

BOOK REVIEW

Clash of Cultures: A Psychodynamic Analysis of Homer and the Iliad. By VINCENZO SANGUINETI. New York, NY: Lexington Books, 2021. Pp. xii + 133. Hardback, \$90.00. ISBN: 978-1-7936-4405-3.

A disclaimer: this book was not what I had anticipated. Sanguineti is not a professional classicist offering an interdisciplinary reading of the *Iliad* informed by psychological theories and methodologies, but rather a psychiatrist who psychoanalyzes Homer. As I am not a psychiatrist, I cannot comment on the psychoanalysis itself (although I note my surprise that if there is any “Goldwater Rule” barring the psychoanalysis of long dead poets, Sanguineti never addresses it); my review therefore will focus on the author’s interpretation of Homer.

Sanguineti’s unique tack enables him to escape the “Western sociocultural basin” for an analysis of Homer’s “Zeitgeist” (p. 5-6) and to bring to light a “sub rosa” (p. 13) reading of the *Iliad* as a song of Hector rather than a celebration of Achilles. He reconstructs the historical context out of which Homer and the poem emerged. First, he uncritically accepts as fact the ancient biographic traditions about Homer, and so accepts that Homer was born and raised either in Chios or Smyrna, sometime in the 10th-9th centuries. He does not try to resolve how Homer could have had two hometowns, nor does Sanguineti seem to realize that this discrepancy perhaps casts doubt on the traditions’ veracity. Moreover, he accepts the ancient etymology of ὄμηρος as a dialectal word for “hostage” and (again uncritically) accepts the account in Lucian’s *True Story* that Homer was Babylonian. Sanguineti’s argument is that Homer was a non-Greek poet who sang in Greek, which results in the *Iliad*’s anti-Achilles (and Greek) perspective. Moreover, Sanguineti subscribes to the views that oral singers preserved the song until its later textualization and that the Alexandrians had an important hand in editing the text. Both are of course defensible and held by prominent Homerists; however, Sanguineti never addresses how his understanding of these textualization processes result in a multiplicity of “authors” and should thus complicate his psychoanalysis of a unitary Homer.

Sanguinetti further contextualizes his Homer against the Bronze Age Collapse (ca. 1200 BCE). Furthermore, he assumes the Trojan War as a real event (based on the Ahhiyawa letters) and reinterprets the war as part of the Ionian colonization movement, understanding the Trojan War part of a larger project of Greek expansionism, imperialism and colonialism. While the Trojan War is perhaps a distant cultural memory of the Bronze Age Collapse, Sanguinetti leans into this interpretation and claims that the fall of Troy must have been a traumatic collective event for native peoples. Accordingly, Sanguinetti's Homer grew up in the wreckage of Troy, whose fall he begrudges his Greek overlords. Herein lies the reason behind Homer's portrayal of Achilles. Although Sanguinetti does not use this language, he is essentially decolonizing the text and recovering a lost Near Eastern voice.

I have summarized the first half of this very short book. What remains is Sanguinetti's reading of the *Iliad*, but it adds little that is not argued more persuasively in James Redfield's classic *Nature and Culture in the Iliad: The Tragedy of Hector*. However, Sanguinetti betrays no knowledge of this foundational book. Indeed, a major shortcoming of Sanguinetti's project is that its bibliography is a mere 1.5 pages and mostly comprises translations of Classical texts (including four separate translations of the *Iliad*). Consequently, he seems to labor under the impression that he is the first in millennia to realize that the *Iliad*'s portrayal of Achilles is unflattering. Perhaps it is a fair assessment of much of the pop-culture reception of the Trojan War (though complex portrayals in *The Song of Achilles* or *Troy: The Fall of a City* may belie a not so monolithic pop reception), but it is not the state of the professional field.

I applaud Sanguinetti's efforts to bring to the forefront Near Eastern elements and to decolonize the *Iliad*, although his attempts are problematic. First, Sanguinetti treats all of the Near East as though it were a culturally homogenous area – as though Hittites, Babylonians, Lycians etc. are all the same. This is by now an outmoded and well-recognized Orientalist trope (“the East” seen as an undifferentiated mass) and troublingly Sanguinetti uses Orientalist language throughout. Because Sanguinetti understands the *Iliad* to describe real events, he remarks that Hector's and Sarpedon's deaths mark one of the darkest and most consequential chapters in ancient Near Eastern history (17-18). The obvious factual issues aside, here is the epitome of Orientalism, which valorizes a (proto-)Western myth over Near Eastern emic historical accounts such as Mesopotamian chronicles or the Hebrew Bible.

That being said, Sanguineti makes numerous interesting observations – and I use “observation” purposefully here because inevitably he does not follow them up with dedicated analysis. For example, he remarks on how Homer stresses the much larger size of the Achaean army vis-à-vis the Trojan army in the dual catalogues of Book 2. As he notes, normally we would expect such a situation to redound to the Trojans’ greater glory. He makes similar intriguing observations about Achilles’ final defeat of Hector in Book 22. These observations raise important questions about why Homer frames his poem the way that he does that could be fruitfully explored. But again, these observations are not followed with analysis to make a convincing argument. With more thorough research and consultation with a professional classicist, these seeds of wisdom could likely have sprouted into an interesting contribution to our understanding of Homer and the *Iliad*.

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