

BOOK REVIEW

Para-Narratives in the Odyssey: Stories in the Frame. By MAUREEN ALDEN. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2017, Pp. xii + 424. Hardcover, \$110.00. ISBN 978-0-199-29106-9.

In *Para-Narratives in the Odyssey* Maureen Alden has written an impressive, hefty book that serves as a companion volume to her 2000 *Homer Beside Himself: Para-Narratives in the Iliad* (Oxford). That volume studied in great detail all the narratives that occur “beside” the main narrative of the *Iliad*, building up to a comprehensive, 121-page analysis of the famous paradigm of Meleager in Book 9. Her study remains a helpful guide to that crucial part of the poem. Alden’s ambitions are similarly large in this second book, in which she examines how the main narrative of the *Odyssey* “is explored and illuminated by all the many subsidiary narratives by the poet and his characters” (vii).

In an introduction, Alden outlines the different kinds of para-narratives. There are “parallel situations” in the voice of the main narrator (e.g., Telemachus’ journey and homecoming = Odysseus’); “paradigms” told by characters (perhaps the most studied already of the different kinds of para-narratives); “paradigmatic models,” when a character or a ritual stands as a model for another character to follow (e.g., Heracles for Odysseus); “story shapes” (e.g. returning hero); “mirror stories” (e.g. the Trojan Horse story); the *ainos* or “veiled hint,” an allusive tale with hidden meaning (e.g. Odysseus’ story to Eumaeus about the cloak); and a catch-all category of other digressions, which includes things like genealogies and omens. These categories can be overlapping and they do not serve as Alden’s template for how she organizes the book. The rest of the chapters are organized more loosely around characters, and each includes examples from several of the types listed above. Most of the analysis in the chapters that follow proceeds by identifying shared motifs among narratives and showing how these motifs function differently or similarly in different narratives. Much of this is well-trodden territory, though it is helpful to have it all brought into one place.

Chapter 2 covers return stories. The *nostoi* of Menelaus, Agamemnon, Nestor and Ajax all have elements that reflect one another and, most of all, reflect Odysseus’ *nostos*. Alden has some good original insights here: for instance, the seer

mentioned in the Nekyia (later named as Melampus) is a parallel for Odysseus. Chapter 3 deals with the “Oresteia” story, to which the poem makes frequent allusion. The most interesting element of Alden’s analysis here is her discussion of Clytemnestra’s “trick” (*dolos*), which she understands to be an allusion to the “robe” (*pharos*) with which Clytemnestra traps Agamemnon in the version of the myth known from Aeschylus. The link might be too weak for the work Alden wants it to do, but the pay-off is interesting: it makes both Penelope’s trick of the shroud (*pharos*) and Odysseus’ aversion to sleeping under blankets in his home seem more ominous.

Chapter 4 follows closely on the previous chapter and concentrates on Penelope. Chapter 5 covers para-narratives involving Odysseus that Telemachus hears, especially Helen’s and Agamemnon’s stories from Book 4. Chapter 6 examines some of the important para-narrative models for Odysseus: e.g. Heracles and Apollo. The discussion of Apollo as a model for Odysseus is suggestive, as is seeing the opening of the Homeric *Hymn to Apollo* as an intertext (in the sense that both poems draw on a traditional way of depicting Apollo). However, the definition of para-narrative has been stretched at this point: there is no “narrative” of any length involving Apollo actually told in the *Odyssey*.

Chapter 7 is on firmer ground with a solid analysis of the songs of Demodocus. Chapter 8 on the Cyclops is the best section of the book. It builds on a brief examination Alden had already published in her *Iliad* book, which is drawn from an earlier article.¹ She shows how this episode presents a “split image”: “In the first fragment of this image, the suitors correspond to the Cyclops and Odysseus is equated with his narrative self in the Cyclopeia: the second fragment presents Odysseus as a grim reflection of the Cyclops, who returned late and alone, to find his cave infested with intruders making free with his food” (233). Alden’s second “fragment” is unsettling: it equates Odysseus with a cannibal. Alden could have pushed this line of argument even further: I would suggest that it is precisely at the moment in which this cannibalistic imagery reaches its peak (the simile of 22.401–6) that Eurycleia is about to ululate, as if at a (human?) sacrifice in enthusiastic approval of the slaughter. Chapter 9 rounds out the book with a study of the “lying tales” Odysseus tells different addressees over the course of the poem.

