

Erin Shanower (2004). *Age of Bronze Volume 2: Sacrifice*. Image Comics. New York. 224 pgs. ISBN: 1582403600

Reviewed by Thomas E. Jenkins
Trinity University
tjenkins@trinity.edu

Eric Shanower's *Age of Bronze: Sacrifice* is an impressive, meticulously researched graphic novel version of the epic cycle, narrated with real artistry and even *pathos*. Taking its cue from the events leading to the Trojan war, *Sacrifice* continues the stories begun in *A Thousand Ships* and which will continue, at least as promised, through five more volumes of war and its remembrance. *Sacrifice* thus begins with the Trojans' confusion over Paris' arrival with Helen, and with the Greeks' resolve to sail to Troy. The sacrifice of the title, however, refers to that of Iphigenia, and the second half of the novel specifically calques Euripides' treatment of the same in his *Iphigenia at Aulis*. It's a tour-de-force effort, one that happily marries the best of classical scholarship with the oh-so-21st century penchant for cinematically narrated graphic novels.

A glance at S.'s bibliography demonstrates that S. has not skimmed on his efforts to re-create a convincing Bronze Age world. Cutting-age scholarship—such as Hilary Mackie's *Talking Trojan, Speech and Community in the Iliad* (Lanham, MD, 1996) and the *Studia Troica* series (1999-2001)—sit aside old favorites like Rhys Carpenter's *Discontinuity in Greek Civilization* (New York, 1968). The penchant for recreating an 'authentic' Greek world is palpable: banished are the whitewashed Greek figures of e.g. the Renaissance, and in their place are indubitably dirty, shaggy, haggard soldiers, and their stressed-out wives – or boyfriends. In a sense, then, this is a *cinema vérité* version of myth, both gritty and raw. Famous archaeological images—such as a vase painting of Achilles mending Patroklos' shoulder—find themselves inserted unobtrusively into the general narrative, and artifacts such as

Minoan civilization's famous 'touch-down goddess' end up as contemporary Bronze Age *chotskys*. In style, Shanower tends towards the highly detailed: his pen-and-ink panels are chockablock with cascading locks, blooming foliage, and intricate hoop-skirts. All of this is calculated to produce the effect of a photographically-perfect reproduction of a camera-less era.

But Shanower's real talent, surprisingly, is in telling a whopping good tale: everything from the pacing to the editing to the *dénouement* is crafted with finesse. It's a complicated mass of stories, after all: everything from Paris's fling with Helen, to the Greeks' unfortunate raiding on the wrong 'Troy', to the unfortunate events at Aulis. And Shanower proves himself fearless as a *provocateur* as well: the middle section of the book details Achilles' perhaps-not-so-surprising affair with Patroklos, including a steamy man-on-man kiss and a gay frolic along the seashore. The prose might here be a bit overripe (Patroklos to Achilles: "I don't want you to go...not ever.... Come with me down the hill—I know a place where we can be alone together") and purists might object that Bronze Age sexual *mores* probably differed considerably from the later Athenian manifestations. But compared to the idiotic treatment of Achilles and Patroklos in the recent film *Troy*—in which Patroklos was morphed into Achilles' *cousin*—this is a refreshingly adult way to view a complex sociological phenomenon.

Most of the novel is divided into standard comic book panels, though Shanower varies the shape and number considerably, from eight panel grids to more intricate combinations of panning shots and other wide-angle tricks. When the ominous winds kick in at Aulis, a hissing SHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSHSH outlines every panel, an ever-present reminder of the wrath of Artemis, and of the Greeks' plan of appeasement through sacrifice. The most spectacular set-pieces, however, are the single panels that take up a whole page, often with special effects. The various misfortunes of the house of Atreus, for instance, are all narrated in

the tangle of Menelaus' hair (!), while Telephus' Oedipally-inflected woes are intersected by an enormous snake that looks suspiciously, if appropriately, phallic. A flashback to Heracles is superimposed by an outline of the hero with lion's skin and club, while the initial interview between Helen and Priam is a sliced-up single panel that neatly captures the narrative structure of the work as a whole: one story, multiple frames.

The end of the novel displays Shanower's real talent for composing effective visual narrative. With all threads now tied to Iphigenia's sacrifice by her father, the panels become progressively less wordy: when confronted with the horror of human sacrifice, words seem to both the characters and the modern reader somehow banal. Thus, a wordless passage of several panels follows Iphigenia's passage to the altar, to the priest's hoisting of the dreaded knife, to Iphigenia's fawnlike eyes, and (mercifully) to a cut-away of the actual blow itself, silhouetted against a full moon. The graphic novel thus betrays its intimacy with modern film – one could easily use the last eight or nine pages as storyboards for a brilliant, filmed, *Iphigenia*.

There are very few shortcomings to Shanower's presentation of this portion of the epic cycle. The lack of page numbers in a 200+ page book is unfortunate, though I suppose that Shanower decided that numbers would distract from the cinematic flow. Shanower's decision to excise depictions of the gods—a choice also made in the cinematic *Troy*—emphasizes the human dimension of the stories, though perhaps also a missed opportunity. And one worries that given the time needed to produce each volume—about two years a piece—the series won't conclude until the mid 2010's, which might try the patience of even the most dedicated fan of the series.

But these are quibbles. Definitely *not* a 'comic book' in the e.g. *Captain America* sense, *Age of Bronze: Sacrifice* engages seriously and creatively with some of the great myths of the

classical era. If the thought of picking up a graphic novel seems juvenile, I urge you to give Shanower's latest effort a try: it's hardly a sacrifice at all.