BOOK REVIEW

One Man Show: Poetics and Presence in the Iliad *and* Odyssey. By KATHERINE KRETLER. Cambridge, MA: Center for Hellenic Studies, Harvard University, 2020. Pp. 384. Paperback, $24.95. ISBN: 978-0-674-98002-0.

Katherine Kretler's *One Man Show: Poetics and Presence in the* Iliad *and* Odyssey is a challenging book to read; but the reader who invests the time necessary to acclimate to the author's rather idiosyncratic style and digest her argument will find the effort worthwhile. If there were a spiritual successor to Gregory Nagy's *The Best of the Achaeans,* then this is it. Kretler writes passionately and evinces a profound knowledge of Homer, Homeric criticism, linguistics, continental philosophy and theories of the theater. *One Man Show* offers a deep reading of key books in both *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and argues that public oral performance of Homeric verse is not just something extra but is integral to the meaning of these poems.

Kretler's book is a revision of her University of Chicago doctoral thesis. Yet, the book bears few signs of its origins as a graduate thesis and reads like the work of an established, confident Homeric scholar who knows intimately the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* as well as the vast scholarship in English, German, French and Italian on the poems. Indeed, the bibliography is one of the book's many strengths, as it includes not only standard philological works in Homeric studies but also works in theater and the related niche category of ancient poetry in performance. One will find Chantraine's *Grammaire homérique* and Taplin's *Homeric Soundings* cited alongside Artaud's *The Theater and Its Double* and Brook's *The Empty Space* in ways that enrich one's understanding of Homer and challenge one's understanding of the term "performance" as it has been increasingly used by philologists.

While the bibliography impresses one even at first glance, some might initially find the book's organization bizarre or even pretentious. The structure of Kretler's book recalls that of Claude Lévi-Strauss's *The Raw and the Cooked.* Readers of Lévi-Strauss will remember that the great anthropologist used a musical metaphor to give structure to his book on myth arguing that "the structure of

myths can be revealed through a musical score"[1] and that "music and mythology bring man face to face with potential objects of which only the shadows are actualized, with conscious approximations … of inevitably unconscious truths which follow them."[2] Accordingly, the anthropologist begins his book with an "overture," his first chapter is a "theme and variation," the second, a sonata, the third a fugue and so on. While neither citing Lévi-Strauss nor so obviously imitating his conceit, Kretler nevertheless begins her study of Homer with a programmatic introduction and intersperses two "interludes" between her four chapters, ending with two appendices that provide glosses on the rhapsode in ancient art and the rhapsodic staff as a prop. Moreover, a recurring term for Kretler is "musical chairs," by which she means that "the solo performer … is able to enact one character stepping into the position of another [character], thereby arriving at the 'source of action' and receiving the impetus to act'" (75). While drama and theater are the more direct points of reference for Kretler than music as she analyzes Homeric performance, music is never far away, and one senses a kind of musical structure lying beneath the book.

The specific organization of the book is as follows. In the long "Introduction" (1-47) Kretler announces her program, namely to "plumb the virtues of the Homeric poems as scripts for solo performance" and "to do for Homer what scholars have been doing for drama and choral poetry: to bring out the totality of the experience of these works on the stage, as opposed to the page" (1). To engage the "totality of the experience" of Homer, Kretler proposes two terms, found in her book's subtitle, to study the two dimensions she sees in Homeric performance: "poetics" and "presence." By "poetics" she explains that she means "the fabrication, selection, and assembly of words, lines, images, scenes, episodes – all the way to emplotment … in the sense of *poēsis* or composition/making" (11). This would seem to be a pretty conventional use of the term. In contrast, the term that she pairs with poetics, "presence," she defines as that which is "*genesis,* in the sense of 'becoming' rather than 'origin.'" She continues: "'Presence' in the present study includes all the dynamics that solo performance activates, and deploys, among bard, audience, and character, the story-world and the world of performance" (11). She then goes on to insist on a nuance between "presence" and "performance," arguing that the words "are not coterminous" (11). It is in this

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[1] Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked.* Trans. John and Doreen Weightman, Chicago, 1969: 15.
[2] Lévi-Strauss, 17-18.

nuanced use of the term "presence" that the book makes its greatest contribution;
for while one might contend that the parts of the book that deal with Homeric
poetics are just conventional philological study, Kretler always ties poetic assess-
ment of Homer to presence to explain layers of meaning that can only be actual-
ized in performance by the solo performer. Kretler's introduction might be read
as a manifesto of her theory of poetics and presence, as she draws upon Plato, Ar-
istotle, Longinus and a host of modern scholars before offering two examples of
her theory in practice by looking at poetics and presence in the opening of the *Il-
iad*, 1.1-26 and in the famous and ghastly prophesy of Theoclymenos to the suit-
ors in *Odyssey* 20.345-57.