¹ M. Alden, “An intelligent Cyclops?” in *Spondes ston Om̄ro*, ed. M. Paisi-Apostolopoulou (Ithaki, 1993), 75–95. Despite what the style sheet says, the program we use to publish reviews online does not accept Greek letters. Please transliterate.

This book's greatest virtue is its relentless comprehensiveness. Nearly every possible analogy between a para-narrative and the main narrative (or often another para-narrative) is outlined. A very full apparatus of notes on relevant scholarship accompanies the text. The book, in this way, makes a strong argument for understanding these parallels as meaningful. It represents something of a maximal approach to the subject, which will provide a useful reference for those thinking about such parallelisms.

I would judge Alden's project a success, but I note two sorts of questions some critics will doubtless raise. First, not all of her readers will be persuaded of every connection she sees. Does Odysseus really mean for Minos, who dispenses judgments in legal cases among the dead, to be a positive example for Alcinous (60), whom he wishes would dispense to him conveyance home? I have intentionally selected a small, unimportant example to illustrate the point. I detect no important cases where such connections are as tenuous, but some critics will disagree. Some of this criticism could have been forestalled by engaging with the current debates about allusion and referentiality in Homer.²

Second, and more substantive in my view, for all her analysis of the different sorts of para-narratives, Alden never really gives a satisfactory method for defining a para-narrative, especially as it may be distinguished from the main narrative. In fact, it turns out that it is very difficult to do this, perhaps impossible. Alden thinks Aristotle's synopsis of the *Odyssey's* plot (Arist. *Poet.* 1455b16–23), which begins with Odysseus' absence and concludes with the slaughter of the suitors, is an accurate description of the main narrative. Understood this way, most of the first-half of the poem consists of para-narratives (the Telemachy and the *Apologos*), but we might wonder whether these are really subordinate to the main narrative. Odysseus' wanderings have long been to many, if not most readers, the most vivid part of the poem. Doubtless, Alden and those of a narratological persuasion will say that the *Apologos* is not part of the "main story"—i.e., the events told by the main narrator, excluding external prolepses and analepses.³ Perhaps this is right, but when does a para-narrative embedded within a main-narrative become a main-narrative surrounded by a secondary frame-narrative? Surely no one thinks that the governess's story in *The Turn of the Screw* is a para-narrative, even though it is not told by the main narrator. Or to take an ancient example: is

² See B. Currie, *Homer's Allusive Art* (Oxford, 2016).

³ See I. de Jong, *A Narratological Commentary on the Odyssey* (Cambridge, 2001), xv.

Clitophon's narrative, occupying virtually the entirety of Achilles Tatius' *Leucippe and Clitophon*, really a para-narrative in any meaningful sense? This question is more significant for the *Odyssey* than the *Iliad* because the latter poem has no para-narratives of the scale of the Telemachy and the *Apologos*. Egbert Bakker has recently argued that the *Odyssey* "subverts the hierarchizing narratological distinctions between primary and secondary ... narrator."⁴ The *Odyssey* is a liminal case of a narrative poem that expands its para-narratives about as much as it can before the main narrative becomes another para-narrative.

Thankfully, the fruit that comes from Alden's study does not depend on making such hierarchical distinctions. We may equally gain from seeing correspondences between Odysseus' poor reception by Polyphemus and Telemachus' good reception by Menelaus, even if neither (or both) are "para-narratives." Alden has written a good book about the many relationships among the various stories in the *Odyssey*. It will be welcome resource that should find an important place on the shelf of scholars of the *Odyssey*.

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⁴E. J. Bakker, *The Meaning of Meat and the Structure of the Odyssey* (Cambridge, 2013), 5.