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Homer's Thebes: epic rivalries and the appropriation of mythical pasts

Elton T. E. Barker, Joel P. Christensen, *Homer's Thebes: epic rivalries and the appropriation of mythical pasts*. Hellenic studies series, 84. Washington, DC: Center for Hellenic Studies, 2020. Pp. viii, 318. ISBN 9780674237926

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Like other publications in recent years, this book demonstrates a renewed interest in Homer's treatment of the Theban Cycle and in the functioning of the ancient epic.^[1] These broad themes bring with them underlying questions, in particular that of the choice of the method of analysis for epic. One merit of this book, therefore, is the development of its introduction, both pointed and educational, devoted to linguistic methodology and its recent historiography. Should the epic be approached as a set of written poems or as a set of oral traditions—and should the latter include the Homeric Question? Following the methodological concept of “traditional referentiality” favored by researchers such as Foley, Graziosi, or Haubold, the authors defend the need to go past the text, to see how epic takes meaning in the interaction with its audience. In order to understand poetic creativity, the authors put the importance of context and performance in its proper place. This study's aim, however, is not to reconstruct the Theban Cycle through Homer. “Rivalry” is the key word of this book: it is about showing how the Theban Cycle was able to serve as a basis for the development of the Trojan Cycle, and this idea has to be shown in the framework of competition and dynamic traditions. Consequently, this approach is not only of interest to the philological researcher but also to the historian who is attentive to the dynamic processes structuring the emergence of cities and identities in the Archaic period (p. 266sq.). Indeed, heroes are deeply embedded in these processes, involving political claims—from the audience—and poetic ones—from the aoidoi obeying a necessary competition to gain authority. The very act of oral composition, composed in performance, refers to all this interaction. Therefore, to better describe the historical, cultural and artistic development of epics, Barker and Christensen use the vegetal metaphor of “the epic-rhizome” (p. 24) advanced by Deleuze and Guattari (*Mille plateaux*, Paris, 1980). Epic poems developed not in a mono-directional way, like a tree, which suggests only a relationship between fixed texts. Rather, epic poems developed in a more complex and multifactorial manner. Thus, dealing with Theban heroes appropriated by Homeric epics in rivalry with the Theban Cycle provides a good way to understand these oral and dynamic processes.

First, the poetic competition between Homer and the Theban Cycle is demonstrated through the study of Diomedes and Tydeus in the *Iliad*. Chapter 1 proposes to identify in the heroic feats of these great Theban figures all the elements which, in various ways throughout the *Iliad*, discredit the Theban Cycle, despite its high antiquity. The analysis is astute and proposes to distinguish two types of heroism, of which the Trojan version would be, in the eyes of ‘Homer’, the best model. Reading these pages detailing the negative and systematic methods of Homer's appropriation of the Theban Cycle, the

specialist in Theban mythology cannot help but think of Zeitlin's study.[2] Nevertheless, the dynamic at work is of a different political nature: here it enacts an epic rivalry between traditions (and not cities); and Homer's goal is to promote the ideal of a coalition of heroism praised in Troy in lieu of the individual actions that the Epigonoï performed in Thebes.

The same type of poetic strategy concerning the Theban Heracles in Homer is shown in Chapter 2. Heracles, however, is never treated at any length in the *Iliad*, which makes the Homeric point of view on the hero not easily accessible—discernible only *ex silentio*. Moreover, we do not have the Theban texts anymore, which presents a challenge from the start for the authors' analysis. Their hypothesis of the distinction between heroic models nevertheless remains convincing for Heracles: as for Diomedes and Tydeus, the immortal hero par excellence seems to emphasize, through the *Iliad*, antagonistic engagement with rival traditions. Appropriated as a rather negative paradigm in Homer, Heracles reveals, according to the authors, an antagonistic relationship between the Trojan Cycle and the Heracleian fabula.

What about Oedipus? Although archaic sources dealing with him are scarce, as they are for Heracles, according to the authors Oedipus nevertheless corresponds to a "suffering hero" in the manner of Odysseus. But, as Chapter 3 suggests, there is another type of strategic competition between the two figures. The *Odyssey's* Catalogue of Women (in book XI) could indeed be the site of this competition, where the mention of Epicaste (Jocasta) and her "mega ergon" can be read as an implicit reference to Odysseus' relationship with his mother, much more enviable than Oedipus' relationship with his own. This competition between the two heroes can thus appear as the resonance of the poetic competition between the *Odyssey* and the Theban traditions. This competition is played out through the literary device of the poetic catalogue, as the mention of other heroes shows—for example Amphion and Zethos (p. 154sq) : Theban heroes mentioned in the Catalogue of Women thus become the subject of significant choices both poetically and politically.[3] And as far as Oedipus and Odysseus are concerned, such a debate could also involve the rivalry between epic traditions on another level, the panhellenic one.

