

BOOK REVIEW

Experiencing Hektor: Character in the Iliad. By LYNN KOZAK. Bloomsbury Classical Studies Monographs. London: Bloomsbury, 2017. Pp. xiv + 307. Hardcover, \$135.00. ISBN 978-1-4742-4544-9.

Experiencing Hektor considers the *Iliad* through the eyes of its author, Lynn Kozak, a self-confessed television addict who has viewed innumerable episodes of modern serials such as *Breaking Bad*, *Songs of Anarchy* and *Game of Thrones*. Kozak's perspective has influenced both her writing style and her views on epic performance. Hers is a running commentary on much of the *Iliad*, with particular emphasis on Hektor, but not exclusively so. Really, she comments on much else in the *Iliad* (I will say more on this).

Kozak's book is made up of four parts, including a helpful introduction that outlines her chosen methodology followed by three chapters of commentary on the greater part of the *Iliad*. All of this is capped by a much too brief set of conclusions (less than four full pages that do not do Kozak's interesting approach justice). Since the style of Kozak's work is that of a rather far ranging set of summaries and running commentary, it is impossible to encapsulate the book's contents here (nor will I try to represent the TV comparisons, although they are interesting and well made). Instead, I am concerned here with the book's intent and how well the author has created her argument as it relates to the *Iliad*.

Kozak's goal is clearly stated in the Introduction (1-22), "Binge Watching the *Iliad*." Her chosen methodology includes such concepts as beats (=scenes), character recognition (by the audience), and audience alignment with (=focus on) and allegiance to (=like or dislike of) Iliadic characters. Also especially notable is Kozak's repeated and informative application of terms, such as "melodramatic alignment structures," "episodes," "recaps," "call backs," "arcs" and "red shirts" to various epic scenes in order to enhance our consideration of epic action and "character" generally. Kozak wants to show that the *Iliad* is "a serial narrative that consists of both episodes and breaks" (2).

Chapters 1 to 3, entitled "Enter Hektor" (3-68), "Killing Time" (69-145), and "Ends" (147-229), amply illustrate each of the TV serial terms and ideas reviewed in the introduction. Kozak tell us, for example, that *Iliad* 1-6 took about five hours

to perform (23), and some reminder of performance length occurs in almost every “beat.” The author (following in the footsteps of Edwards, 2004, *Sense, Sound, and Rhythm*, 43) shows where performance breaks could have occurred and that they need not have followed book divisions (see e.g. 90). Kozak also reminds the reader of the importance of the (external) audience’s memory of recent events and relative time since a hero’s presence in the epic narrative. Centrally important in Kozak’s analysis is the “switching” of audience alignment from one character to another, in one beat after another. The reader gains a sense that Kozak is viewing epic characters within epic performance through a camera, and her description ardently and successfully argues for the need to consider the audience’s reception of a performance. Even the chatty and overly personal style of her writing (including the regular use of split infinitives and incomplete sentences: e.g. 109), albeit overly subjective at times, gives the sense that we are thinking out loud as an audience as if we are discussing a TV show among friends.

There are also some weaknesses in Kozak’s book. Aside from its hurried editing,¹ it reads somewhat less like a monograph on Hektor (as the title would suggest) and somewhat more as an overview of the whole *Iliad* as a serial; and it includes numerous narrative summaries less strategic for appreciating Hektor.² I would rather have seen a fuller analysis of the sections of the *Iliad* that do deal with Hektor, since in some cases Kozak’s interesting overview left me wanting more depth. In part because of the discursive focus, there is also a lack of summaries of argumentation (as opposed to summaries of epic text) throughout. Neither does Kozak sufficiently indicate how her presentation builds up a central thesis (something a fuller conclusion would also have aided).³ Further, Kozak considers questions of character (part of the book’s subtitle, *Character in the Iliad*) and character shift (“overhaul”), but is not always clear about what all this means for our understanding of epic character or characterization (a term she does not use as far as I remember), except for the more general idea that in some way it

¹ Aside from the author’s intentional use of a personal and colloquial style and comma splice, errors of missing, extra (“sees shows,” 144), or mistyped words, along with translational ellipses, occur frequently enough that they should be corrected in any future (preferably less expensive paper) edition: see e.g. 11, 29, 37, 53, 58, 63, 92, 110, 113, 115, 123, 144 etc.

² All or most of the following summaries seem less necessary: 28-30, 33-35, 40-42, 45-46, 80-81, 91, 106, 112-113, 119, 121-122, 130-131, 151-153, etc.

³ Also, while there is a fair amount of Greek, very little use is made of it in any way, either for philological argument or for understanding the implications of traditional formulae.

adds to character depth. I think she could have provided a less ambiguous biography for Hektor as she does at times for other characters. Yet, this difficulty perhaps stems from Kozak's position that there is no consistent character center (21): "I have never found a clean paradigm that I can fit Hektor into ... Hektor exists, but always between: in between what he says and what he does." For Kozak, Hektor is like a serial character from television, for whom we, as audience members, "must build and rebuild" (21-22?) our understanding. She feels that Hektor "is unknowable and I still want to know him more." Kozak has a point. The singer can use his tradition in creative ways and there is much he can do through suspense and anticipation (74); and every character experiences a range of emotional responses. Yet, surely, while characters can be "messy" (20) and "ambiguous" and much more than "typical" (see 240, n. 33 for Kozak's very reasonable reaction to this view), there is also a traditional core known to singer and audience not only from current, but also from past aoidic performances, especially for so central a character as Hektor.

All that I have said in no way detracts from the value of Kozak's work as an interesting and useful "lens" through which to view ancient epic. What is formative and makes Kozak's book especially worth reading is her constant reminder of narrative time on almost every page, and her determination to try to "see" Homeric performance from the "viewers'" vantage point. In this regard, Kozak succeeds in her task. Her book, written with an audience of university students in mind (Preface), could prove quite useful for an instructor teaching a class on the *Iliad* and modern serials, although the stiff price puts it out of reach for most students.

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