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INTRODUCTION

Sara Lindheim and Helen Morales

This special volume of *Ramus* presents new essays on the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* of Homer. They all focus on close literary readings of one or both of the texts, and invite the reader to engage anew with well-known episodes, moments, words, and to draw fresh, and sometimes surprising, conclusions.

New Essays on Homer: Language, Violence, and Agency aims to give a sense of the issues and questions that animate today's literary interpretations of the epics. We gave our contributors a wide remit: to provide original essays that addressed big questions about the poetic and ideological operations of Homer. What emerged from all ten chapters were, in broad strokes, analyses of language, violence, and, in various guises, agency. They are theoretically informed, drawing on materialism, psychoanalysis, literary and political theories, religion, improvisational theater, sublimity and ancient reception. They all contribute to a greater understanding of the poetics of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*: what the Homeric epics mean and how they create their meaning.

The subject of violence surfaces again and again in the volume, perhaps an unsurprising preoccupation given the ongoing conflicts throughout the world, and the unique ability of the *Iliad* to articulate the experience of war. Simone Weil's famous assessment that force is the true subject of the *Iliad*, force that profoundly alters the human spirit, is a concern in Brooke Holmes's 'Situating Scamander: "Natureculture" in the *Iliad*', Alex Purves's 'Ajax and Other Objects: Homer's Vibrant Materialism', and William G. Thalmann's '"Anger Sweeter than Dripping Honey": Violence as a Problem in the *Iliad*'. Thalmann directly addresses, and seeks to re-problematize, violence in the *Iliad*. Holmes and Purves both come at Weil's proposition from another angle. They focus on her claim about the power of force to alter, as human beings perpetrating and suffering violence metamorphose into things. Holmes examines the episode in Book 21 of the *Iliad* in which the river Scamander battles with the hero Achilles, at stake a consideration of the pure elemental force of the landscape. For Weil, violent humans lose their humanity. In contrast, for Holmes Scamander, while perhaps surprisingly not taking on human qualities like a fleshly body, does in fact, through its assumption of violent force, become 'an ethico-social agent who coheres at the extreme edge of mortal brutality and misery'. Through his acts of violence, she argues, the river becomes a character, simultaneously adversary of Achilles and defender of Troy. Purves is also interested in the way that objects—Ajax's shield in *Iliad* 15 for example—take on agency, in particular as they interact with human bodies in war. Purves's argument that objects in the Homeric texts possess a kind of agency that breaks down the usual dichotomy between acting subject and acted-upon object asks readers to consider the human in Homeric

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poetry in a new way. As objects have 'their own life form, their own energy, vitality, and even creativity', as human beings become 'embordered' beings 'always in concert with the world around [them] through a series of open connections and entanglements', there is a shift in how identity and subjectivity are constituted.

A similar question is at the heart of Carol Dougherty's 'Nobody's Home: *Metis*, Improvisation and the Instability of Return in Homer's *Odyssey*'. Dougherty considers the manifold ways in which Odysseus creates and recreates his 'self' throughout the *Odyssey*. She argues that the hero does not possess an essential identity that he alters in telling the stories of his adventures but to which he returns in the end. Rather than reclaiming a true, stable self as Odysseus, king of Ithaca, husband of Penelope, the hero, suggests Dougherty, constantly embraces, through his lies, deceits and disguises, improvisation as a 'performance' and a 'way of life', with the result that he 'continually reinvents his identity with each new encounter both abroad and at home'.

James Porter's 'Homer and the Sublime' is concerned with 'aesthetic and conceptual intensity'. Porter focuses on the sublime nature of certain moments of Homeric language, moments that also draw the attention of ancient literary critics like Longinus and Demetrius: the description of the magnificence of the universe, the intensity of certain emotions, the portrayal of the divine. In all these cases, claims Porter, we witness the poet constructing images and conceits that strain at the very limits of expression, dancing on the edge of 'a realm that lies beyond the limits of the poem's language, of what the poem can actually express'. Ultimately, argues Porter, we should buck the trend of modern critics and consider again the sublime qualities of Homeric language as 'anything Homer touches with his language—anything he attends to aesthetically—is bound to become saturated with extraordinary value, lifted beyond the ken of everyday existence, and taken to another dimension of reality'. Although she does not deploy the term 'sublime', Brooke Holmes also draws attention to Homeric language coming up against the boundaries of picturability. Scamander unleashes its full force against Achilles in a whirlpool, then a wave, churning with blood and bodies, and 'it is as if nature in all its hostility has broken out of the confines of the simile'.

