

## BOOK REVIEW

*Ajax, un héros qui vient de loin.* By GIAMPIERO SCAFOGLIO. Amsterdam, NL: Adolf M. Hakkert Publisher, 2017. Pp. 139. Paperback, €32.00. ISBN 978-90-256-1325-9.

As the French proverb goes, there are two kinds of people in the world: those who divide the world into two kinds of people and those who do not.<sup>1</sup> For a long time, we know, the world of Homeric scholarship was divided into the opposing camps of Oralists and Neoanalysts. In recent years, however, Homeric criticism has increasingly challenged this stark opposition. More and more, scholars are mining the synergy between these rich interpretative traditions. In so doing, they are finding new, promising ways to pursue the elusive Homeric Question.

Giampiero Scafoglio's slim French monograph falls directly in this exciting line of research. In fact, the author begins by aligning his approach with these recent trends in Homeric hermeneutics: "the conception, interests and results of Neoanalysis and of Oral Theory can be reconciled in such a manner to compose a plausible picture of the pre-Homeric and shed light on the genesis of the Homeric poems."<sup>2</sup> Scafoglio succeeds in doing just that, using the figure of Ajax as an interpretative lens to reconstruct the stratified oral tradition that lies at the root of Archaic epic, Homeric and cyclic alike.

Scafoglio's project contributes to the ongoing rehabilitation of Ajax, showing how the hero is a "living anachronism" in the world of Archaic epic (26). A careful study of Ajax's heroic profile suggests that he is a warrior who "comes from afar"—that is, from an earlier generation of heroes, closer in mythological origin to Heracles than his counterparts at Troy. We find traces of this forgotten past in the heroic traits that clearly set Ajax apart: his immense stature, his vintage

<sup>1</sup> *Le monde se divise en deux catégories: ceux qui divisent le monde en deux catégories et ceux qui ne le font pas.*

<sup>2</sup> For this citation, see *Homeric Contexts: Neoanalysis and the Interpretation of Oral Poetry*, edited by F. Montanari *et al.*, Berlin/Boston, De Gruyter, 2012, 7–8. The introduction of this volume nicely surveys the current hermeneutical landscape.

armor, and his old-fashioned fighting style. All of these vestiges point to Ajax's Mycenaean origins—which, in turn, explain the hero's frustrated fate in the later tradition. A heroic throwback, Ajax is inevitably (and quite literally) out of his element in epic poetry. In this way, the "bulwark of the Achaeans" (*Il.* 3.229) becomes the "unfulfilled hero" *par excellence*, the unhappy warrior who never can quite win (37).

In good French fashion, Scafoglio's argument unfolds *en trois parties*, which trace Ajax's story in the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, and the Epic Cycle. These three traditions all underscore the hero's *inachèvement*. In the *Iliad*, Ajax repeatedly falls short of his desire to kill Hector—and virtually vanishes once Achilles returns to do so. This Iliadic disappearing act finds its Odyssean equivalent in the *nekuia*, where Ajax's famous silence (*Od.* 11.563–564) captures in an eloquent (and meta-literary) way his inability to find his place in the world of epic poetry (75). Of course, this scene also alludes to the *denouement* of the Ajax myth: the Judgment of Arms and suicide, both of which stories are explicitly (and variously) told by Homer's *Epigonoï*. Scafoglio shows how, in the Epic Cycle, Ajax's "final defeat" actually comes after his suicide, when he is denied Homeric funeral rites (cremation) in favor of Mycenaean ones (inhumation). Burial thus seals the tragic fate of this Mycenaean misfit (100–103).

For Scafoglio, product and process work together nicely. Though the limits of our material evidence inevitably prevent definitive conclusions, the author's robust methodology—philological and literary, diachronic and synchronic—speaks for itself. Scafoglio's multidisciplinary approach also includes relevant iconographical evidence, although the images (black and white) provided in the three appendices are rather low in quality. From beginning to end, Scafoglio recognizes the bounds of his argument, regularly employing adverbial expressions to nuance his positions (*sans doute, probablement, peut-être*, etc.). Ultimately, critics will find it difficult to argue, for example, with his compelling theory of an "Ajax Song" in the pre-Homeric substratum of the oral tradition (35–39). This hypothesis greatly eases certain old Iliadic problems, such as the harsh transition between the *Homilia* (Book 6) and the *monomachia* (Book 7). Scholarly debate will center more on the author's fresh analysis of the cyclic fragments, which significantly reinterprets the nature and content of the *Little Iliad* (110). In all of this, Scafoglio advances the *status quaestionis*.

The monograph does, of course, pose a few challenges. Despite its clarity, Scafoglio's French will naturally limit the target audience in the States to graduate students and researchers. Readers who can follow the French will still sometimes

wonder where exactly Scafoglio is leading them. Repeatedly, at key moments, the figure of Ajax recedes into the background, seemingly forgotten in the forest of related interpretative questions. In his Introduction (4–5), the author acknowledges the presence of these digressions, which generally do enrich the central argument. In a way, the continual need to circle back to Ajax gives the text a fitting kind of “cyclic” feel. Moreover, it says something essential about the hero in question: since he comes from afar, Ajax cannot help but “rest in the shadows” (86).

In short, this little monograph lands a heavy punch. It will surely become a standard bibliographic reference for anyone who works on Ajax, Homer, or the Epic Cycle.

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