

BOOK REVIEW

Homer and the Poetics of Gesture. By ALEX C. PURVES. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2019. Pp. xiv + 218. Hardback, \$74.00. ISBN 978-0-19-085792-9.

Many readers of this review will remember the feeling of exhilaration produced by their first encounter with truly excellent Homeric scholarship. Bringing Homer's verses to (metaphorical) life through scholarship requires academic skill and rigor, but it is also something of a magic trick; an alchemical feat that few contemplate undertaking, let alone pull off. For those lucky enough to find our way to such scholarship, it is a rare and precious gift. Even rarer, at least in my experience, is the opportunity to revisit this feeling of awestruck joy once reading scholarship has become one's job. So it is with gratitude as well as deep admiration that I attempt to describe and praise Alex Purves' masterful study of bodies and movement in the Homeric poems.

The book takes shape around a foundational insight that is so tantalizingly straightforward and so manifestly true that it is almost inconceivable that no one has thought of it before: just as the formulaic language of hexameter epic builds meaning through extended patterns of traditional verbal expression, so too do the bodies that fill Homer's poems create their own patterns of meaning through the structured repetition of formulaic movements (what Purves calls "gestures"). As Purves puts it, gesture in the Homeric poems "can be understood to stage a process of articulation through limbs and joints just as epic verse does through verse and meter. [...] The Homeric body, like the Homeric line of verse, cannot help recalling and repeating earlier versions of itself, and, just like Homeric language, it has its own movement vocabulary and rhythm, its own way of fitting into the space of the line" (7).

The book begins with an introductory chapter that, in addition to setting out the basic premise of what is to come, offers a broader framework for thinking about bodies and embodiment that will be of interest (indeed, should be required reading) for anyone wishing to explore this topic in Homer or elsewhere. Purves here gives shape to a methodology that is sophisticated and innovative, yet intelligible even to undergraduate readers. Purves invites us to view ancient

texts through the lens of modern theories of embodied movement. The mechanical/technological approaches inspired by the invention of still- and moving-photography in the 19th century permit us to better appreciate how “gesture” can be understood “as ‘poetics’” (7); to grasp how gesture must be considered in relationship to time and that it stands as a discrete category of investigation even as it contributes to more complex structures of meaning (22). Bourdieu and, especially, Merleau-Ponty allow us to see the repetitive habits of the/a body as providing “a set of possibilities for addressing the present moment” (15); and, by extension, we can think of their patterning in Homer’s verses as “stitches or folds in the poem that gather it together” (16). Purves invokes these contemporary voices to train our interpretive eyes to a certain type of double vision whereby we can keep sight of “two formulaic systems” at work in the gestural poetics of Homer’s texts: “both the practice of oral composition in performance and the habits and training of [the character’s] own (fictional) body as it reacts to the circumstances in which the narrative places him” (8).

In each of the five chapters that follow, Purves explores the poetics of a single gesture as expressed in Homeric poetry: “Falling,” “Running,” “Leaping,” “Standing” and “Reaching.” It is not possible in this review to do justice to the elegance and insight of her interpretations, but I emphasize that they are not simply aesthetic exercises but rather address the major themes of Homeric epic. In the “Falling” chapter, for example, a preliminary examination of that most repetitive of Iliadic gestures – the hero’s fall in battle – expands into a broader contemplation of the poem’s notion of mortality, exploring how falls of gods, such as those of Hephaestus and Aphrodite, situate divine bodies within the emphatically mortal “formulaic” frame of death. “Running,” with its emphasis on catching up and overtaking, not only establishes itself as the definitive heroic gesture of Achilles, but also calls attention a key facet of Odysseus’ characteristic excellence: just as he is ready to forgo his own name in pursuit of his aims, the Ithacan regularly exploits his willingness to be “last” (*husteros*) in order to triumph over opponents. “Leaping” explores in detail the sequence by which the spring-loaded body prepares for battle, but also points to moments of indecision or hesitation and allows us to viscerally perceive how the “momentarily deviant bodies” of Homer’s heroes activate a sense of “possibility and uncertainty” within the poems (109). “Standing” is “an in-between state” and is therefore more challenging to understand in terms of formulaic repetition (117). But, by the same token, insofar as it permits scrutiny of the “relationship between standing and movement” it sheds light on the sequencing and spatial structuring of embodied gestures. Purves

deploys standing as a tool for focussing on relationships between bodies – be it Achilles’ solitude or Penelope’s repeated appearances flanked by her two slaves – and the subtle ways that stillness calls attention to the temporalities of embodied experience. In the final chapter, “Reaching” Purves delves further into relationality, especially as it involves touch, and the ways in which embodied relationships call attention to the materiality of gesture. Like “Falling,” “Reaching” takes death as its theme, focussing on how the gestures around Hector’s corpse communicate grief and loss as embodied affect.

The scale of Purves’ accomplishment in this book is simply dazzling. She has offered a wealth of new interpretive insights into specific Homeric passages while at the same time providing a methodological model that can be applied to the broader study of bodies and embodied performance in antiquity. The impact of this book will, no doubt, be played out much like the gestures to which she has turned our attention: over time and in a range of different registers and patterns. With her account of Homer’s poetics of gesture, Purves invites scholars to once again assume the crouch of Homer’s heroes poised on the cusp of new interpretive leaps.

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