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Aristotelian Catharsis Theory in the Homeric Scholia?

The commentaries on the *Iliad*, transmitted in medieval manuscripts, but deriving their main ingredients from Hellenistic and early Imperial sources, preserve detailed discussions of the first word of the poem *mênin*. In answer to the question *dia ti apo tês mênidos êrxato, outô dusphêmou onomatos* (“why did he begin with the ‘wrath’, a word so ill-boding”), a note in several of these manuscripts gives two reasons, the first of which runs as follows: *prôton men hin’ ek tou pathous apokathar(i)eusêi to toiouto morion tês psuchês kai prosektikôterous tous akroatas epi tou megethous poiêsêi kai proethisêi pherein gennaiôs hêmas ta pathê, mellôn polemous apaggellein ...* (“first, in order to cleanse (?) such a part of the soul of the feeling and make the listeners more attentive as to its importance and habituate us in advance to bear the sufferings nobly, since he was about to tell the story of wars ...”). In his useful survey of literary criticism in the exegetical scholia to the *Iliad* (*CQ* 30 [1980] 274), Nicholas Richardson believes he can hear an echo of Aristotelian catharsis theory in the term *apokathar(i)eusêi*. It is my purpose to draw attention to reasons for questioning this idea, however attractive it might appear at first sight, and indicate another possible line of approach.

To begin with, *apokathar(i)eusêi* is a variant, and considerations of grammar make it dubious: the context requires a transitive verb, but *kathar(i)euô* is regularly intransitive. The concept of catharsis appears to play no role in the commentator’s reasoning either: the emotion in question is anger (not pity or fear), the arousal of the feeling alone is the focus of the note (not its removal or reduction), and an application of the theory at such an early stage would be out of place. A reference to Aristotelian catharsis would also be unique in the Homeric scholia.

It might therefore be preferable to consider the text against the background of rhetorical doctrine and in particular against that of the functions of the proem. Both the context of the scholium itself, with its emphasis on the predisposition of the audience, and the comparison with another scholium on *mênin* (bT on *Il.* 1.1*b*) favour this approach. In short, the commentator appears to discern in the poet’s reference to the emotion of wrath a device for winning the attention of the audience by instilling the same emotion in their minds. He seems to have expressed this psychological effect in physiological terms and may have had in mind the image of the poet as doctor, one which occasionally turns up in the scholia.

Whatever the exact implications of this conclusion for the early history of classical scholarship and the complicated question of Peripatetic influence on Hellenistic literary studies, a trace of the *Poetics* in the Homeric scholia does seem to vanish and with it a potential piece of evidence for the Alexandrian critics’ direct knowledge and use of this particular treatise.