David F. Elmer, The Poetics of Consent. Collective Decision Making and the Iliad.

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REVIEWS

David F. Elmer, *The Poetics of Consent. Collective Decision Making and the* Iliad. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013. Pp. xiii + 313. Cloth (ISBN 978-1-4214-0826-2) $55.00.

I fear for this important book. In it, David Elmer moves what is to my biased mind the most important strand of modern Homeric scholarship forward significantly, delivering on the promise of the work especially of Gregory Nagy and Richard Martin in a narrow but extraordinarily important semantic domain of the *Iliad*: the thematics of ἔπαινος, which Elmer convincingly renders as "consensus." If *The Poetics of Consent* were to find a broad readership, it could, as I believe it should, transform the face of Homeric scholarship. I can however see hurdles in its path. They should not really discourage any reader from reading it with great profit, from the advanced undergraduate to (above all) the specialist. They may nonetheless, I fear, keep the book from attaining its rightful, prominent place on the everyday-more-imaginary ideal bookshelf of the amateur classicist. The virtues of the book are very many. Three stand out as signal achievements, to my mind: Elmer's analysis of what he terms the grammar of reception, his convincing demonstration of the vital importance of that grammar, and his extremely tantalizing, if not quite dispositive, case for that grammar's metapoetic dimension carrying over into the realm of the historical, real-world reception of the *Iliad*.

Building on the work especially of Louis Gernet and Egon Flaig, Elmer gracefully establishes that contrary to some received critical notions, the politics of the three communities who meet in assembly in the *Iliad*, the Achaeans, the Trojans, and the Olympian gods, are fundamentally grounded in consensus. Unlike Flaig ("Das Konsensprinzip im homerischen Olymp: Überlegungen zum göttlichen Entscheidungsprozess Ilias 4.1–72," *Hermes* 122 (1994) 13–31), Elmer is laudably very careful to distinguish the politics of the *Iliad* from what we can, and more importantly what we cannot, recover of the politics of bronze-age and archaic Greece. In this caution he adheres to the school of Homeric scholarship that regards synchronic and diachronic pressures on the Homeric poems as shaping their depictions of social institutions in such a way as to make those institutions as depicted a function not of any attempt on the part of the bards at realistic portrayal of their world, but of the specific poetic needs of the system of oral poetics and the songs composed within that system.

Elmer's most important advance on Flaig, however, is in tying the thematics of consensus to the formulas used by the *Iliad* to articulate varying degrees of efficiency of decisions taken in the several crucial assemblies of the poem. In a masterful chapter called "The Grammar of Reception," he lays out five such degrees, ranging from the actual expression of ἔπαινος (which Elmer demonstrates, in Homeric diction, and, later, in post-Homeric diction that describes the reception of Homer, to mean "consensus," especially when invoked in the derived verb ἐπαινεῖν) to a silence that expresses the lack of consensus.

That grammar would on its own be an extremely useful hermeneutic tool, and in the succeeding chapters Elmer applies it to wonderful effect, demonstrating its importance for the Achaeans, the Trojans, and the gods. The consensus of the Achaeans

is shown to be truly determinative of the epic's mainspring theme of disruption and conservation, which Elmer argues convincingly should be understood in close relation to the interplay in the epic's composition between received versions of the story of the Trojan War and of the wrath of Achilles and innovations on the part of the composer(s) of the epic as we have it. Likewise, the politics of the Trojans are shown by the same standard to be dysfunctional, above all at the one crucial moment in book 18 when they attain ἔπαινος, but in the wrong way and for the wrong reasons. The politics of the gods, on the other hand, are read very fruitfully as metapoetic, and reflective of the contest among different versions of the story we know as the *Iliad*.

The ramifications of the importance of ἔπαινος just on the level of the plot of the epic are staggering, and Elmer teases them out patiently and cogently. The basic aesthetic impulse noted by Joseph Russo in the *Iliad*, to reimpose regularity after permitting disorder, finds in the politics of consensus an analogue that, even without the metapoetic implications of performance and audience, would give us important new insights into the state of exception, so called by Elmer in an analogy with the political theory of the Weimar Republic, that exists after Agamemnon refuses the ransom offered by Chryses despite the Achaeans' expressing ἔπαινος for it.

