

Book Review

Reading Homer: Iliad Books 16 and 18 (JACT Classical Teachers' Greek Course)

Anderson (S.) Maclennan (K.) and Yamagata (N.)
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Students who have only been learning the language for a year or so can, with the help of these three great pedagogical *psychagogoi*, tackle two entire books of the *Iliad* with confidence and enjoyment. All Greek words are glossed at their first appearance in the text and also in the vocabulary at the end of the book. There is a lucid and brief account of some of the oddities of Homer's Greek in the Introduction, and these points are explained again when the reader meets them in the text: so (for instance) the Homeric omission of the augment in forming the aorist tense is described on page 11 and then explained again in the notes on the first lines of Books 16 and 18. The notes also point out what Homer's words would be like in Attic Greek, thus reinforcing the student's basic knowledge as well as extending it. Names, geographical locations, methods of making a shield – all these and much more are explained in the notes, and especially knotty lines are translated clearly for the reader. Speed and ease of reading is massively helped by having the notes on the same page as the text rather than collected together after it. The amount of help on offer is exemplary: students can read this poem without needing any other books to hand and they will quickly acquire familiarity and fluency as they work through the 1,484 lines of Greek text. Nor is it assumed that all readers will work through both books of the *Iliad*: each of the two books assumes a linguistic *tabula rasa* in the mind of the reader, so that (for example) points on 16.1 are repeated almost verbatim on 18.1.

Readers are not expected to have any prior knowledge of Homer or the plot of the *Iliad*. The Introduction – which is a model of clarity and enthusiasm – takes us through what we know about Homer and what happens in the *Iliad*, before whetting the reader's appetite for the epic style which makes this poetry so impressive. 'Style' here involves both literary technique (similes, speeches etc) and also literary methods of working with heroic themes and the role of the gods. The 'Homeric question' is well summarised in the course of a discussion of 'verbal repetitions', and the authors also give us a quick tour of the metre of Homer's verse and a judicious set of suggestions for further reading. That they manage all this in 15 pages, without either cutting any corners or talking down to their readers, is something of a miracle of concision and clarity.

The books chosen for the text are full of variety and interest, giving us the tragic tale of Patroclus in 16 and the subsequent explosion of grief and anger which Achilles unleashes when he learns of his friend's death in 18. The notes point out places where Homer is emphasising words and themes with devices such as enjambement (e.g. 16.70) but they do not spoon-feed the reader with their own interpretations. That said, the authors point out factual matters which are of significance and which the novice could not be expected to know: when Thetis is economical with the truth in her words to Hephaestus at 18.452, the note sharply corrects her version of events by reminding us of what Homer has told us in the opening lines of book 16. The ecphrasis of the shield of Achilles with which book 18 closes is beautifully described and explained ('Achilles will then carry into battle a panorama of the life he has renounced') and the authors show themselves to be as authoritative in metallurgy as they are in everything else. When Achilles promises the dead Patroclus that he will 'slit the throats of twelve shining sons of the Trojans' (18.336) the note on this line is a masterpiece of stylistic and contextual comment: 'ἀποδειροτομήσω is 1s. fut. An emphatically horrible word, taking up more than a third of the line, used only here and at 23.22 (again Achilles to the dead Patroclus). He duly fulfils his promise at 23.175-6.'

There are 12 superb illustrations and the typesetting and production quality of the book is excellent throughout. Students (of all ages) coming to Homer for the first time are extremely well served by this book, and when the price comes in at under £20 they are certainly getting a bargain.

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