

BOOK REVIEW

Homer: Odyssey, Books XVII and XVIII. Edited by Deborah STEINER. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010. Pp. xii + 242. Hardback, £55.00/\$99.00. ISBN 978-0-521-85983-7. Paper, £19.99/\$34.99. ISBN 978-0-521-67711-0.

In the fifth tetrad of the *Odyssey* these two books provide a splendid, thousand hexameter poetic feast. Herein the long-deferred hero returns to his soiled estate and experiences a spectrum of crippled welcomes and inventively ugly unwelcomes. Steiner presents a 43-page introduction with basic information on the poetic medium of oral formulaic composition, the early and recent transmission of the text, and a primer for the hexameter. A fourteen-page bibliography and two indexes supplement 145 pages of commentary. Steiner acknowledges deep indebtedness to Russo's masterful 56 pages in the 1992 Oxford (Fondazione Val-la) commentary, addressed to more advanced audiences. This commentary also resembles its Cambridge "green and yellow" Odyssean predecessors, Garvie on Books 6–8 and Rutherford on 19–20, but fails to provide a synopsis of Homeric grammar. Beginners are unlikely to have Rutherford's concise, Stanford's more expansive, or Chantraine's immense *Grammaire homérique*. The ratio of commentary to verse is significantly greater than what Rutherford provided for his succeeding contiguous books. Cambridge offers upper-level students worthy commentaries explicating over one-fourth of the junior Homer.

Incisive observations stud the volume, such as Iros' pugilistic *agon* as a burlesque of *Iliad* 23's slugfest contest—with the anti-heroic prize here of blood sausage replacing Akhilleus' mule and goblet. Steiner believes that Odysseus' dwelling cannot be very large, since Penelope seems to hear all conversations, but, as she adds (13), Homer's "vagueness [and] inconsistency" in describing aristocratic dwellings may arise from formular pressure, plot needs ("transference"), or sheer ignorance of an earlier age's dwellings—real or imaginary versions (cf. ad 17.492-3). The elusive literary target is moving and blurred, however, since descriptions of regions of the Odyssean *domoi* may fabricate an amalgam of structures of the Mycenaean age, the now not-so-dark early Iron Age (think of the *megaron* and burials at Lefkandi), and the Poet's(') undeterminable

age(s). This problem of polychronicity already vexed Finley's seminal sociological study, *The World of Odysseus* (cf. Drerup, *Arch. Hom.* 1969; Beck, *LfgRE s.v. domos*). Steiner employs Fenik's work on repetitions and doublets, distinguishing low and high abusers, such as Thersites-ish Melanthios and Iros who "pre-echo" the big-shots (footstool-hurling) Eurymakhos and Antinoos. Odysseus' probing *ptochic*, pseudo-parasitic actions pattern after gods briefly disguised as asset-less *xenoi* who test the hospitable qualities of their hosts and deal out deserved rewards and punishments (17.483-7; cf. D. J. Stewart's oft neglected monograph, *The Disguised Guest: Rank, Role, and Identity in the Odyssey* [1976]). Epic verbal drubbings, Steiner suggests, may owe something to contemporary iambic "dissing" as well as to riffs on the palpable hits of the *Iliad*'s Thersites, and his "betters," Agamemnon and Achilles.

Each change of epic scene or interlude has an instructive synoptic introduction orienting readers. These synopses provide a useful antidote to the atomistic nature of traditional verse-by-verse explication. Steiner finds six functions for the Argos reunion (N.B.: divine disguise penetrated). She is sensitive to the titrated proxemics of the *Odyssey*, the hero's complicated progress from island and upland peripheries to urban liminal threshold to basileutic central dining table (and bedroom). Homeric grammatical and compositional particularities are often explained, e.g., βάν as a 3rd pl. aorist athematic indicative, ἀπονέεσθαι as a line-terminating formula, and epithets, e.g., ἐϋστέφανος, λευκώλενοι ("regularly between the penthemimeral caesura and the bucolic diaeresis") with parallels. Subscripts are printed adscript. Steiner helpfully elucidates many of the "speaking names," e.g., Amphinomos, Dolios; see further, Sulzberger, *REG* 1926.

The commentary is very helpful, thoughtful for both the problems that new readers of Homer face and incisive about some unresolved (unresolvable, perhaps) issues. Not the least of these, we can venture, is what does Penelope know and when does she know it (see further, Gainsford, *JHS* 2003). Steiner adheres to the feminist Felson and Katz "indeterminacy" approach, rather than the still dominant, unitarian and "masculist" (e.g.) Rutherford-de Jong "ignorant and clueless victim" school. Steiner considers but rejects the unpopular and unpopulous camp (largely of Stanford University) of "early recognition," founded by P. W. Harsh and developed by Amory, Winkler, and John Vlahos (see, most recently, *College Literature* 38.2 (2011): *Early Recognition in Homer's Odyssey*, where Vlahos argues in detail for Penelope's early and conscious awareness of the stranger's stratagems and five resistant critics—Louden, Reece, Richardson, Yamagata, and Floyd—react). This conundrum confronts all (repeat) audiences, impinging on

questions of gender, inheritance customs, plot-construction, analytic and neo-analytic interpretations (positing multiforms of the tale), formular pressures, and Homeric psychology. Steiner opines, “Penelope must not yet be party to the revenge plot” (7). Yet Steiner confesses that Penelope’s behavior changes radically from the moment of the stranger’s arrival (26). The now laughing widow keys herself to the ragtag “nobody’s” hints and predictions, “almost preternaturally” and “intuitively responding” to his cues (27). Steiner’s last adverb suppresses too many disconfirming assumptions. To describe the sharp, polytropic Penelope as embarking “unwittingly” on her decisive course of action denies her agency in the discovery and suitor-slaughter (ad 18.259-70).

To Penelope’s unique *ad hoc* account to the suitors of Odysseus’ reported departing χείρ ἐπὶ κάρπου instructions to her, his mate and housekeeper, add a fifth interpretation to Steiner’s four: e) grieving “widow” recognizes the ξένος who has in fact come home, she chides the suitors for their improprieties, tests and teases the real, one-man audience with her unlikely account. She pleases (281: γήθησεν) and fascinates him and the external audiences by her deceptions and remarriage demands. If this woman is the “supremely faithful” paradigm of wifedom (180, and she is), then illogical or incoherent (or clumsily inserted or just dumb) is the faithful house-mistress’s decision *now* to end her extended state of husbandless marriage, *now* to hold an ironic, anachronic “bride contest” for a widow and mother. Why now, when—as many German “analysts” noted—all the crowded signs tilt toward her missing man’s long-awaited, incredible epiphany?

We’ve slipped imperceptibly into Book 19, but most skeptics won’t give the heroine’s indirection and misdirection an inch of “recognition” until 23.206. The “Penelopeia” creatively and retardatively keeps audiences—internal and external—in doubt about the designated house-protector’s intentions and *anagnorisis*. The forces, however, that compel the cool and grounded heroine to employ women’s weapons within her familial and social constraints enlarge our appreciation (and her husband’s) of the carefully attuned, *homophrosync* spouse and her narrative talents. “Homer” suggests that if this testy and testing spouse does not need Olympian-assisted wonders and the glib, disguised stranger’s sophomoric but folkloric, heroic revelations of identity—scars and such—then attentive, repeat listeners should not rely on them, either.

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