   The individual chapters and interludes that follow show Kretler examining
ways in which the Homeric bard creates poetry and makes it present in solo per-
formance, becoming various characters, calling attention to inanimate objects
(helmets, swords, scepters) and drawing in the audience so that it is no longer a
passive entity, but becomes part of the performance as characters addressed
within epic. Fundamental in her investigation is the use of Aristotle's term *atopon*
(the un-placed, the out of place) which Kretler equates with Freud's term *das Un-
heimliche* (the uncanny). She suggests that the goal of Homeric poetry is to pro-
duce an unfamiliar, uncanny world for an audience rather than to provide any re-
alistic picture of a past world (47; 51). Chapter 1 "The Elements of Poetics and
Presence," (49-105) develops further the theory outlined in the Introduction.
This chapter looks at a myriad of heroes and highlights uncanny aspects of their
appearance, as characters emerge from the bard and blend with him or with other
characters. Thus Kretler studies the apostrophe of Patroklos at *Iliad* 16.787
("then, O Patroklos, the end of your life showed forth for you"), given in the past
tense, a line which brings the narrator to the battlefield where Patroklos is already
dead, while in the narrative as it unfolds, Patroklos is still living, though wounded,
and suggests "an empathy between narrator and character" that additionally
aligns the character Patroklos with Achilles, who will mourn Patroklos (56-7).
Similar meditations follow for Diomedes, Agamemnon, Helen, Menelaos, Idom-
eneus, Meriones, Noemon, and finally Odysseus. The examination of Odysseus
and his reaction to the third song of Demodokos in *Odyssey* 8 is especially
thought-provoking. Kretler shows that in performance the bard seems to stand
over all the characters in the song in a kind of "Russian dolls" arrangement – the
Greeks who emerge from the horse, the dead husband, his wife mourning over
him, Odysseus crying as he remembers it all – and that at the last "Odysseus

erupts out into the speech of the bard as the narrator, disrupting the narrative process – that is, the performance itself" (100).

In Chapter 2, "Marpessa, Kleopatra, and Phoenix" (107-165) Kretler takes a deep look at Phoenix's speech in the Embassy to Achilles (*Iliad* 9.434-605). The argument here, in Kretler's own words, is that "While the performer is becoming Phoenix, Phoenix is becoming another character from the deep, 'heroic' past: Kleopatra, wife of Meleager" (107). Kretler's reexamination of ring composition in Phoenix's speech is original and provocative and leads to the book's first interlude. "Interlude 1. Ring Thinking: Phoenix in *Iliad* 23" (167-194) is a structuralist exploration of the Phoenix character that links his gestures or "kinesthetics" (another of Kretler's *Lieblingswörter*) in *Iliad* 9 to his presence in *Iliad* 23 but also to a phoenix-horse at *Iliad* 23.454-55, the phoenix-bird of Greek and Egyptian mythology and images of the Homeric character Phoenix in Etruscan and Roman art.

Chapter 3, "Half-Burnt. The Wife of Protesilaos In and Out of the *Iliad*" (195-235) digs into the backstory of the Trojan War, exploring the death of Protesilaos and the way memory of him haunts the space around his ship where events unfold in *Iliad* 15 and 16. In the book's subsequent section, "Interlude 2. A Source for the *Iliad*'s Structure" (237-242), Kretler picks up on connections she has been following between women characters in the *Iliad* such as Marpessa, Kleopatra and Protesilaos's wife to argue that Hesiod's *Catalogue of Women* inspired not only the catalogue of heroines in *Odyssey* 11 and the list of Zeus's conquests in *Iliad* 14 but the very plot of the *Iliad*. While existing in the background, the stories of these women exert a powerful influence on the epic's structure.

Chapter 4, "The Living Instrument: *Odyssey* 13-15 in Performance," (243-321), is the book's longest chapter. The title alludes to the passage in Aristotle's *Politics* 1253b about the slave as a "living instrument." This chapter offers, among other things, an extended investigation of the relationship between Odysseus and Eumaeus, arguing that far from being the submissive slave, Eumaeus "forces the hero to confront the reality of slavery from the slave's perspective, releasing the hero's monopoly on the body of the bard" (246). This chapter encourages a new reading of *Odyssey* 13-15 that could prompt worthwhile discussions about the nature of slavery in antiquity.

In her "Conclusion" (323-325) Kretler brings together the various parts of her argument that poetics and presence are coequal components of the epic experience. In the book's final paragraph, she writes

> If we pay careful attention to the script, and if we elevate per-
> formance to the same level as poetics, the two become inter-
> twined, change each other, and add up to something com-
> pletely new. Rather than allusions we have intrusions into
> body and space. Background stories foment a kind of uncon-
> scious, not an 'intertextual unconscious' or a psychological
> one imputed to a single character, but a walled-off wellspring
> of memory and emotion that is shared among poem, charac-
> ter, and the body of the bard. To entwine poetics and pres-
> ence is to produce, or recover, a living thing. (325)

Two appendices follow the conclusion, Appendix A "Rhapsodes in Vase Paint-
ing; Rhapsōidia," (327-334) and Appendix B, "The Homeric Performer, the Staff,
and 'Becoming the Character'" (335-341). As noted above, there is a full bibliog-
raphy, a subject index and an index of Homeric passages.

   Conventional wisdom says that one should not judge a book by its cover.
However, Henry Fuseli's dark, haunting Romantic painting *Achilles Seeking to
Seize the Shade of Patroclus* (1803) that graces the cover aptly captures the mood
of Kretler's book. Kretler invites readers to the show performed by the Homeric
bard, lets the show begin and then starts to pull off the multiple masks that the
bard and, indeed, the audience wear. By the end of the book one is left with a
sense, like that evoked by the Fuseli painting, of having seen and heard beautiful
and strange Homeric ghosts in places where one has been many times before but
seen nothing or understood only partially. Kretler offers many original insights
into key passages in *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. This is a significant book, a must for any-
one who loves Homeric poetry and poetry in performance.

<div align="right">TIMOTHY WUTRICH</div>

Case Western Reserve University, trw14@case.edu