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Andrew Porter, Agamemnon, the Pathetic Despot: Reading Characterization in Homer. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019. Pp. 264. Paper (978-0-674-98445-5) \$24.95.

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REVIEWS

Andrew Porter, *Agamemnon, the Pathetic Despot: Reading Characterization in Homer*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019. Pp. 264. Paper (978-0-674-98445-5) \$24.95.

Andrew Porter's engaging examination of Agamemnon in Homeric epic is a welcome addition to Homeric studies. Drawing on earlier, more general studies of characterization, Porter identifies Agamemnon's distinctive personality traits against the background of traditional oral elements well known to epic singers and their ancient audiences. This detailed, compelling analysis also incorporates the larger question of Homeric characterization itself and the capacity of oral technique to permit individualization of character. Consisting of five chapters with copious notes, an appendix on colometry and formulae, an extensive bibliography, *index locorum*, subject index, and index of words and phrases, Porter's book is both informative and stimulating. Porter argues persuasively that traditional story patterns shape the depiction of Agamemnon in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and the audience's reaction to it. Set against an ancient audience's prior knowledge of the events at Troy and afterward, Porter argues, Homer's portrait of Agamemnon highlights his tremendous deficiencies as a leader.

Porter maintains that although both epics were and are accessible to all, they were especially revealing to an audience familiar with epic storytelling. Fieldwork on the South Slavic epic tradition suggests that the Homeric singer's audience would have been similarly knowledgeable and intensely involved in the poetic performance. Arguing for an intimate connection between individual characterization in a given scene and the associations of the larger narrative tradition, Porter explains that rather than limiting a poet's creativity, this connection offers opportunities for the poet to challenge the audience's expectations or to create dramatic irony. Achilles' rejection of the embassy in *Iliad* 9, for example, gains ironic force from the audience's foreknowledge of the dire consequences to follow for the Greeks and for Achilles himself. Just as typical Homeric scenes provide a backdrop for significant departures, signaling something new to the audience, the same process, Porter explains, occurs in Homer's depiction of character. Alterations of conventional details both surprise the audience's expectations and re-affirm the audience's awareness of the characters' distinctive personalities.

Central to Porter's methodology is the recognition that our written version of the *Iliad* must be later than some oral version (or versions) of the *Odyssey*. Porter argues convincingly that Homer's portrait of Odysseus indicates not only that the *Iliad* influenced the *Odyssey* but also that the *Odyssey* influenced the *Iliad*. The traditional audience, in other words, already knew details that later audiences, reading the texts, have to wait to

discover. Homeric characterization emphasizes characters' words and actions, and both epics persistently resonate between past, present, and future events. To understand Homeric characterization, we must read the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* together.

Porter provides a focused and illuminating synchronic reading of both epics. His meticulous, scene-by-scene analysis measures individual character depictions against traditional uses of relevant words and phrases. The resulting portrait of Agamemnon is far from flattering. The *Odyssey's* emphasis on Agamemnon's recklessness, miscalculation, and arrogance reflects an "ironic disdain" for Agamemnon in the poetic tradition (67). Agamemnon's "lack of foresight" (71) provides a counter-model and warning for Odysseus to take care and to plan ahead.

The *Iliad* similarly presents Agamemnon as impulsive and miscalculating. This epic also emphasizes his "impetuous leadership style" (159) and implicitly alludes to the story of the House of Atreus and Agamemnon's feud with Thyestes. (Porter remains unconvinced by arguments against the authenticity of *Iliad* 10, and his discussion of it bolsters claims for accepting it as organic to the epic as a whole.) Without diminishing Agamemnon's considerable martial ability, the *Iliad* throughout highlights his inability to see his own mistakes and foresee their consequences and his subsequent unwillingness to accept responsibility for his prior actions and their dire results. His frequent protestations of his own blamelessness convince no one. Agamemnon's inability to take responsibility for his own actions contrasts with Achilles' ultimate recognition of his own responsibility for the consequences of his anger.

The value of Porter's book lies more in its details than in its overarching conclusions. Porter well substantiates his claim that both epics present Agamemnon as "impetuous, thoughtless, rash and foolish," and that the *Iliad* further distinguishes him as "inept and unconvincing as a leader," notable for his "arrogance, imperiousness, irreverence, and insult" (177). But *despotēs* never appears in Homer, and Porter never precisely identifies his understanding of "despot," seeming to use it as shorthand for "bad king, ruler, or leader." Porter ultimately defines Homer's Agamemnon as a "pathetic despot" (e.g., 197) because the poet draws on the traditional epic depiction of Agamemnon as both causing and experiencing the *pathos* consequent on his family's story and his own actions. This conclusion risks seeming circular, however, as if Porter were claiming that Agamemnon's portrait in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* is consistent with the poetic tradition because the poet drew on that tradition.

Similarly, Porter's frequent references to the poet's desires or intentions appear to undercut the book's central (and convincing) argument that the poetic tradition provides the essential context for individual events and character portraits. Given the strength of the book's interpretive arguments about textual *effects* and our ignorance of the identity of the poet (or poets), such confident assertions of the poet's goals seem unnecessary and

distracting: e.g., “The poet is intent on further displaying...” (57), “...the poet wanted ... to create...” (58), “Homer wishes us to see...” (75), “the poet wants us to consider” (77), “...what the poet means to do is ...” (92), “the poet wants us to see...” (96), “the poet wishes to...” (117 and 134), “the poet may have wanted...” (142), “the poet’s intention is...” (157), “...the poet...wished to show” (159), “the poet ... meant to show...” (p. 183).

Despite succumbing at such times to the intentional fallacy, Porter’s meticulous philological examination usefully revisits familiar terrain and adds many valuable new insights. Although directed toward scholars and including extensive and thoughtful discussion of relevant scholarship, the book provides translations of all quoted Greek passages, and Porter’s clear, lively prose will make it appealing to undergraduates and non-specialists as well. (In quoting the scholarship, however, Porter assumes that readers have a working knowledge of French, Italian, and German). Porter’s systematic, sequential commentary on significant passages in the epics results in considerable repetition of arguments, and his concluding chapter provides a detailed, repetitive recapitulation of the entire discussion. The extensive repetition, though wearing at times, might however be useful for undergraduate and non-specialist readers unfamiliar with this material.

Most valuable is Porter’s persuasive reminder that knowledge of Agamemnon’s entire story informed an ancient audience’s reaction to any given scene’s description of Agamemnon’s words and actions. The nature of the oral tradition necessitates that we read the *Iliad* as Homer’s original audience must have heard it, with the events of the *Odyssey* firmly in mind. The consistency of Homer’s depiction of Agamemnon’s character makes the audience see him as unlikely to be capable of change or improvement as a leader.

Porter never suggests that Agamemnon’s character portrait, his traditional “proclivity for distasteful despotism” (157), calls into question either the other warriors’ willingness to follow his leadership or the willingness of the external audience to accept such destructive and self-destructive characteristics in their own leaders, but as authoritarianism gains ground in the twenty-first century, the question seems well worth asking.

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Michael Anderson and Damian Robinson, eds. *House of the Surgeon, Pompeii: Excavations in the Casa del Chirurgo (VI, 9-10. 23)*. Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2018. Pp. 664. Cloth (ISBN 978-1-78570-728-5) \$110.00.

A popular understanding exists that Roman atria style houses came into existence around the third or second century B.C.E., and the House of the Surgeon (Casa del Chirurgo), is regularly identified as a prime example of this iconic Roman architectural