In Chapters 4 and 5, Barker and Christensen choose to explore this epic panhellenic scale through both Homer's and Hesiod's poetics. Whether these two poets—or these two traditions—are in competition is no longer in question. Hence the analysis, in a transversal way, deals with *eris*, cause of wars. The authors approach the question from the perspective of Hesiod on Thebes, which also appears in the myth of five ages (*Works and Days*, 161-165). As with Homer, the Hesiodic poems display poetic innovations upon the Theban Cycle, where the theme of the *eris* was probably central. So, the authors further refine their account of the political dimension of epic, focused on the well-being of communities, which has been highlighted in recent studies.[4] Indeed, a unifying thread of epic poetry consists in focusing on the theme of bad distribution—which is also bad *eris*—and on its rightness or correct emulation—the good *eris* of which the heroic feast is representative. Interpreting this poetic composition in the *Works and Days*, the authors emphasize the dynamic, opportunistic, and strategic character of Hesiodic creativity. And, as far as Ascræ is concerned, Thebes is definitely not far away. Another hypothesis of the authors, which renews the debate concerning Perses, deserves to be pointed out here: could not the conflict of Hesiod with his brother be a meaningful reutilization of the fraternal conflict that tore Thebes apart?

The troubles caused by *eris* are dealt with further in Homer. Where Hesiod praises the abilities of the ideal king to negotiate conflicts, the *Iliad* deals with institutions and puts forward a type of founding hero of assemblies intended to manage strife and to set a standard. The law of burial provides an effective example: scenes like that of the conflict over Hector's body, as well as its resolution, appear as the implicit denial of the refusal of burial which is so present in the Theban Cycle. Likewise, in the *Odyssey*, the scrupulous attention shown to the proper distribution of shares or to the consequences of the bad distribution (p. 198sq.) may appear as an echo of the disastrous distribution of the princely Theban heritage. Obviously, we lack compelling evidence, but the authors show how Thebes, despite its relative disappearance in epic, nevertheless remained active in the Greek imagination and political culture.

A question that now arises is why the Theban Cycle failed to survive as a text to be passed down to us? Or, put differently, why did it not benefit from the panhellenic dimension that the Homeric and Hesiodic poems gradually acquired? Chapter 6 offers a synthesis, a history which is obviously impossible to reconstruct with precision, since panhellenism was, according to the authors, "oblique," "competitive," and "multidirectional." The participation of the sanctuaries in this process in archaic Greece seems very likely, since this process not only structured the Homeric and Hesiodic epics like a rhizome, it also fed on the Theban epic while erasing it. In the classical period, Athenian tragedy, a new competitor with epic, provided the familiar image of Thebes, while Alexander—and Alexandria—did the rest. In exploiting a model of heroism turned towards the conquest of the East, Alexandrians saw in the *Iliad* and in the *Odyssey* an epic tradition adapted to the identity needs of an enlarged Greek community. The Thebaid, specter of Greek internal wars, was less suited to this political and ideological moment.

These are the ways by which Homer—i.e., the ancient *aidoi*—produced epic, manipulating narrative dynamics which were constantly adapted to their audiences and times, and this book reminds the reader of the various ways in which surviving epic treated the Theban Cycle. Barker and Christensen nonetheless use precise, complementary, and convincing argumentation, displayed step by step in the course of a very clear text and presentation. Typos are rare in the text, which constantly recapitulates the progressive results of the analysis, so that the work can be recommended as much to students as to specialists in archaic literature. It is, however, regrettable that the bibliography is overwhelmingly composed of English sources. Admittedly, recent publications relating to epics are primarily in English, but the authors could have cited some contributions—major ones—in French, Italian or German.^[5] Still, the authors make an enlightened contribution, in my opinion, to the functioning and issues of epic poetry throughout this archaic Greek period, full of mutations but—it should be emphasized—all carefully nuanced.

Notes

[1] Some major studies for this book are C. Tsagalis, "γυναιῶν εἶνεκα δῶρων : Interformularity and Intertraditionality in Theban and Homeric Epic", in *Trends in Classics*, 6, 2014, p. 357-398, and M. Davies, *The Theban Epics*, Washington, 2014.

[2] F. Zeitlin, "Thebes: Theater of Self and Society in Athenian Drama", in J. Peter Euben, *Greek Tragedy and Political Theory*, Los Angeles, 1986, p.101-141.

[3] See also for example Karin Mackowiak, "Cadmos le Phénicien et les élites sociales archaïques : mythe et histoire identitaire à Thèbes (IXe-VIe s. av. J.-C.), in *Gaia*, 21, 2018, p. 1-14 or "Les mythes fondateurs de Thèbes et l'histoire : les mises en formes du passé d'une cité et leurs enjeux", in *Dialogues d'Histoire Ancienne*, Suppl. 4.2, 2011, p. 563-589.

[4] Tanja Itgenshorst, *Denker und Gemeinschaft. Polis und Politisches Denken im archaischen Griechenland*, Paderborn, 2014.

[5] F. Blaise, P. Judet de la Combe, and Ph. Rousseau, eds., *Le métier du mythe. Lectures d'Hésiode*, Lilles, 1996 ; P.A. Bernardini, ed., *Presenza e funzione della città di tebe nella cultura greca. Atti del Convegno internazionale – Urbino 7-9 luglio 1997*, Rome, 2000 ; M. Hirschberger, *Gynaikon Katalogos und Megalai Ehoiai. Ein Kommentar zu den Fragmenten zweier Hesiodischer Epen*, Dusseldorf, 2004.