

Review: Jonathan L. Ready (ed.) (2024). *Oxford critical guide to Homer’s Iliad*. Oxford: OUP.

By Wayne Rimmer

Given the scope of Classics, it is especially important to establish whom a book is aimed at. Homer is the most traditional element of the most traditional discipline, that is literature, so both the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* attract a wide audience. It has long been realised that many readers will access the poems through translation yet still want to engage with a scholarship largely compiled by the classically trained. Peter Jones has been a champion of making Homer inclusive, for example through commentaries based on the translated text (Jones, 2003), but many a book has boldly claimed to cater for both classicists and the general public, with an attempted middle course not really satisfying either. There still lingers some reluctance to accommodate non-Greek readers of Homer, partly because they are positioned, with no little snobbery, as hostage to the conundrums of literary translation.

The Oxford critical guide to Homer’s Iliad (OCG) is candid about its audience and intent. The foreword of the editor Jonathan Ready, Professor of Classical Studies at the University of Michigan, states two well-motivated considerations. One is that some readers will not know Greek. Now is not the time to get into the debate about what is lost in translation, although I would say that pontification such as “To know Homer, the real Homer, you do have to come to him in Greek” (Murphy, 2006) is often naïve. (There is no “real Homer” out there.) Supplying translation throughout is pragmatic. The second consideration is that as a teaching resource most users will want to refer to individual books. Hence, OCG goes through the twenty-four books of the *Iliad* in turn, each critiqued by a different author so that “[t]heir distinctive approaches emerge in the individual chapters” (p. viii.) Although the division of the *Iliad* into books is a not undisputed convenience (Heiden, 1998), a book-by-book approach allows users to read OCG selectively. Coherence is provided by each chapter having the same structure of summary, themes, poetics and references.

Before picking from this chocolate box, I would recommend first reading Ready’s Introduction chapter. Unpacking the famous first line of the *Iliad*, this provides a general background to the *Iliad*, such as the link between $\alpha\epsilon\iota\delta\epsilon$ (sing) and the poem’s oral tradition. As familiar ground, this is aimed more at the newcomer to Homer, but it is a concise and engaging account. What will appeal to advanced students is Ready’s discussion of the transmission of the text and “wild” papyri written before 150 BCE that differ from the version eventually (semi)established. For example, one such papyrus expands upon Achilles’ grief for Patroclus (*Il.*23.221-4), adding to the simile of a dead son with the pathos of a widowed wife. Constrained by space, Ready makes a strong case that wild papyri reflect “the components of a successful performance” (p. 5), i.e., a rendition sensitive to audience reception. This is a short but welcome departure from the standard dismissal of rogue readings in the quest for the holy grail of a definitive *Iliad*. For those with a deeper scholarly interest, Ready provides references to his 2019 title on wild papyri.

The foreword makes the point that some books of the *Iliad* have received less attention than others (the orange creams in the chocolate box.) As Ready’s examples (p. vii) are “the battle books of 11 to 15”, I have chosen the chapter dealing with book 11 to illustrate the detail of OCG. This chapter (pp. 129-142) is written by Maureen Alden, described interestingly as an “independent scholar” in the notes on contributors (p. 315). From her previous publications, there is no doubt about Alden’s credentials, but it is rare in academia to see writers operating outside educational institutions, almost always universities: the other twenty-three contributors are situated within universities, mostly holding professorial rank. As a side issue to this review, perhaps the voice of commentators is rather limited to those fortunate enough to hold tenure, and thus access to time and funding for research.

Alden’s treatment of book 11 follows the OCG pattern of summary, themes, poetics and references. The summary shows Ready to be correct in that this is essentially a battle book, but the complexity of the narrative, the ebbing and waning of the fortunes of war, belies his earlier claim (p. 2) that “[t]he *Iliad* is a character-driven work more than a plot-driven work.” The identity of the hero is essential, but in part this is moulded by the plot. For example, the rout of the Achaeans cements Achilles’ sense of indispensability to the cause. Alden rather understates this with “[Achilles] takes a

keen interest in the effect his withdrawal is having on the Greeks’ (p. 133). The tone with which Achilles (Il. 610-611) imagines “περὶ γούνατ’ ἐμὰ στήσεσθαι Ἀχαιοὺς // λισσομένους” (“the Achaeans standing at my knees, begging”) combines contempt and schadenfreude. Only a generous reading would attribute any pathos to Achilles. He feels enhanced by the Greeks’ struggles because this allows him to position himself as saviour; conversely, a Greek victory would undermine his value to the cause and consequently identity. The plot is thus far more than backdrop.

