

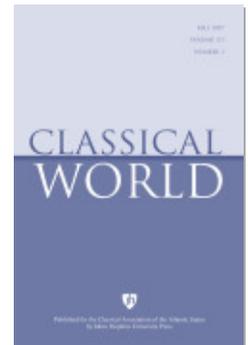


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Experiencing Hektor: Character in the Iliad by Lynn Kozak
(review)

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Lynn Kozak. *Experiencing Hektor: Character in the Iliad*. Bloomsbury Classical Studies Monographs. London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2017. Pp. xv, 307. \$128.00. ISBN 978-1-4742-4544-9.

In considering the narrative properties of the *Iliad*, scholars have often used the novel and its practices for comparison. In her lively exploration of the *Iliad*'s techniques of characterization, Lynn Kozak instead uses serial television as a *comparandum*, arguing that, as a “non-literate” form that puts significant demands on audience memory and engagement, the *Iliad* is more like a television series than a novel. She points out that, like television series such as *Breaking Bad* or *Lost*, the *Iliad* is a single long story with a beginning, middle, and end, but is performed and experienced episodically, in smaller pieces, like “the *aristeia* of Diomedes” or “the ransoming of Hektor.” Listening to the *Iliad* is thus similar to binge-watching a television serial, as both require a significant commitment of time—around 15–25 hours or so for the *Iliad* by Kozak's estimation—punctuated by fairly frequent breaks, which she estimates occur at least every 90 minutes. Whether ancient performance of Homer included as many breaks as Kozak imagines may not really matter, though very infrequent breaks in actual performance time (perhaps only after every eight books) would make the comparison significantly less compelling. Kozak counters this potential objection by pointing to places in the *Iliad*'s narrative that are particularly suitable for a break, often followed by a recap of some part of the action; these, she argues, function similarly to partial recaps of previous episodes in serial television. The length of individual Greek dramas helps her case, suggesting ancient audiences appreciated significant pauses in performance time approximately as often as Kozak estimates for Homer.

Kozak persuades that the analogy is fruitful if not perfect. In particular, in analyzing how successful television series use certain techniques of characterization to hook audiences, she shows how the *Iliad*'s similar practices create a gripping character in Hektor. Using Murray Smith's model of film character engagement and comparisons to television series, she discusses how both the *Iliad* and serial television encourage an audience first to “recognize” characters, then to “align” with some of them, and finally to experience strong “allegiances.” Like successful serial television, the *Iliad* is particularly effective at creating ever-shifting alignments with a broad range of characters and complex allegiances to certain ones, particularly to Hektor.

Kozak's presentation of examples is extremely lucid. Even though I am unfamiliar with most of the series she uses to illustrate her points, I was able to understand her analogies easily and found many of them stimulating. For example, her comparison of the many minor warriors introduced in the *Iliad* only to die in battle to the “red-shirts” of *Star Trek*, characters introduced briefly only to die in the same episode, gave me a new way of thinking about this familiar feature of the poem. Such comparisons may also be helpful in the classroom in illustrating how the *Iliad* engages interest in character to students who may know and understand serial television better than literature.

Early in the book, Kozak confesses that she finds the *Iliad* and serial television equally addictive, and her obvious enthusiasm charms and engages. She also shows considerable knowledge of both, citing examples from many popular series and analyzing the entire *Iliad* beat by beat (a term borrowed from theorist Michael Newman, loosely equivalent to a scene. For the distinction, see 6–7).

Admittedly, I found the earlier part of the book, where she lays out the case for the analogy and defines her terms, more consistently interesting than the detailed analysis of the *Iliad* that follows. Nonetheless, the careful analysis demonstrates the value of her approach. This part of the book may be better digested in small pieces by those teaching, or writing about, individual parts of the poem.

Kozak's writing is delightfully clear, though characterized more by enthusiasm than elegance. The old-fashioned philologist in me did cringe at a couple of lapses ("it peaks interest," 35; "*in medium res*," 43) that will support curmudgeonly suspicions that watching a lot of TV erodes traditional forms of literacy. A good copy editor could have prevented these minor errors from marring what is generally an enjoyable venture into a new way of looking at this very old poem.

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Reinhard Pirngruber. *The Economy of Late Achaemenid and Seleucid Babylonia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. Pp. xiii, 249. \$99.99. ISBN 978-1-107-10606-2.

New Institutional Economics (NIE), a system of analysis developed by the Nobel laureate in economics Douglass C. North, is all the rage in the study of the ancient economy, and this book, too, explicitly invokes the approach as its guiding principle. The method has the advantage of getting us away from the tired formalist–substantivist debate, which contrasts caricatures of the ancient economy as market-driven and essentially modern to its diametrical opposite, where centralized distribution and barter dominated. NIE argues reasonably that economies are embedded in social institutions that explain performance and structure. The disadvantage for its use in ancient history is that it focuses on market performance, a very modern interest, at the expense of concerns about production, and that it ignores other means of exchange.

Scholars of Greece and Rome promoted the application of NIE in ancient studies, and it is interesting to see it applied here to the ancient Near East, both before the region was part of the Hellenistic world and during that era. Probably unbeknownst to most nonspecialists, there exists an unparalleled database on prices of six commodities, most importantly barley and dates, the primary sources of nutrition in Babylonia and crops that produce yields at different times in the year. These prices are inserted in the *Astronomical Diaries*, a corpus with observations of astronomical (especially lunar) and meteorological occurrences, that was compiled from the mid-seventh to the mid-first centuries B.C.E. and is especially well preserved for the late Achaemenid and Seleucid periods. Since these texts are precisely dated and occasionally refer to historical events such as the battle of Gaugamela, they are ideal sources of information on how market prices react to noneconomic factors. Together with additional sources on prices and political history, these allow the author to present a detailed price history of Babylonia from c. 400 to c. 140 B.C.E., the end date set by the Parthian conquest of the region (93–163). Pirngruber is well aware of the danger that this is *cum hoc ergo propter hoc* reasoning, and in another chapter he applies statistical methods