

# Colby



Colby Quarterly

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Volume 29  
Issue 3 *September*

Article 10

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September 1993

## Introduction: Essays on Homeric Epic

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### Recommended Citation

Colby Quarterly, Volume 29, no.3, September 1993

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## *Essays on Homeric Epic*

### INTRODUCTION

**F**EW TEXTS OFFER the same unmitigated challenge to each generation of scholars as that offered by the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, and few texts better lend themselves to such a diversity of approaches and interpretations. Over the years, these timeless epics have been analyzed from every possible angle: philological, literary, sociological, anthropological, historical, and others. Our aim, as editors of this issue of *Colby Quarterly*, was to take advantage of this rich variety of approaches. Articles included in this issue, even while they focus on a certain perspective and methodology, take into account the varying points of view that have enriched our understanding of the poems. It is our hope they will provide the reader with a sense of the multitude of conceptualizations and interpretations that modern scholars use in dealing with the Homeric epics. Because the kind of multilevel perception that is evident in these papers defies their classification into categories, the articles have been arranged alphabetically, according to the author's name.

Walter Donlan examines the Quarrel between Agamemnon and Achilles in the *Iliad* from the social and aesthetic perspective of the "original" audience. The Quarrel is in the form of a "duel" with gifts, a sociologically common form of competition in the pre-state society, and metaphorically it frames the larger issues of right and wrong in the poem. On that sociological level, Achilles emerges as the winner at every stage of the Quarrel.

Donald Lateiner applies the nonverbal approach to the Homeric epic and attempts to show how the Odyssean suitors pervert and violate heroic social norms of dining, gift-exchange and territory, face-to-face encounter etiquette, and moral rules for peers and inferiors. He shows how the text's presentation of their nonverbal behaviors sometimes betrays their insecure psychology, their social status, and their communication deficits. The asymmetrical reciprocity of the suitors and their take-over tactics are foiled by Penelope, Telemachus, and Odysseus in the disguise of a beggar.

By tracing a selection of terms through a range of narrative contexts in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* Michael Lynn-George's article gradually elicits elements that constitute the armature of the heroic world. His paper focuses upon the question of the possibility of survival. By analyzing the articulation of the needs of protection, shelter, defense, and help, the paper formulates a prolegomenon to a new approach to the complex issue of Homeric values.

Richard Martin considers the *Odyssey* on the level of folk epic performance

and the social situations it entails, and attempts to construct a method to explain Homeric characterization. In his paper he analyzes the metapoetic meanings of one figure in the poem, Telemachus, and attempts to wed the recent insights of Neo-analysts and Unitarians regarding the composition of the *Odyssey*. Telemachus in this interpretation can be seen as a figure for the audience of the performance, but also for the epic tradition's sense of its own imminent end.

In his article Michael Nagler discusses Homeric women and the "war system." The article focuses on two elements in the concluding books of the *Odyssey* which, it claims, contain meaning that has been overlooked hitherto, even though the latter is one of the most discussed cruces in Homer: the Eurytion *paradeigma* and Penelope's "heavy hand." The basic argument is that woman's attempt to avert conflict is sidelined and even co-opted by men's control of narrative in these texts.

Pietro Pucci's article shows the striking differences in the antiphonal response between Briseis' and Achilles' mournings over Patroclus, *Iliad* 19.283-339. Briseis laments her crushed hopes of marriage and joins the chorus of slave women; Achilles utters a pathetic feminine self-centered cry. The rhythm of the two laments studied on new grounds reveals Briseis' lament to be regular, almost rhyming, but Achilles' is abrupt and broken.

Carol Thomas questions the usual analogy for the Homeric epics that compares them to layers of an archaeological site, an accumulation of material compacted into discrete chronological segments. She offers a more apt metaphor of a rainbow, the hues of which melt into one another. While acknowledging the existence of distinction between the elements of the epics, the image recognizes a true entity.

We wish to thank Professor Peter Westervelt for his invaluable assistance in preparing this issue.

Hanna M. Roisman and Joseph Roisman  
Guest Editors