Alden’s themes section acts as a commentary on book 11 in that it broadly follows the narrative sequence, highlighting and unpacking key features of language and plot development. When commenting on language, Alden manages to accommodate readers without Greek, as in her explanation of how the temporal clauses “Ὀφρα...τόφρα...ἤμος” (“while...so long...when...”) in ll. 84-86 switch perspective. The “Ὀφρα...τόφρα...” correlative clauses “[bookend] a period of inconclusive and anonymous battle” (p. 130), but “ἤμος”, through the simile of a woodcutter resting, provides “focus on the significant and irreversible actions of individual fighters” (p. 130). More could be said regarding this sequence, for instance the significance of inserting the woodcutter and a scene from peacetime amidst the war discourse, but Alden has made the reader with or without Greek sensitive to the poetic diction. Also very helpful in this section is the cross-referencing of themes elsewhere in the *Iliad*, and even *Odyssey*. For instance, linking Coön’s revenge attack on Agamemnon (Il. 248ff) to the concept of *ποινή* (blood-price), Alden cites Achilles’ killing of twelve Trojans as recompense for Patroclus’ death in 24.175-176, and the final book of the *Odyssey* where the relatives of the slaughtered suitors are shamed by their inability to exact *ποινή*.

OCG allows contributors freedom of focus, and for the section on poetics in this chapter, Alden chooses to explore two areas: para-narrative, evidenced through Nestor’s speech to Patroclus, and simile, attested more in book 11 than any other book of the *Iliad*. My own lens briefly falls on Alden’s treatment of para-narrative, defined in opposition to primary narrative, compromising the main plot line of the *Iliad*. Nestor’s typically expansive speech is categorised according to para-narrative purpose and Alden (p. 136) claims as the “business part” the retelling of Nestor’s defence of a besieged city because this is cleverly designed to mirror the current conflict and entice Patroclus into battle. Alden offers several convincing parallels between Nestor’s para-narrative and the present

situation. For instance, Peleus’ reluctance for his son Nestor to fight (ll. 717-719) corresponds to Achilles’ protective stance with regard to Patroclus, manifest in book 16 and Achilles’ injunction on Patroclus to limit his involvement in the war. As Nestor defied his father and played a decisive role in the conflict, the para-narrative posits, with tragic error, that Patroclus can also resist external pressures in the pursuit of glory. While Alden perhaps overstates the match between Nestor’s youthful exploits and Patroclus’ war designs (the Trojan war is a much weightier event than the local skirmish Nestor was involved in), the fact that Patroclus does enter the fray is evidence of the “rhetorical effectiveness of Nestor’s story” (p. 137.) Whatever the reader’s position on this, Alden illustrates how narrative is layered in epic, allusions to characters and events creating a network of meaning for speakers to exploit and listeners to respond to.

Each chapter in OCG has its own style and focus, but Alden on book 11 is typical in that it showcases the merits of OCG as a valuable reference point for students of the *Iliad* with and without Greek. It is hardly a volume for the general reader, who would be well served by contemporary translations such as Wilson (2023), which features extensive background material including maps and a glossary. However, OCG offers a thorough and rigorous analysis of each book of the *Iliad*, synthesising previous research with the author’s own insight and expertise. My analogy of the chocolate box is flippant but the OCG’s premise that most readers will approach the *Iliad* piecemeal is borne out by pedagogical experience. A companion version to the *Odyssey* is promised (Christensen, forthcoming) and it is hoped that this standard of excellence is maintained. The opening of a new chocolate box is eagerly anticipated.

References

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