

## BOOK REVIEW

*Device and Composition in the Greek Epic Cycle*. By BENJAMIN SAMMONS. Oxford, UK and New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017. Pp. viii + 263. Hardback, \$85.00. ISBN 978-0-190-61484-3.

Within the context of classical scholarship, Benjamin Sammons' new monograph joins many recent efforts to rehabilitate ancient texts previously excluded from the literary canon – in this case, the cyclic poems, which critics from Aristotle onwards have compared unfavorably with the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. But in the context of Homeric studies, Sammons' book is strikingly original. In recent decades, the cyclic poems have most commonly been the focus of neo-analytical scholarship. But as Sammons observes, when neo-analysts explore intersections between the tropes of the major Homeric epics and the poems of the Epic Cycle, they tend to define the latter against the former and to treat the cyclic poems as a single category. Sammons, however, studies each poem of the cycle as a work of art in its own right, showing how each in its own way employs the compositional tools of the early Greek epic tradition.

Each of Sammons' chapters draws on Proclus' summaries of the Epic Cycle to discuss the use of one of these compositional tools. Chapter 1 shows that, like the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, the cyclic poets employed techniques such as analepsis and prolepsis in organizing their narratives. Sammons proposes, for example, that the *Cypria* began not with Zeus's plans to address the over-population of the earth (cf. fr. 1 Bernabé) or even with the marriage of Peleus and Thetis but rather with the Judgement of Paris, and that the two episodes just mentioned were incorporated in analepsis. In Chapter 2 Sammons identifies catalogues and catalogic structures in the cyclic poems: for instance, he is able to infer that the phrases *pollous anelontes* ("killing many") and *ta loipa laphura dianemontai* ("the remaining spoils are distributed") in Proclus' summary of the *Ilioupersis* allude to catalogues of slain Trojans and of spoils distributed after the fall of Troy. In Chapter 3 Sammons builds on Fenik's (*Studies in the Odyssey*, 1974) observation that "anticipatory doublets" can serve as large-scale structuring devices in Homeric epic. He contends that they could be used to structure entire poems, as with the *Aethi-*

*opsis* (Achilles defeats first Penthesileia and then Memnon) and *Telegony* (Odysseus' Ithacan adventures double his adventures in Thesprotia). In Chapter 4 Sammons explores the casts of characters in the cyclic epics. He finds that some of the poems focus on particular characters – Achilles and Odysseus are the protagonists of the *Aethiopis* and *Little Iliad* respectively – but that in poems such as the *Cypria* a number of characters compete for prominence. In Chapter 5 Sammons analyzes *aristeiai* in the Epic Cycle and posits that the structure of Iliadic *aristeiai* explored by Krischer (*Formale Konventionen*, 1971) represents a development from simpler structures reflected in the cyclic poems. In Chapter 6 he shows that the *Cypria* and *Aethiopis* resemble the *Iliad* in their complex divine apparatuses, but that these and other cyclic poems differ from the major Homeric epics in their use of divine intervention to signal important narrative developments.

Many of these observations are persuasive. Nevertheless, readers might hesitate before endorsing Sammons' opinions concerning the composition of the cyclic epics (Introduction, Appendix A). For Sammons, "The poems were composed by singers trained as *aidoi* in essentially the same tradition as Homer ... At some point they were committed to writing, most likely by the authors themselves or at their behest" (15). Sammons, then, argues both that the cyclic epics were the product of the same early Greek performance context as the major Homeric epics, and that they remained relatively unchanged in transmission. But it is also possible that they were the product of a fluid tradition and only reached the form known to Proclus or to his source at a relatively late date (cf. Finkelberg *CP* 95 [2000]). Granted, the differences between Proclus' and other descriptions of the cyclic poems (e.g., Helen and Paris stop at Sidon in Proclus' account of the *Cypria*, but according to Hdt. 2.117 the episode did not feature in the poem) are not sufficiently numerous to confirm the existence of "multiforms" of the cyclic epics. But neither can we be sure that such versions did not exist. Nor do we know whether the poems reflected in Proclus' summaries were composed by *aidoi* or, if they were, when they were first committed to writing: the *Aeneid*, for instance, incorporates structural devices found in the major Homeric epics (analepsis, catalogues, etc.) but was not composed orally.

Not everyone, then, will accept Sammons' conclusions in their stronger form – namely that divergences in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* from Proclus' versions of the cyclic epics (e.g., in the structuring of *aristeiai*; in the use of doublets to structure whole poems) show that the cyclic epics were more typical products of the early epic tradition than the major Homeric epics: Proclus' versions may not in

fact have been composed in archaic times. If those versions did employ traditional techniques – and Sammons’ demonstrations of structural similarities between the cyclic poems and the major Homeric epics give us reason to believe that this is the case – they might represent imitations/continuations of such techniques by a later poet.

Nonetheless, Sammons’ comparisons of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* with the Epic Cycle offer important insights into the poems reflected in Proclus’ summaries. Sammons has succeeded admirably in recovering those poems as works of art.

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