Like Porter and Holmes, Mark Buchan, Alexander Loney and David Elmer explore the limits of language and reading, although they approach the issues from different angles. Buchan's 'Penelope's Foot' offers a characteristically provocative reading of the prelude to Odysseus' recognition by Eurycleia in which Buchan challenges us to reconsider both this episode and how we read (or refuse to read) sexual innuendo and activity in the *Odyssey*. Focusing on the ethics of the poem's hero, Alexander Loney too looks again, closely, at the interactions between Odysseus and his nurse. Loney's 'Eurykleia's Silence and Odysseus' Enormity: The Multiple Meanings of Odysseus' Triumphs' probes deeply into the language of the scene in Book 22 of the *Odyssey* in which Eurycleia reacts to the slaughter of the suitors. Arguing for 'an implicit, darker ethical evaluation

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of Odysseus alongside the dominant positive perspective', Loney suggests that the connotations surrounding the descriptions of the suitors' deaths and the nurse's reaction in the face of slaughter open up a reading that highlights the potential ironies of the hero's actions. Indeed, questions about the deep ambiguity of the *Odyssey* to its ethical framework similarly surface in David Elmer's 'The "Narrow Road" and the Ethics of Language Use in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*'. Elmer traces the use of formulaic epithets in both epics at moments when their choice seems particularly 'inappropriate'. Suggesting that there is more at stake than oral formulaic style, he argues that jarring epithet-selection drives a reader or listener to reconsider that dissonance. In doing so, claims Elmer, she will discover that the singer of the *Iliad*, mirroring the ethical position of Achilles, makes words 'fundamentally mean what they say', while the rhapsode of the *Odyssey*, like its hero, prefers contradiction, ambiguity and the 'Odyssean principle of "declaring one thing and concealing another in one's mind"'.

The language of Homer also captures the attention of Barbara Graziosi and Johannes Haubold. Unlike the interpreters who press the limits of language, Graziosi and Haubold, in the opening essay of the collection, 'The Homeric Text', address questions of how textual critics establish a stable language of the text. Seeking a bold rapprochement of 'fields of scholarship that seldom talk to each other', Graziosi and Haubold argue that where the Homeric text is involved, composition and explanation of meaning—i.e., textual criticism and reception studies—should proceed hand-in-hand. They suggest that early reception of the epic, the pronunciation in performance by particular rhapsodes, or early audiences' and/or singers' views about Homeric grammar or euphony of utterance, should play a substantial role in modern editors' assessments of ancient evidence for the constitution of the text. This should become a foundational essay for any future editor of Homer. The piece that closes out the collection also concerns the ancient reception of Homer but has a narrower and rather quirky focus. Max Leventhal's 'Counting on Epic: Mathematical Poetry and Homeric Epic in Archimedes' *Cattle Problem*' is an original interpretation of Archimedes' mathematical, riddling epigram. The epigram, Leventhal suggests, is an erudite and allusive consideration of the cattle of the Sun episode in the *Odyssey* and of Homeric poetics in general, that leaves the reader with the understanding that counting the cattle and knowing all of Homer are of a piece, both impossible.

Half of the essays in the volume had their inception in papers delivered at a two-day conference on New Directions in Homer and Hesiod at the University of California, Santa Barbara, in May 2012; the others were commissioned afterwards. The conference, organized by the editors, was made possible through the generosity of the Argyropoulos Endowment in Hellenic Studies; it is a pleasure to thank the Argyropoulos family for their financial support, and our colleagues and students at UCSB, along with the original speakers, invited discussants, and other

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participants for a stimulating intellectual event. We are also grateful to the *Ramus* readers for their comments and criticisms on the volume.

In the few weeks leading up to the conference, we learned that our colleague, Apostolos Athanassakis, renowned for his work on Homer and Hesiod, had decided to retire after 44 years at UCSB. The Argyropoulos Endowment in Hellenic Studies was established through Apostolos' hard work, and he held the Argyropoulos Chair in Hellenic Studies from 2001 until his retirement. His scholarship includes important English translations of Hesiod and the Homeric Hymns, as well as *Essays on Hesiod* I and II (*Ramus* 21, 1992). He gained a reputation for enchanting undergraduates with his recitations of Homer that packed 500 students into Greek mythology classes. With the announcement of his impending retirement, the conference became something of a tribute to him, and it is a pleasure to acknowledge his contributions here also.

One of the things that made Apostolos Athanassakis a much beloved lecturer was his ability to make people better understand the vitality and complexities of Homer. We hope that the essays that follow will do the same.

University of California, Santa Barbara
lindheim@classics.ucsb.edu
hmorales@classics.ucsb.edu

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