

REVIEWS OF BOOKS

LITERATURE

HOLWAY (R.) **Becoming Achilles: Child-sacrifice, War, and Misrule in the *Iliad* and Beyond.** Lanham MD: Lexington Books, 2012. Pp. xiv + 255. £18.95/\$29.95. 9780739146903 (hbk); 9780739146910 (pbk). doi:10.1017/S007542691400144X

Holway offers a reading of the *Iliad* focused on destructive and dysfunctional kinship relations, and above all those of father-daughter and mother-son. The anxieties of these relations are, Holway argues, ultimately redirected in a cathartic process through Achilles' savage *mênis*.

Holway takes his cue from contemporary psychological research and from Attachment Theory (especially John Bowlby, 1907–1990, and Mary Ainsworth, 1913–1999), which focuses on relationships between infants and their caregivers. One of this theory's arguments is that when parents and care-givers sacrifice the child's needs for their own, the child is forced to confront the conflict between its neglected needs and the need to avoid alienating its caregiver. This gives rise to destructive patterns of behaviour: a daughter (or daughter surrogate), rejected and married off by the father, uses her son to play out the trauma of her rejection; a son, forced into the position of a hero by his mother, redirects his anxiety towards heroic violence and anger. Thetis, Zeus, Achilles, Peleus, Hera, Agamemnon and others play various direct and vicarious roles in Holway's picture of dysfunctional kinship and cathartic transference. His objective, as he says, is to challenge the view of Achilles as a hero 'who speaks truth to power' (3 and elsewhere) and present him in a much more fragmented, pathological light, as the product of destructive family dynamics.

As Holway acknowledges in the 'Introduction', the *Iliad* does not present matters quite so openly. He argues that the poem, as well as ancient Greek culture, must present its intolerable truths and sacrificial narratives in masked and sublimated form. In principle, an *argumentum ex silentio* is immensely attractive, not least in Homer or in psychoanalytically oriented work. However, this requires meticulous technical and

methodological analyses (consider, elsewhere, Porson's *lectiones statariae* for the absent *digamma*, Parry's argument for orality in text or, *mutatis mutandis*, arguments by Freud, Lacan, Zizek, etc.). Without them, the risk of arguing for invisible essence ('proof: you can't see it') is just too great.

Dealing with dysfunctional families comes 'naturally' to the Greeks, to the study of poetry and social structure (see Aristotle's *Poetics*, *Politics*, etc.). Its centrality to psychology and psychoanalysis needs no comment. Combining the two has produced much interesting work (in different ways, G. Devereux, J. Shay, P. Slater, P. duBois, M. Leonard, etc.). But, as a reviewer from the American Psychological Association suggests of this book, invoking 'well-worn oedipal or simplistic attachment theories' is very risky (S.D. Orfanos, 'A hero's aesthetics', *PsychCRITIQUES* 58.6, article 7). The problem, in my view, is not just lack of nuance. Holway assumes that we can equate post-World War II, mostly American families and mythological families whose portrayal is shaped by Archaic Greek experience, Iron Age sensibilities retrojected onto Bronze Age cultures (or fantasies of these) and by the accrued and embedded sensibilities of subsequent cultures. But without a detailed *apologia* this assumption threatens the elision of historical differences and historicity. The universalism of which psychology and psychoanalysis have been (justly and unjustly) accused (although it also marks large segments of Western thought and has partly been revived recently, for example, in so-called Post-Deleuzian philosophy) requires detail and reserve. I say nothing of the fact that the family is one of the fiercest battlegrounds of historical interpretation. As Claude Lévi Strauss, for example (himself a universalist of sorts), notes, the debates on the family are 'sometimes so obscure, often so futile and always so bitter that it is tempting to compare them with those that, according to Swift, rage between the Big and Little Enders as to the correct way to eat boiled eggs' ('Introduction', in A. Burguière, C. Klapisch-Zuber, M. Segalen and F. Zonabend (eds), *A History of the Family* I, Cambridge 1996, 1).

Chapter 1 presents the basic dynamics, the quarrel and introduces us to daughter figures, mothers, sons and son figures; chapter 2 suggests that ‘focusing on parents’ use of children to meet their own needs, family psychology illuminates father-daughter and mother-son liaisons’ (24); chapter 3 looks at the histories of some of the main figures in detail; chapter 4 presents an argument for the *Iliad* as a cathartic device, whose embedded denials are its function; chapter 5 deals with fathers and sons; chapter 6 with mothers and sons; chapter 7 with the tension between a child’s actions and a parent’s plans; chapter 8 looks at ‘the shift of

responsibility and anger’ which is also a part of the cathartic effect of the poem. The final chapter gives the wide ambition of the book yet wider embrace as it attempts to read Achilles and Socrates and the relation of sacrifice and values side by side.

This is a provocative and interesting book, on a few occasions presented in slightly quirky idiom, generally well-produced, but also containing some insufficiently detailed arguments that may be hard to accept in their present form.

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