SANCTIFIED VIOLENCE IN HOMERIC SOCIETY

In *Sanctified Violence in Homeric Society*, Margo Kitts explores the oath-making rituals and narratives of the *Iliad* and articulates a theory of ritualized violence. Analyzing ritual features that are common to acts of religious violence worldwide, she focuses on the paradigms, core metaphors, ritual fictions, and poetic registers of Homeric oath-sacrifices. Kitts sees the oath-sacrificing ritual performance as generating a symbolic text, which is interwoven with the poetic text of the *Iliad*’s oath-sacrificing narratives. The resulting intertextual rendering may be analyzed for semantic tensions. Kitts’s interdisciplinary approach enlists ritual and metaphor theory to help explain some of those tensions, including that between sacrificed animals and slain men.

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OATH-MAKING RITUALS AND NARRATIVES IN THE ILIAD

MARGO KITTS
Iowa State University
To my mother

whose every story has an epic twist.
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At the age of 20, I read Soren Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling* for a seminar on existentialism offered by John Williams at Raymond College (UOP Stockton, CA). I had scarcely any theological background, my previous exposure to biblical stories consisting of a beautifully illustrated children’s book that I had encountered at a doctor’s office when I was eight or nine years old. Kierkegaard’s presentation of the possible mental tableaus with which Abraham may have prepared to sacrifice Isaac evoked a puzzling image I remembered from the children’s book. It was a backside view of Isaac following his father up a mountain trail. Isaac looked at his father’s back; his father, stooped under a bundle of wood, looked straight ahead. The viewer was allowed to perceive neither their faces nor their emotions, much as the reader of Genesis is given no index of either. Lacking those emotional signals, the story confounded me as a child, it fascinated me as a young adult, and it was one trigger for my later investigations of sacrifice and violence in the classroom. Those investigations have culminated in a handful of articles on ritualized violence and now in this book. Although this book is on the *Iliad*, I hope that the theory I present here will be seen to extend beyond Homer into the wider subject of sanctified violence, such as the violence that Abraham was prepared to perpetrate on Isaac.

Of course, a book on Homer cannot be explained away by illustrations in children’s books. Other influences were more direct. One important influence was Professor Michael Nagler, who endured many semesters of Homeric Greek and oral traditional studies with me during my graduate school days at UC Berkeley. My debt to him is obvious in this book. Professor Ruggero Stefanini was truly a mentor who endured just as many semesters of Hittite language, rituals, and Homeric cross-over studies with me. Both professors indulged my obsession with the figure
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Yet writing is a lonely task, and the above friends and mentors assisted with my creation of this book primarily in the form of memories. Concurrent with the writing of this book, I fell in love with Paul Ricoeur’s work on metaphor and Roy Rappaport’s work on ritual. Unfortunately, it is too late to meet and thank either scholar. More recently I have been stimulated by the friendships of Classicist Madeleine Henry, who hosted my presentation of some arguments from this book before members of the Classics and Foreign Language Department here at Iowa State University, and of Hector Avalos, a fellow member of the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies who took my ideas seriously enough to read and contemplate my articles from Kernos and the Journal of Ritual Studies. Phil Sellew’s sessions on Greco–Roman religions at the 2004 and 2005 Upper Midwestern Regional meetings of the American Academy of Religion provided a wonderful forum for presenting my ideas before a rare group of AAR members who actually knew what I was talking about. I have him to thank for arranging that. In addition, I would like to thank long-time friends Joe Illick and Brian George for their enduring confidence in my ability to think. I also must remember Father Tom Casey (now deceased) and Padraic O’Hare (quite alive), two former colleagues who provided riotous humor and moral support during my travail at a small New England Catholic college in the 90s.

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