All of this would be well worth the reading even without the metapoetic dimension, as I have said, but that metapoetic dimension, though the sheer exiguousness of our evidence for the early reception of the *Iliad* makes it nearly impossible to pose a truly convincing argument, should be in my judgment the most important contribution of this book. Using Herodotus, Plato, and the *Contest of Hesiod and Homer*, Elmer makes a very strong case that ἔπαινος was a crucial element in the consensual reception of the *Iliad* itself. That case begins, really, in Elmer's internal arguments concerning the politics of Olympus and the responses of the internal Trojan audience to the laments over Hector, above all in the extremely striking phrase δῆμος ἀπείρων, "boundless people," for the audience who mourn in response to Helen's final lament. Elmer argues that the curious lack of resolution, in terms of the politics of consensus, to the wrath of Achilles either in the council of book 20 or in the games of book 23, signals to the epic's audience that it is their own consensus about the epic that can resolve it.

Elmer writes in a fluid style that becomes jargon-laden only on occasion. He uses some theory, anthropological, political, and literary, which could make the book heavy going for some audiences, in particular undergraduates, though I think the book would be read with great profit in courses on Homeric epic. My principal fear for the book, though, is more fundamental: its argument seems (only, I think, seems) to depend on our *Iliad*'s being a through-composed work. For readers who take this view of the epic, that may prove extremely congenial. For those with a more diachronic view, who see in our text a fungible jigsaw-puzzle of songs placed in a marvelous, but in important ways necessarily arbitrary, arrangement, the suspicion that the meticulously plotted trajectory of the grammar of reception adumbrated by Elmer might be a massive instance of confirmation bias is difficult to escape entirely. What, for example, if the reason that there is no ἔπαινος in the assembly in which Achilles and Agamemnon are reconciled in book 20 is not a tissue of tensions held over all the way from book 1, but rather the adventitious product of a bard's inclination to show that Achilles and Agamemnon just can't get along?

As I indicated, though, this concern is really to my mind only one of appearance. Every instance of the grammar of reception read by Elmer can stand as such an instance, legible within the grammar as a whole in relation, if not to the epic as we have

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it, at least to the system of poetics that produced the epic we have.

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Amanda Wilcox, *The Gift of Correspondence in Classical Rome. Friendship in Cicero's*
Ad Familiares *and Seneca's* Moral Epistles. Madison: University of Wisconsin
Press, 2012. Pp. xi + 223. Paper (ISBN 978-029928834-1) $34.95.

This book examines letters and correspondence as a type of gift exchange
and social transaction. Drawing on established theoretical and ethnographic
studies, largely of Marcel Mauss and Pierre Bourdieu, Wilcox examines certain
letters of Cicero's *Ad Familiares* and Seneca's *Moral Epistles*, providing welcome
insight into the influence of epistolary rhetoric in the formation and maintenance
of Roman *amicitia*. Wilcox demonstrates how Cicero utilizes epistolary strategies
to facilitate the reciprocal, and often utilitarian, gifts expected of republican
friendships, and how Seneca reinvents these inherited epistolary conventions
in developing a new kind of correspondence that asserts Stoic ethics and the
primacy of philosophical friendship.

The book is divided into two parts of four chapters each. Part 1 examines
selections from Cicero's *Ad Familiares*, while part 2 deals with Seneca and
his *Moral Epistles*. The introduction summarizes the book's objectives and
methodologies, addresses the relevant theories, provides brief synopses on the
epistolary genre and Roman friendship, and closes with a succinct overview of
developments in letter writing and delivery in the period between Cicero and
Seneca's lifetimes.

Chapter 1 establishes Cicero's use of "epistolary euphemism" (25), the
strategies he and his correspondents consciously employed to disguise the
self-interestedness accompanying the exchange of favors and letters during the
late republic. Such tactics, Wilcox shows, not only illustrate the importance of
rhetorical self-fashioning as a significant feature of letter writing for Cicero and
his contemporaries, but also reflect the challenges in navigating the tricky waters
of republican *amicitia*, in which friendships and reciprocity were not always
equally balanced.

Wilcox next considers the social and symbolic significance of consolation
letters, gifts that, broadly speaking, allay the grief associated with both
human loss (death) and political loss. Especially notable is Wilcox's insightful
examination of so-called "eristic consolations" (51). Such letters adopt the
conventional rhetorical language and philosophical topoi of epistolary
consolations, but also incorporate strategies that create competition between
the consoler and the consoled. In so doing, the gift of consolation, while on the
surface altruistic, can actually function as a vehicle for asserting one's superior
status and power within a friendship.

Chapter 3 considers a different genre of consolation letters, namely those
related to the absence of friends, i.e., an epistolary substitution for in-person
conversation. Selecting Cicero's letters to Trebonius (15.21, 15.20) and Lentulus
(1.9) as representative examples, Wilcox illustrates how Cicero employs the topos