

GRAZIOSI, BARBARA. *HOMERO*. TRAD. DE MARCELO MUSA CAVALLARI E MARIA FERNANDA LAPA CAVALLARI. ARAÇOIABA DA SERRA: MNEMA, 2021, 171P., IL. ISBN: 978-65-991951-4-3.¹

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Homer, written by Princeton classicist and professor Barbara Graziosi, is a book with short chapters that present an introductory and interesting discussion about selected topics. The author chose to leave the references (passages and mentioned writers) to a section at the end of the book, which gives fluency to the reading. The book, then, fulfills its aim: to introduce the lay reader, mainly the ones not acquainted to Homer, into the main discussions about him and his poems. With the same approach, the book provides a section with suggestions for further reading, which is also subdivided according to the chapters, to those who wish to broaden their knowledge on the subject. Additionally, the book has an index, and the preface is written by Teodoro Rennó Assunção (FALE-UFMG), intitled “O Homero de Graziosi: uma introdução exemplar”, where he frames the book into the author’s more specific bibliographical production on the theme and gives a synthesis of the topics discussed, adding bibliographical references in Portuguese.

Starting with an account of how Petrarch was glad to receive a copy of the *Iliad* in ancient Greek, although he could not read it, Graziosi presupposes, as stated in the “Introduction”, that Homer is well-known, but little read. Her book aims to present Homer and his work to that audience and gives examples from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* of themes that make the Homeric epics immortal, hoping it would be an invitation and a guide to read them. One of the book’s merits is that the chapters can be read in any order, for they are thematically independent and are short and straightforward, having six to thirteen pages each (curiously, the preface is longer than the chapters, counting fifteen pages).

¹ *Homer*, Oxford University Press, 2016.

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The first part, with four chapters, focuses on reflecting about Homer and his work. The second part deals with the *Iliad* and its themes and has three chapters, as well as the third part that deals with the *Odyssey*.

In the first chapter, “Looking for Homer”, Graziosi gives a summary of the debate on Homer and the works attributed to him, called Homeric Question, without delving into any of the problems that have haunted specialists for centuries, but allowing the reader to become aware of the main issues. This narrative starts from the meaning of the name Homer in Antiquity itself, but also from the questions related to the poet and his works pointed out by Herodotus, Aeschylus, Plato, and Aristotle. Graziosi clearly states the importance of the Byzantine scholars for this tradition that will be rescued by the European scholars in the end of the Middle Ages, more precisely by Petrarch, and the contributions by writers as Vico, August Wolf, Goethe, and Nietzsche for the problematization of the topic. In this chapter, there are two portraits of Homer, a bust from the Hellenistic Period and a realistic painting by a Korean artist, setting grounds for the book’s starting point: Homer is a poet that has always sparked the interest and the curiosity of his readers and non-readers.

In the second chapter, intitled “Textual Clues”, Graziosi explores information that can be drawn from the elements in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* themselves. She shows how the works of Milman Parry and his successor, Albert Lord, was able to prove that the repetition of lines in the Homeric poems belong to a long tradition of oral transmission in which pre-set formulas and typical scenes were structural features that helped the poets compose and recompose the stories. She demonstrates in a well-reasoned manner that such elements, existing in the *Iliad* and typical of battle stories, were skillfully adapted in the *Odyssey* to serve in other types of scenes, as in the case of Odysseus’s encounter with the princess Nausicaa. In this chapter, Graziosi also deals with the written language when bringing the specialist’s analysis to demonstrate that Homeric Greek is a mixture of different dialects not only geographically diverse but also temporally and that they had the function of providing expressions varying in length and serving to the poems’ metrics. The language analysis of the poems also offers clues to where the poems could have been composed, as the influence of Ionic and Aeolic elements prevail and establishes a relative chronology to other poems, pointing to the antiquity of the two epics.

Next chapter, “Material Clues”, is not so clear in terms of its planning as the previous two. The title might suggest an analysis of the archaeological remains related to the Homeric epics. However, the chapter seems to aim

at establishing a more specific temporal framework within which the poems were composed. Thus, Graziosi sets an initial limit in 700 BC, based on the description of the material conditions that could not be found before that date and on the diffusion of the hero cult, and a final limit before 501 BC, a time when the poems were already known throughout the whole Greek world. Archaeology is brought up at some specific points in the book. First, to talk about Troy's discovery by Schliemann, who based himself solely on the Homeric poems. Then, to deal with the ruins of the Mycenaean civilization, visible in later times. As an example of the spreading of writing in the 8th century BC, she uses the famous Nestor's Cup and, in the end of the chapter, in order to just prove the poems were known in the end of the Archaic Period, she quickly mentions the iconography of vases in which scenes of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* start to predominate. In the remaining of the chapter, she returns to the poems. There is an interesting discussion on the contrast between the description of the heroes and the Homeric similes, that show more of everyday traits. Here Graziosi fails when bringing a terminology extremely specific to the Homeric studies without explaining to the lay reader what exactly similes are. Her intention is to demonstrate that the poems show awareness of a distant heroic past, even if they mention recognizable places (and ruins), except for the more fantastic part of Odysseus's journey and the exact location of Ithaca. She reasserts the primacy of orality in the poems despite they were possibly put in written form already, mentioning examples of written sources that ascertain their performance during the major public events, as opposed to the figure of the bards in the *Odyssey* whose function seems to be doing occasional recitations.

