

BOOK REVIEW

Homer's Thebes: Epic Rivalries and the Appropriation of Mythical Pasts. By ELTON T. E. BARKER and JOEL P. CHRISTENSEN. Hellenic Studies 84. Cambridge, MA, and London, UK: Harvard University Press, 2020. Pp. x + 318. Paperback, \$29.95. ISBN: 978-0-674-23792-6.

Barker and Christensen explore how the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* selectively redeploy Theban narratives and appropriate key themes of Theban myth to assert their own pre-eminence. The book marks the culmination of many years of collaboration, and most of the chapters are revised versions of previously published work, but they gain value here by being brought together into a larger framework. The authors offer a series of detailed and attractive interpretations, ranging widely across archaic hexameter poetry. They are especially well attuned to the larger political and ideological significances of the maneuvers they trace. In particular, they repeatedly emphasize how our surviving archaic epics chart not only the end of the race of heroes, but also the development of social and political institutions for the post-heroic age.

After a clear and helpful introduction, the first three chapters focus on Theban characters who are marginalized and distanced from Homer's world. Both Tydeus (Ch. 1) and Heracles (Ch. 2) emerge as emblems of a bygone and outdated era, their exceptional individualism a counterpoint to the *Iliad's* preference for collective action. In the *Odyssey* (Ch. 3), Oedipus' "imperfect *nostos*" and his twisted relationship with Epicaste serve as a foil for Odysseus' successful homecoming and his harmonious union with Penelope. Together, these three chapters contain many illuminating close readings. My most niggling question concerns Heracles: how central is his Theban background to his Homeric characterization? As the authors briefly acknowledge, the *Iliad* seems to show little interest in this origin (125), only mentioning it in passing (*Il.* 14.323-4, 19.98-9), in contrast to the emphatically "Theban" Teiresias of the *Odyssey* (238n93). I was left wondering whether this more Panhellenic Heracles can really be grouped in the same camp as Tydeus and Oedipus, whose myths revolve around the city of Thebes itself.

The following three chapters explore interactions on a broader and more thematic level. At times, it is harder to keep track of the larger arguments, but there is still a great deal of stimulating material here.

Chapters 4 and 5 center on strife, with analysis of the *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, *Theogony* and *Works and Days*, alongside our surviving fragments of Theban epic. Thebes comes in and out of focus, and we learn a lot about strife in archaic epic in general, including its competitive and co-operative aspects and its recurring association with *neikos* (quarrel), *dasmos* (division), and *krisis* (judgment). But the authors also suggest more specific parallels and contrasts between the Theban tradition and the rest of early Greek epic: with its opening clash between Achilles and the quasi-Oedipal Agamemnon, the *Iliad* almost begins by replaying interne-cine Theban conflict (195, 203), while the final burial of Hector resolves that recurring anxiety of Theban myth, the unburied corpse (227). I did wonder how distinctively “Theban” some of the relevant motifs are. For example, in the case of contested or unequal divisions among brothers (196-202), we could also think – beyond Oedipus’ sons – of Poseidon’s fractious relationship with Zeus (*Il.* 13.353-5; 15.165-7, 181-3, 185-99); the division of inheritance among Castor’s sons (*Od.* 14.208-10); and Hesiod’s clash with Perses (*Op.* 37-41); the authors only note this last *comparandum* (240-43). I suspect that we might sometimes be dealing with broader typological patterns across archaic poetry. But even so, the authors have still demonstrated the riches to be gained by comparing different traditions’ deployments of such themes.

The final chapter has a broader historical scope, exploring epic rivalries in the context of a growing Panhellenism. Among various case studies, the authors identify intra-regional rivalries in Boeotia (Thebes vs. Orchomenus) and ultimately suggest that this Boeotian in-fighting might have contributed to the eventual disappearance of Theban epic in the face of the more synoptic Trojan tradition (273-4). These broader concerns continue into the conclusion, where the authors explore the tradition that Hector’s bones were relocated to Thebes: a “Theban revenge.”

Homer’s Thebes is thus a wide-ranging and rewarding read. My only main concern is the framing of the authors’ methodology (though not its actual application). In the introduction, they survey different approaches to Homeric reference: allusion, neoanalysis, intertextuality and traditional referentiality. This survey is admirably clear, but at times it feels overly schematic or even misrepresentative. How, for example, should we square the claim that the first three

approaches are only interested in “mono-directional” relations (19), when we have heard of intertextuality’s “bidirectionality” two pages earlier (17)? Moreover, the insistence that these three approaches all concern “relations between actual and fixed texts” (19) seems to be contradicted by the immediately preceding discussion of Jonathan Burgess’ “textless intertextuality.” It is also unfortunate that the book seems to have been completed long before its final publication, meaning that the authors do not engage with important recent publications that would have proved very useful interlocutors for their project.¹ Finally, more copy editing could have ironed out an infelicitous number of typos, inconsistencies and missing/incomplete items of bibliography.

Nevertheless, the authors end their introduction by sensibly promising to “ply as eclectic an approach as possible” (43), and their project ultimately demonstrates the benefits and advantages of applying a flexible range of tools and methodologies to early Greek poetic interactions. The authors close by revealing the volume’s underlying “subtext”: to better understand “how to ‘read’ Homer” (284). But their book in fact does far more than this, helping us to better read archaic epic as a whole. Amid the authors’ detailed observations and broader arguments, there is much of value here for both students and scholars of early Greek poetry and myth.

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¹ E.g. Maureen Alden’s *Para-Narratives in the Odyssey* (Oxford, 2017); Benjamin Sammons’ *Device and Composition in the Greek Epic Cycle* (New York, 2017).