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# CLASSICAL BULLETIN

## BOOK LIST

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CB, 58 (1982), 70-71.

### BOOK REVIEWS

Gregory Nagy. *The Best of the Achaeans: Concepts of the Hero in Archaic Greek Poetry*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979. Pp. xvi + 392. \$15.00.

Gregory Nagy's new book is more literary critical in nature than his earlier works, but like them it relies quite distinctively on linguistic categories of analysis. Nagy has elsewhere professed an admiration of linguistics "for the elegant precision that it can bring to literary studies," and his *Best of the Achaeans* is best when it displays most fully its author's special expertise in that field.

Perhaps the most direct way to describe this very complex and wide-ranging work is to indicate its methodology. Typically, a key passage is selected for scrutiny: in Chapter 1, Demodokos's first song (*Od.* 8.72-82). Especially significant words, names, formulas, etc. are first isolated: here, among others, *klea andrōn*; in later chapters, *aristos Akhaiōn*, the names *Akhilleus*, *Apollōn*, *Patroklos/Patrokleēs*, and numerous others. These are then examined for etymological and semantic value and placed in the context of many other occurrences of the same word(s) in Homer, Hesiod, the Hymns, early Lyric, and Pindar. There is a prodigious amount of concordance work in all this. What emerge are tesserae in a mosaic of semantic/symbolic field studies; each is contiguous with its neighbors, but none is by itself patently indispensable to any grand design in the book's argument. A certain diffuseness results. (A very useful "Index of Key Words and Themes" makes it convenient to consult Nagy on individual topics.)

The book bristles with provocative discussions. An ongoing concern is the (in my view, sometimes over-confident) reconstruction of the tradition of epic poetry at large in the Dark Age on the strength of Homeric, Cyclic, and later evidence. Nagy concentrates on the issue of the hero's immortality, not only as it is ensured and indeed engendered by heroic song, but also as it is secured via apotheoses commemorated in hero cults. Though such extra-literary matters are fascinating, it is in its careful revelation of many patterns of semantic, symbolic, and mythic interrelations that this book makes its real contribution. This is not to say that all these patterns are compellingly demonstrated: Nagy tends toward over-ingenuity in his detection of meaningful correspondences beneath the poet's word choice (as, for example, in his

remarks on symbolic resonances of the element *phthi* in such phrases as *kleos aphthiton* and the place name *Phthiē* [p. 185]).

Not as an explication de texte intended for beginners, this is a richly suggestive study — actually aggregation of studies — which shows what can be achieved by a critical idiom imbued with a masterly knowledge of linguistics and of oral-formulaic theory.

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