BOOK REVIEW

Communication, Love, and Death in Homer and Virgil: An Introduction. By STEPHEN RIDD. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2017. Pp. x + 258. Paperback, $29.95. ISBN 978-0-8061-5729-0.

This book examines the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid* along three loosely defined thematic axes. Despite the subtitle, it is difficult to know exactly what it is introducing, or to whom. Communication, love and death do not naturally cohere as a single category, nor is the book limited to the intersection of the three; it is perhaps best taken as eight independent essays on related topics, occasionally overlapping. The target readership is similarly undefined. For the undergraduate, the book may be somewhat too preoccupied with diffuse particulars; for the scholar, its utility is compromised by a handful of production decisions.

The first is its organization. Each chapter deals with some aspect of communications, love or death, or some combination thereof ("Singing with the Aid of the Muses," "Singing and Celebration," "Supernatural Singing," "Sons and Mothers," "Helen and the Men in Her Life," "Parting," "Communicating with the Dead," and "Deaths and Endings"). Each, without exception, is divided into three parts. Some chapters take up the three works in turn; in those that do not, however, the rationale for the lockstep trisection is unclear.

The second is the lack of Latin and Greek. Ridd's observations are based on his translations—solid, nuanced and idiomatic, but translations nevertheless. Any medium of exchange entails a certain reductionism; this is no exception. At *Aeneid* 12.908ff., for example, Ridd offers: "And as in our sleep, when the languid quiet of the night lies heavy / on our eyes, we seem to be trying in vain to run forward eagerly, / and in the middle of our attempts we fall exhausted..." (218). He concludes his discussion with the observation, "...it describes a wider range of frustrated activity and embraces both narrator and reader in its use of the word 'we.'" Certainly Vergil is engaging us through our experiences; what he wrote, though, was "*Ac velut in somnis, oculos ubi languida pressit / nocte quies, nequiquam avidos extendere cursus / velle videmur et in mediis conatibus aegri / succidimus...*" I do

not think it is mere pedantry to observe that he uses no word "we" here—neither the English nor any corresponding Latin pronoun. Elevating a derivative text over the original distances us from what we are trying to understand. This would certainly be more problematic if Ridd's translations were not as good as they are. Still, I found myself constantly setting the book aside to track down text that could easily have been provided. Whether an undergraduate reader would have the same reaction is hard to say. Perhaps what I see as a limitation here would, for another, be an advantage.

Finally, because the book is not so much a single extended argument as a loosely connected set of reflections on three different works, different readers will approach it from a number of different angles. This fairly cries out for an index locorum, but none is provided. A well-made index only partly makes good the deficiency.

Ridd's critical approach is reasonable and accessible, and he avoids excessive jargon and abstractions. He nevertheless takes as postulates a few claims that are far from universally acknowledged. He argues that the *Aeneid* is distinguished by "a grand narrative," and that its central thesis is that Imperial Rome is effectively Troy reincarnated. One can hardly deny that there is some kind of grand narrative at work, but its import has been substantially questioned by scholars Ridd himself cites, and the jury is still out. Similarly, to create a level playing field for his comparisons, he summarily announces that he will treat the three poems as texts on a more or less equal footing, ignoring the fact that the Homeric poems were primarily oral compositions. One cannot, however, cancel the ramifications of this fact by fiat. Some of his assumptions, finally, seem gratuitously post-modern: almost any occasion involving a male and a female (human, god or demigod) is taken as a paradigm of gender politics. That is certainly one way to read them; I prefer to think that the characters in a story are sometimes just that, and not a platform for expounding dogma, good or bad.

Such broad misgivings aside, I found many of Ridd's local observations quite penetrating. They arise from a robust and generous engagement with the poems, and he supports them from both the text and from a well-chosen (if limited) range of scholarship. I found several chapters particularly thought-provoking.

Chapter 5 ("Helen and the Men in Her Life") has a natural coherence, and Ridd accommodates his diverse materials, seeing past glib evaluations of Helen and Menelaus in *Odyssey* 4 as merely exemplary hosts, and exposing their brittle passive-aggressive relationship. Vergil's Helen balances her place as the instigator of the Trojan War against her problematic association with Venus in the Roman

"grand narrative" (Vergil really has remarkably little to say about her character as such).

Chapter 7 ("Communicating with the Dead") explores a topic deeply rooted in all three poems; it would make a useful addition to an undergraduate reading list on ancient epic. It makes explicit a number of differences between the various encounters between the living and the dead in all three poems. I found myself wanting to go through the passages again—certainly a good consequence for any critical work.

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