
This is a commentary on a modest scale (some 150 pages) and with modest aims (“helping the reader to understand and appreciate the text”), this reader being primarily “the beginning Homerist”, though G. expresses his hope that “the more advanced reader will also find some of the discussions interesting”.

About one third of the book is taken up by an introduction, which discusses 1) The Iliad and heroic poetry, 2) The Iliad, 3) Book Nine and the Iliad, 4) Language and style, and 5) The text.

1 is an elegant discussion of the subject, paying more attention than most introductions of this kind to the affinity between Homer and Near Eastern literature.

2 is largely a summary of G.’s views on the Iliad which he set out earlier in his Homer on Life and Death (1980). Thus we find, amongst other things, his idea of the tragic difference between the easy living gods and toiling mortals, an idea which I find pertinent and illuminating, though at times carried too far, e.g. on p. 12 (“the crushing divine perspective in which nothing human is really serious”) or 14 (“the gods are used to show that it [the tragedy of Achilles] both is and is not truly significant”). G. here seems to adopt too much the Olympic, divine perspective, whereas the Homeric narrator takes care to show us both divine and mortal perspectives (often in dramatic juxtaposition) and hence to end up with a tragic perspective. In his discussion (pp. 5-6) of the way in which the whole of the Trojan war is evoked in what is only a poem about its final stage, G. seems to lose track of his own argument and to start believing that the first books really describe the beginning of the hostilities, e.g., footnote 9: “... at 2.786ff., where again it is made clear that this is the first onset of the Achaeans”. This view, which occasionally has found defenders in the past, is contradicted, e.g., by passages such as 2.295-6, 6.435-9, or 9.352-4.

3 offers a rapid, but convincing discussion of the internal structure of Book 9 and its pivotal place in the Iliad (Achilles’ choice to reject Agamemnon’s offer turns the simple plot pattern by which a hero, slighted and dishonoured, withdraws from battle until his
comrades are forced to beg for his return into a complex one, in which the hero causes the death of his own dearest friend and instead of triumphing finishes in remorse and despair). G.’s treatment of the celebrated crux of the duals is, in my view, all too cavalier (and internally inconsistent); having repeatedly stressed that Book 9 is a masterpiece of Homeric poetry, we are given to understand on p. 24 that “[t]he text of Iliad and Odyssey which reached us must ultimately go back to a performance of each poem, and in this case the performance was one which showed a high-handed indifference to punctiliousness about factual details”.

The subject matter of 4, language and style, clearly does not belong to G.’s primary interests, except where the question of ‘Psychology and speech’ is concerned, a field of research to which he himself has made a seminal contribution in his 1986 JHS article. Thus the section on ‘Dialect’ reads like excerpts which G. must have made when himself a student, the secondary literature referred to hardly exceeding the sixties. No mention of C.J. Ruijgh, who has devoted a lifetime as a scholar to research of the Homeric dialects, resulting in more than a hundred articles on the subject (now usefully collected in two volumes of Scripta minora, Amsterdam 1991 and 1996). The section on ‘Formulaic composition’, again, can hardly conceal G.’s dislike of the subject and his evident refusal to keep up with the latest developments, the studies of Egbert Bakker or Edzard Visser, who ‘deconstruct’ Parry’s notion of the formula in a far more radical way than scholars like Hoekstra or Hainsworth, who are mentioned. One wonders whether the publisher had not served his buyers better by letting G. stick to the subjects he is good, indeed brilliant, at and not obliging (?) him to go through the motions of a complete introduction.

I turn to the commentary. Speaking in general, I have my doubts whether G.’s comments suffice to help the beginning Homerist through the text. Thus he leaves them in the cold with τῷ θαύμα in 35 (what does the pronoun refer to?), χρεώ in 197 (are we to understand ‘you have great need for me’ or ‘I have great need for you?’), αἰ κε + subjunctive in 172 (where the εἰ-clause has ‘purpose value’), or μόστακ’ in 324 (if a dative, we have to add an object; others take it as an accusative). Conversely, what is the gain of the following type of—learned, but uninformative—reference: (ad 2) “On φυξία cf. P. Chantraine, Études sur le vocabulaire grec (Paris 1950), 23; (ad 171) “This unique present form (φέρτε) has parallels in vedic formulae”, (ad 101) “κρηγναί. Aorist infinitive of κραί-