

Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



Wolfe, Jessica. Homer and the Question of Strife from Erasmus to Hobbes

David Katz

Volume 39, numéro 2, printemps 2016

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1086575ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v39i2.26890>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (imprimé)

2293-7374 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Katz, D. (2016). Compte rendu de [Wolfe, Jessica. Homer and the Question of Strife from Erasmus to Hobbes]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 39(2), 233–235. <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v39i2.26890>

© Canadian Society for Renaissance Studies / Société canadienne d'études de la Renaissance; Pacific Northwest Renaissance Society; Toronto Renaissance and Reformation Colloquium; Victoria University Centre for Renaissance and Reformation Studies, 2016

Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

é
rudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>

triumphant humanist emblems of Reformation orthodoxy and Renaissance scholarship unanimously concerned with accurate interpretation of the word, and past as prologue to the present. The book's eighth chapter regards John Donne's "An Anatomy of the World" (the "First Anniversary") and its hyperbolic commemoration of Elizabeth Drury's death in light of other alchemical remembrances of women penned that year in funeral sermons and memorials. The final chapter assesses the fundamental significance of language to virtually everything in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, thereby reemphasizing the centrality of the word to the entire year's textual production.

Prefaced with a detailed chronology of events and equipped with an appendix of the year's printed texts, 1611 offers readers a limited but intriguing glimpse of some of the thematic interconnections among a group of printed texts published in London over the course of a year. While it is unlikely to unsettle many received ideas or to satisfy readers craving a richer account of early modern English textual culture, 1611 offers an engaging primer for students and scholars interested in exploring the thematic connections among a temporally gathered grouping of texts.

MARK ALBERT JOHNSTON
University of Windsor

Wolfe, Jessica.

Homer and the Question of Strife from Erasmus to Hobbes.

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015. Pp. xv, 607 + 10 ill. ISBN 978-1-4426-5026-8 (hardcover) \$110.

Focusing on the full range of the Homeric corpus, including texts incorrectly attributed to Homer—such as the mock-epic *Batrachomyomachia* and the collection of lyric encomiums, the *Homeric Hymns*—alongside more familiar works such as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, Jessica Wolfe's *Homer and the Question of Strife from Erasmus to Hobbes* argues that Renaissance interpretations of Homerica were shaped by a diverse and conflicted set of responses to the representation of *eris* (strife, conflict, or discord); in other words, by sectarian, theological, and social conflicts. As the first two chapters of Wolfe's book show, for sixteenth- and seventeenth-century humanists, Homer's depiction

of *eris* mediated and was mediated in turn by political debate, sectarian discord, and scholarly dispute. Erasmus uses Homer as a touchstone for theological and scholarly controversy; for interpreting and discussing the line dividing productive conflict and destructive contention. While Erasmus responds to Homer throughout his works, including *Praise of Folly*, the *Adagia* accommodate Homer to Erasmus's own time and place; more still, they allow the arch-scholar to interpolate Homeric representations of pagan *agones* into his own irenic form of Christian humanism. Likewise, Philipp Melanchthon and Francois Rabelais construct a Homeric ethos contrary to epic values, interpretively creating a counter-epic Homer exemplifying tolerance and skepticism. For Rabelais, this includes an appropriation of sophistic copiousness, dialogism, and two sided-argumentation. As Wolfe explains, Rabelais draws on a tradition of interpreting Homer as a *gioco*-serious poet, as the father of sophism, to satirize ignorance.

Moving in a different direction, the middle and final chapters of *Homer and the Question of Strife* provide readings of two major English poets, Edmund Spenser and John Milton, and two translators, George Chapman and Thomas Hobbes. Chapter 3 argues that Spenser uses a series of Homeric commonplaces—the many references in *The Faerie Queene* to the golden chain of Zeus and the poem's frequent allusions to the wedding between Thetis and Peleus—to create an "aetiology of strife." Spenser transforms the wedding and golden chain into master metaphors both for his linking of virtues and for the *concordia discors* that animates *The Faerie Queene*'s argument. These metaphors act as conceits embodying and commenting upon forms of strife that promote or oppose ethical behaviour and political stability, allowing the poet to demarcate between productive and harmful examples of discord. Although Spenser depicts conflict as a deeply ambiguous social force, he ultimately portrays the relationship between harmony and discord as fruitful. Chapman, on the other hand, interprets Homer as the poet of irony and scoptic speech, a strategy that permits him, via glosses, commentary, and translation, to appropriate Homer's authority to both circumvent the prohibition on satire in the "Bishops' Ban" of 1599 and to justify the ethicality of his own vituperative language. Milton, the final major poet discussed by Wolfe, exonerates the God of *Paradise Lost* from introducing strife into the world in favour of locating the birth of sin within the agency of "pondering" subjects, using Homeric images to dramatize deliberation in a world where moral agents have liberty of conscience. Wolfe concludes with a brief analysis

of Hobbes's translation of Homer, the last significant work of the philosopher's career. She demonstrates that Hobbes reads Homer as an absolute monarchist with a view of sovereignty grounded in a very Hobbesian idea of contract theory. The philosopher-translator portrays the Achaeans as victorious in the Trojan War due to their acceptance of Agamemnon's supremacy, an acceptance based on a susceptibility to fear that Hobbes sees as inimical to strife. In the final tally, Hobbes creates one last counter-epic Homer.

Wolfe's readings are at once wide ranging and low to the ground. This approach has many advantages. Sticking closely to the literary descendants of Homer's *Eris* allows her to cover a tremendous amount of material without sacrificing either interpretive rigour or thoroughness of research. But this focus also has a few disadvantages. Wolfe's chapter on Spenser, for example, contains no discussion of the poet's participation in the Tudor colonial project in Ireland. Even Wolfe's discussion of *The Faerie Queene's* fifth book fails to grapple with the Irish question, concentrating instead on courtly virtues at the expense of a number of concerns that significantly intersect with Wolfe's broader interest in the representation of conflict. Still, the chapter is so rich, it contains enough material for a separate monograph; indeed, Wolfe has something valuable to say about each book of *The Faerie Queene*. Nearly every chapter in *Homer and the Question of Strife* maintains this level of depth. Wolfe persuasively discusses subjects ranging from rhetorical accommodation, to hermeneutics, to humanist disputation, to allegory, to theological conflict, to parody, to literary *agon*, and more. At its best, *Homer and the Question of Strife* goes well beyond examining the reception of Homer, ultimately detailing a vast typology of reading, one that partakes in some of the copiousness often ascribed to Homer's work itself. In her acknowledgements, Wolfe admits that she spent more time finishing her volume than Odysseus took travelling home to Ithaca. In the best possible way, the careful readings on display here bear witness to this investment in both time and effort. Among the most wide-ranging and extensively researched publications on classical reception in recent years, *Homer and the Question of Strife* makes a welcome contribution, not only to the study of Homer's place in early modern intellectual culture, but to the history of reading in the period.

DAVID KATZ

University of Massachusetts, Amherst