

BOOK REVIEW

The Homeric Battle of the Frogs and Mice. Edited by JOEL P. CHRISTENSEN and ERIK ROBINSON. London, UK: Bloomsbury, 2018. Pp. xii + 198. Hardback, \$114. ISBN: 978-1-3500-3594-2.

By the editors' own declaration, the aim of this edition of the *Batrakhomuomakhia* is to provide a text, translation and commentary of this *opusculum* that takes into account advances in oral formulaic analysis of epic diction, scholarship on the ancient fable, literary theory and the growing interest in non-canonical works of ancient literature. The Greek text is only 315 lines long, has been liberally edited to include once-suspect lines (especially ll. 42-52) and is presented without critical apparatus (a few variants are discussed in the commentary). The translation is quite serviceable (e.g., rendering the comic names of characters in English, such as Platelicker, Greenstalk, Cabbagetreader) and follows the Greek text rather than facing it. The edition is thus aimed at the student and casual reader "with just a bit of Greek" (x), and the commentary ranges from the nitty-gritty of identifying verb forms to pointing out literary parallels from epic and other genres. A glossary provides ample help for the Greek learner.

Thus far it would appear, then, that the book conforms to the desiderata of Bloomsbury's Greek Texts series. As the authors have focused on the literary discussion of the text, it is best to evaluate it along those lines. The introduction addresses the main topics of epic parody, the construction of Homeric verse and some of its deviations from standard epic diction. The literary commentary is judicious, particularly with the bizarre and entertaining cascade of epithets that concludes the poem as the crabs join in the fight. It will tell you throughout what words are outright post-Homeric, what phrases are pilfered or tweaked from Homeric usage, what stylistic features harken back to animal fable and what things seem deliberate absurdities. In the standard drive-by shooting style of classical commentaries, it does its job.

But at this point in classical studies, one cannot help but think a crucial dimension is lacking in this edition: a deeper appeal to seeing this text as an excellent entry into classical reception. The whole work can be seen as a product of

reception—a playful, parodic riff on the peculiar world of epic, undertaken centuries after the heyday of Homeric epic in performance. This is a mock epic world of decidedly written texts (as the proem states), but aping the diction of an oral-formulaic genre and creatively pushing it to new, comic ends. The authors mention the work's later popularity in Byzantine times, but the opportunity was lost to present an actual Byzantine text in the *Leithandschrift* style of approach, to allow the student to get the feel of a particular textual instantiation of the tradition as opposed to “the tradition” in more open terms.

As it stands, Christensen and Robinson present the reader with a very liberal and inclusive text, in hopes that “by including many of the problematic passages we will encourage readers to consider them in depth and make some of their own editorial selections” (4). But to what end? They suggest, “a more inclusive text recognizes the importance of the poem’s reception among various audiences,” but this doesn’t give much for the student to latch on to, other than a vague notion that just as Byzantine and earlier editors shaped their own texts based on their “tastes and assumptions about foregoing literary traditions, so too may modern readers” (5).

I would argue—perhaps unfairly—that the editors should have more courage in these convictions by considering the presentation of more than one version of the text (it’s so short, this is certainly possible), rather than a nebulous recension that is not yet an edition and that is tied to nowhere. By comparing a particular Byzantine manuscript version (which could include the context of whatever else was copied with it) to, say, an Early Modern print edition, the student not only would learn *more precisely* what the dynamics of tradition look like, but could learn other aspects of cultural history in terms of text production. There is a substantial early printing history of the work that includes Latin and vernacular translations, and at least a few pages of such a version could again help the student to glean some insight into the vitality of this peculiar *jeu d’esprit* and its outsized presence in the reception of the classical epic genre. By the 17th and 18th centuries, heroic epic was generally more threatened, one might even say, by the co-presence of mock epic than Homer or Virgil ever were in antiquity, and this particular text has a significant role in tweaking the vector of epic reception. So it would be important not just to look backward to the text’s genesis, but also forward to its reception in point of detail, with a thicker description of “modernity” than the reference to generic “modern readers.”

Of course, I am foisting an agenda on a book that largely meets the series’ and its own stated goals. But if we don’t begin to shift the rhetoric of classical

education—which is always already reception in action—even in cases like these, we'll miss the opportunity to enrich the students' understanding of the enduring importance of classical texts.

[Errata: page 21, Nonnus 4th or 5th century BCE *for* CE; page 11, “mouse lied [sic] in the water” *for* lay.]

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