techniques of persuasion" found in Homer and defined by Aristotle (92). The fifth chapter presents the crucial evidence for what the true explanation might be: Homeric understanding of rhetoric as a formal practice persists in various ways through archaic poetry and into the fifth century.

A clear picture of this persistence, however, does not emerge. Some Iliadic techniques reappear in the *Homeric Hymns*, but an increasing sophistication from the earlier to the later hymns suggests an initial break in continuity with Homer. Wisdom literature, represented by Hesiod's *Works and Days* and Theognis, shows little persuasive argumentation. The elegies of Callinus and Tyrtaios deploy rhetoric that feels Iliadic, but Knudsen suggests—correctly—that this is because of a shared "wartime context" (121), thereby muddying the argument for persistent rhetorical practice *per se*. Choral lyric proves more useful: speeches in Stesichorus, Bacchylides, and Pindar show sufficient rhetorical form that Knudsen can reasonably conclude, "Homeric precedents seem to be close at hand" (134). Given that the other poetic genres suggest, if anything, a diminution of rhetorical sophistication following Homer until the mid-to-late sixth century—not a useful progression for the book's argument—lyric seems a slender bridge on which to travel from Homer to Aristotle.

The sixth chapter presents the movement from "pristine" poetry (as in, without "theorized rhetoric;" 136) to the fifth- and early fourth-century forms of rhetoric, especially forensic and philosophic prose, by which Aristotle defines the *technê*. The discussion is weakened when Knudsen chooses to bracket tragedy, explaining that most extant plays are "simply not ... chronologically remarkable," when it comes to rhetoric, and they are too implicated in the intellectual revolution from 430 BCE on (136). As stated this second claim overlooks Aeschylus and even early Sophocles and Euripides. Knudsen further asserts that analysis of dramatic

dialogue is precluded by consistency, since she is studying only direct speech embedded in narrative. Yet she also omits, without explanation, fifth-century historians. These choices create disconcerting gaps: without tragedy or history, the promised genealogy of rhetoric moves from lyric to Antiphon, Antisthenes and Plato, who emerge as somehow discontinuous precursors of Aristotle.

Tragedy may be heavily theorized on the nature of persuasion and, as Knudsen notes, it may already have been well-studied on this point. Yet tragedy and history present persuasive argumentation in contexts very similar to the Iliadic battlefield and its aftermath, and each genre seems invaluable for a fully examined lineage of rhetoric from Homer to Aristotle. Otherwise, Knudsen's largest claims about either author's role in the invention of rhetoric, especially the claim to have complicated the prevailing, fundamentally Aristotelian narrative of what the Athenian intellectual revolution did to the authority of poetry, remain premature.

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