The fourth chapter, "The Poet in the Poems", is the last one about Homer and it analyses the narrative voices and points of view in the two poems. It is an indeed interesting and innovative reading, even to the ones who already read the poems. Still making clear that we do not know who composed them, Graziosi points out that the narrator's voice is crystal clear, delimitating an important distinction between the gods, who are always present, all-seeing, and all-knowing, and the mortals, who are distant and just listen and, because of that, are unaware. In this chapter, she explores the topic of the blind bard, as it is Demodocus's case in the *Odyssey*, an idea about Homer hold by many in Antiquity, and the ability of reciting from divine inspiration, then distinguishing the narrative voices and points of view in the *Odyssey* and in the *Iliad*. This last one would be an objective and distant narrative showing a broad point of view, often seen from high above – a perspective from the Olympus –, but with the possibility of close-ups and detailed reports, as in the description of the microscopic decoration of Achilles's shield. By its turn, the *Odyssey* would

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have a more subjective narrative, in which Odysseus himself or the bards are narrating the events, and a perspective from the earth (and the sea), at the level of Odysseus's eyes. In both cases, there would be a cinematographic perspective, maybe more obviously felt from the great plans of the *Iliad*, but equally noticeable from scenes like the one where Odysseus strings his bow, the climax of the second part of the story, when the narrator describes the action in slow motion to expand the tension effect.

Chapter 5, "The Wrath of Achilles", second part's first chapter, brings a discussion of a well-debated topic regarding the *Iliad*, after all the poem starts precisely with that expression. Graziosi demonstrates that, if on the one hand, the hero's behavior is extreme, even irrational, on the other his feelings are not uncommon. Achilles deals primarily with a consciousness of mortality and then with the grief for someone close and dear, a feeling also wrapped in guilt. Graziosi draws a parallel to the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, in view of its main character also losing his dear friend and trying to beat mortality, not in order to seek in the Mesopotamian epic an origin for the Greek epic, but instead to point out that the themes in the *Iliad* are universal. She even uses modern psychology and compares Achilles's behavior, with due proportions, to a post-traumatic stress disorder. The aim here is to evoke the familiarity of the themes treated in Homer's poetry, even if narrated through heroic deeds and atypical characters, with which we would certainly not identify ourselves immediately.

In the next chapter, "A poem about Troy", the author investigates how the *Iliad*, that deals with just a few episodes during the last year of the war, became the poem about Troy in the middle of a tradition with other poems and narratives. Firstly, the *Iliad* is at the same time a general poem about the war, for throughout the poem several episodes prior and after the framework found in the *Iliad* are evoked, which in a certain way has the *Iliad* dealing with the whole of the war, as well as the fact that the battle scenes are numerous, lengthy, and realistic. Secondly, and on the other hand, it is a specific narrative where each falling hero is not an anonymous warrior, but the deaths, despite numerous and violent, make us face the question of mortality and the reasons for fighting.

"The Tragedy of Hector" is the last chapter about the *Iliad*. Having dealt with Achilles in chapter 6 and with the crowd of heroes to be dealt with in chapter 7, nothing more meaningful than to finish this session with Hector, who is, in many ways, the counterpoint to Achilles, for he is different from this last one, who is driven by selfish motives. The Trojan has a responsibility towards his people. At the same time Hector's death, in a

general sense, means the fall of Troy, and under a specific perspective we get closer to the emptiness of meaning in having hope when someone knows their own destiny. Different from Achilles, Hector's choice is not between life or death, but having a heroic and honorable death, even if he hoped things could be different.

The third part starts the same way as the first chapter specifically about the *Iliad* (chapter 5). Chapter 8, intitled "The Man of Many Turns", analyses the meaning of the first word in the poem. In the *Iliad* the word is wrath, in the *Odyssey* it is man. In the *Odyssey's* proem, it is given many adjectives to that man, but his name is not mentioned. Thus, it is a poem that deals with the search for humanity, but it is done from a particular man. Throughout the narrative, Odysseus shows up and disappears several times, he disguises himself, becomes nobody, and hides only to reveal himself at specific moments, particular to the character that is multifaceted. Graziosi takes the opportunity to show the poem in its two parts: the travels and the attempt to reach home, on the one hand, and, on the other, his homecoming and the resuming of his rightful place by means of the massacre of the ones who were trying to usurp it, as well as discussing a little a certain discomfort felt by the audience, since Antiquity, caused by the violence and the ending somewhat unconcluded of the poem.

The chapter "Women and Monsters" is perhaps the least well tied up. Graziosi presented Odysseus as a character difficult to grasp not only in the sense of knowing him, but also in the effort of fixing him somewhere. The discussion, interesting but somewhat circular and repetitive, deals with all the obstacles, tempting and monstrous, in Odysseus's way, presenting the hero as the one who rejects them in favor of returning home. Penelope also becomes a peril, given the poem's insistence in narrating Agamemnon's fate when he returns to Mycenae. Thus, in the *Odyssey*, neither route nor return are safe.

Chapter 10, "An Infernal Journey", discusses the Odysseus descent to Hades and the episode repercussions. In this part of the poem, Odysseus gets the farthest from home, not necessarily in a spatial sense, and was possibly the closest to never returning to his home. He goes to Hades looking for Tiresia's prophecy but gets curious about the characters he meets there and stops to listen to their stories. It is from this narrative that Virgil, and later Dante, expands the universe presented in the *Odyssey*. It seems that Dante, as Petrarch, had not read the *Odyssey*, but contributed considerably so that the epic could reverberate in the Western World from then on in works such as Tennyson's *Ulysses* and Joyce's, and in Primo Levi's enquiries about survival and returning home.

Barbara Graziosi's book is a beautiful addition to the topic of Homer and his works, an interesting reading not only for those who do not know the poems but certainly for the ones who already read Homer. There will always be possible views casted on his works. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* do not have their status in vain, for their themes, stories, and questions are universal.