

ACHILLES

BURGESS (J.S.) *The Death and Afterlife of Achilles*. Pp. xviii + 184, ills. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009. Cased, £24, US\$45. ISBN: 978-0-8018-9029-1.

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Can there be intertextuality without texts? B. follows in the footsteps of scholars like Slatkin (*The Power of Thetis*, 1991) who have shown the importance within the *Iliad* of allusions to extra-Homeric myths. B. turns the focus to the narrative of the death of Achilles as reflected in the cyclic *Aethiopis*, the events of which have often been thought adumbrated at several points in the *Iliad*. B.'s project is to treat these echoes not as evidence for one of the ur-texts from which the *Iliad* was putatively constructed, but as allusions to an oral tradition that the original audiences would have known well, and which thus served to heighten the pathos of Achilles' fate. The intellectual justification for this method is provided in the central Chapter 4, which constructs a unified theory of neoanalysis and oral poetics. In B.'s nuanced and impressively convincing formulation, the events around Achilles' death are imported into the *Iliad* by means of 'motif transference', a collaborative process rooted in the common knowledge of the fate of Achilles shared by the audience and generations of oral poets.

The biggest problem with this approach is not, however, theoretical but practical. None of our evidence for the tale of Achilles' death can be proved to be pre-Homeric, so there is always the possibility that our knowledge of the earliest form of this myth has been contaminated by subsequent pressure to conform with or depart from the Homeric pattern. We must be very sure that the motif transference in question has not taken the form of later writers and artists reacting to Homeric themes when working with cyclic material. The danger of circularity lurks around every corner, and no amount of theoretical sophistication can banish it at one stroke. B. does acknowledge the danger squarely (pp. 5, 29), but also makes occasional, worryingly dismissive remarks about the 'supposedly overwhelming influence of Homer in the Archaic Age' (p. 78). The only course in the face of such an intractable problem is to use extreme care and circumspection when handling each particular piece of evidence. Fortunately, this is B.'s particular strength.

A preliminary chapter deals with the birth and infancy of Achilles, on account of the way Achilles' death in late versions is bound up with the theme of his partial invulnerability. B. deftly handles the complexities of the evidence, but he dismisses on weak grounds (p. 13) the theory that this reflects an archaic tradition of invulnerable armour, perhaps because as an oralist he cannot accept that this might betray the fingerprints of a master poet who consciously erased some of the more magical elements of the tradition. The next chapter jumps to the death of Achilles, and B. once again sets out with admirable clarity the evidence for each stage of the reconstructed archaic narrative. Most of the literary evidence is worryingly late: Proclus, Apollodorus and Quintus of Smyrna feature repeatedly. In both these chapters, a salutary check on circularity is provided by the visual comparanda, where the magnetic pull of the Homeric narratives is clearly offset to a degree by independent iconographic traditions. B. is excellent on this visual material, and one could only wish for more of it. Unfortunately, the press decided not to number the illustrations, so B. had no way of referring to them explicitly in the text.

Chapter 3 prepares us for the subsequent discussion of allusions to the death of Achilles by examining this event as explicitly discussed by characters in the poem. After the theoretical fourth chapter, we come to the main part of the argument in the fifth. B. works through the *Iliad*, reexamining places where scholars in the neoanalytic tradition have identified motifs drawn from the *Aethiopsis*-tradition. The crucial difference is that B. takes these as adding depth to the narrative rather than as compositional flaws. This work is done in a very careful and rigorous manner, which means that many alleged points of contact have to be rejected. The reward for this conservative approach comes in the next chapter, where the remarkable conclusion is drawn that the remaining episodes from the *Aethiopsis*-tradition tend to appear in the *Iliad* in their correct sequence.

The final two chapters deal with the burial and afterlife of Achilles, including a fascinating discussion of the ancient and modern search for the burial mound of Achilles and for the place of his final, blessed existence. The only unconvincing part of the book is the brief discussion of Achilles' afterlife, where it is claimed that the tradition of Achilles' translation to a happy existence on White Island is both archaic and not grossly incompatible with Homer (pp. 106–10). This combination of arguments is problematic in itself and points to broader potential issues. If Proclus' report that, according to the cyclic *Aethiopsis*, Achilles was taken to White Island after his death is a reliable indicator of alternative mythic traditions at the time of the composition of the *Iliad*, why does Homer show no evidence of this? If not, is any of the material from Proclus that B. has used to reconstruct the archaic narrative tradition reliable? One solution would be to suggest that the *Iliad*'s utterly bleak eschatology and the savage bitterness of Achilles' self-assessment of his posthumous existence in *Odyssey* 11 are a reaction against the tradition of happy-ever-after such as we find reflected in the *Aethiopsis*. But this would tend to imply once again a master poet at work. The grand unified theory of neoanalysis and oral composition works well when demonstrating similarities between the *Iliad* and other traditions, for it is easy to see how motif transference could work collaboratively: it might begin by importing one small element from the other tradition, which poet after poet could add to gradually. It is harder to see how an oral tradition could contrive to agree to reject so emphatically and comprehensively a feature of the legend allegedly known to them all. Why was the *Iliad* tradition only receptive to the pessimistic parts of the archaic *Aethiopsis* tradition? Does that not argue for a guiding hand?

This detailed and rigorous, but also accessible and well-written, book will be of enormous value not just to specialists but to anyone with an interest in the figure of Achilles. Given that some of the central issues which are treated here with great clarity, such as the role of fate and free choice in Achilles' destiny, are matters of perennial difficulty for student essay-writers, it will also be a very useful teaching resource for the *Iliad*.

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