

## BOOK REVIEW

*Die Ilias und ihr Anfang: Zur Handlungskomposition als Kunstform bei Homer.* By SVEN MEIER. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2018. Pp. 205. Hardback, €39.00. ISBN: 978-3-8253-6882-1.

Any reading of the *Iliad* must recognize that there are moments, particularly in the earlier parts of the poem, where the overall narrative stops and the piece gives way to digressions, smaller plot lines and interruptions. These can often appear as abstruse and unnecessary additions, that frustrate the narrative and place distance between the reader and the central thrust of the poem. Book 1 for instance tells us rather more of Nestor and ancient legends than actual details about the war and its leading protagonists. Although this may help establish Nestor's importance in offering advice and guidance to the leading protagonists later on, it can appear a rather peculiar focus when there is so much left unsaid about the events leading to the war. These digressions once played a central role in the divisive discussions between Homeric interpreters, and could lead to quite serious disagreements and conflicting perspectives on the merits of what could be rather paratactic prose. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century Homer's style could be, and often was, criticised for these excursions and deviations. In contrast, scholars in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in part as a result of Milman Parry's work, began to recognise the oral nature of the *Iliad*, and look again at these smaller plotlines and excursions. The scholarship has been divided between Unitarians and Analysts, those who view the poem as the product of one single figure, or the work of many, and the digressions can of course be used for both perspectives.

Writing as early as 1966 Norman Austin showed how the digressions were not irrelevant or ornamental, nor were they simply vestiges of the oral nature that surrounds the *Iliad*. They could be seen instead as crucial components in the creation of a structural whole for the poem, in particular when developing characters and tracking shifts or changes in their moods (and thus the narrative arc of the

poem). More recently Lynn-George saw the digressions as ways in which tension could be built and the narrative controlled. It is also worth remembering that ancient readers were aware of Homer's digressions; and while Quintilian praised Homer for using them as a rhetorical technique, Pliny the Elder sees it as a form of creativity and compares himself discussing his villa to Homer describing the shield of Achilles. Meier's work provides a new study of Books 2-7 of the *Iliad*, looking through the digressions, and is thus a most welcome endeavour. This is a book of great erudition, written in a fluent prose, and although there are some issues here and there, the overall argument is compelling.

Meier's work belongs to the Unitarian tradition, following in the example offered by Wolfgang Schadewaldt's *Iliasstudien*, first published in 1938. Shaping Meier's perceptive is the overall understanding of the poem as a structural whole, and this must be borne in mind as the analysis proceeds. The book is divided between three sections, with a succinct Introduction (9-15) and Conclusion (189-193). The scholarship drawn upon is wide-ranging and useful (195-205), although there is a tendency to focus a little too much on theory instead of analysis. This does not weaken the work, for the theories explored become rather more important as the book proceeds, but it does distract a little from the otherwise clear-sighted observations.

The introduction provides a good route into the topic, using the question "Wozu Homer?," to shine a light on German classical scholarship, the benefits of studying ancient Greek as well the merits offered by a literary interpretation. This anticipates the approaches seen later on, and paints a strong defence of the book's aims and ambitions (13-14). Rather more could have been made here of the "Homeric Question," with a more immediate discussion of how this work fits into current trends of Homeric scholarship, but it is nonetheless a clear and succinct opening.

The first chapter ("Die *Ilias* als ethische Dichtung und strukturelle Einheit," 15-48) asks important questions of the *Iliad*, and makes ambitious effort to work through a number of theoretical approaches. The first chapter has at its heart Aristotle (*Nicomachean Ethics* and *Poetics*), and ways of interpreting structure, plot and narrative. Although the discussion could be a little clearer here, and the structure

of the ideas rather more focused (to dismantle the various theoretical approaches), the close engagement with Aristotle provides a good foundation to the observations presented. It gives a useful framework against which to measure the narrative arc of the *Iliad*, while also presenting Aristotle's understanding of plot and unity. As Meier writes: "[t]he start of the story matches the actions of the character and each of the narrative steps contribute to make you understand what the individual character strives for and why he misses his goal" (48)<sup>1</sup>. All the other elements, digressions and asides does not challenge the unity of the *Iliad*, because each aspect becomes part of the wider narrative arc, which is the wrath of Achilles.

The second chapter ("Ist das Epos retardierend?," 49-88) continues the theoretical underpinning, but in contrast to the first, the ideas here becomes a touch more difficult to follow. In part this is because Meier is here seeking to challenge the necessity of functionality in poetic works, a complex topic that needs quite a lot of unpicking. The exploration of the letters exchanged between Goethe and Schiller is fluently written, and certainly interesting (when thinking about Kant and the legacy in historical writing), but needed to be placed more firmly in a clearly defined argument. While there is a strong sense of direction to the opening chapter, this one lacks the focus and precision needed fully to bring everything together. This is a shame, as the points being made are persuasive but would be more so if they were established in a slightly more analytical (and argumentative) manner.

The final chapter ("Die Bücher 2-7 als Retardation und als Handlungskomponente," 89-188) is where Meier applies all these theories and approaches to the poem itself, and unsurprisingly this is the strongest section of the book. Here Meier's argument is presented with care and precision, and he carefully reviews the opening digressions that have so often been dismissed or viewed as superfluous to the overall narrative. Beginning first with Thetis' plea to Zeus, Meier challenges the view of this episode as a delaying incident ignored until Book 8 before then

<sup>1</sup> *Der Anfang der Erzählung stimmt mit der Handlung des Charakters überein, und auch die einzelnen Erzählschritte diene dazu, verständlich zu machen, was der jeweilige Charakter erstrebt und warum er sein Ziel verfehlt*

considering how to read Books 2-7. It can be tempting to view these actions as windows into the previous years of the long war; echoes of previous battles and conflicts. Meier urges us not to see the *Iliad* in this way. Instead, we are to see in Books 2-7 the opening salvo of the tenth year of war. This is framed with great confidence, and provides a persuasive interpretation of the poem, grounded in Aristotle's thoughts on structure and Schadewaldt's *Iliasstudien*. The chapter then looks to the plan of Zeus within different character actions, in particular Agamemnon and Hector. This is where Meier's analysis comes to the fore, with a close reading of critical moments and the relationship between characters, placing them all in the last year of the war. These digressions may not serve a functional purpose; but they can form a structural unity when viewed through Zeus' plan.

To close, Meier should be commended for producing an important volume that asks complex questions of Homer and the *Iliad*, and throughout engages with an impressive array of scholarly perspectives. In part this awareness of different interpretations and approaches distracts a little from the author's own viewpoint (particularly in the opening chapters). As the book proceeds, the argument becomes more nuanced and focused, and the conclusion offered is persuasive. The book is strongest when engaging with the characters and exploring the temporal realities of the poem and its subjects. The digressions can be viewed as important elements creating a sense of structure and unity in the *Iliad*.

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