

## BOOK REVIEW

*Greek Heroes In and Out of Hades*. By Stamatia Dova. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012. Pp. xiv + 227. Hardcover, \$70.00. ISBN 978-0-739-14497-8.

The subject of Dova's book is the *katabasis* in Greek poetry, though the theme serves as a point of entry for a wide range of topics on the characterization of heroes. The book's structure is also very open: though divided into three parts corresponding roughly to the genres of epic, lyric, and tragedy, it basically consists of thirty more or less interrelated essays ranging from 2 to 8 pages each. The main texts discussed are (in the order presented) Homer's *Odyssey*, Bacchylides 5, Homer's *Iliad*, Plato's *Republic* and *Symposium*, and Euripides' *Alcestis*. Each text once discussed reappears repeatedly through the rest of the book in an ever-deepening comparative perspective. The essayistic format is never really explained or justified, and while some essays form sustained and intensive discussions, others appear to be digressive or free-standing. No real thesis or goal is defined, and the book can seem, by turns, deeply engaging but strangely aimless. For the sake of brevity, I summarize below only the main arguments, omitting from my review much that is original and surprising but difficult to place within the context of the whole.

Part I begins with Odysseus' visit to the Underworld in Book 11 of the *Odyssey*. Dova focuses on the manner in which heroes evaluate one another's fates and how this contributes to the definition of heroic *kleos*. Agamemnon, himself a negative paradigm for the epic *nostos*, helps to define competing notions of *kleos* through the praise he offers Achilles and Odysseus respectively. Odysseus' praise of Achilles is defective because he intentionally elides Achilles' continuing honor among the living while dead, i.e. his *kleos*. Hence Achilles' hostile response is not a rejection of heroic death but a rejection of Odysseus' chosen terms. Discussion of the word *makar* leads into a general overview of the term within the *Odyssey*: in describing as *makares* both those who died at Troy and the future husband of Nausicaa, Odysseus delineates competing models of *kleos*, one emphasizing the *kalos thanatos*, the other emphasizing *nostos* and matrimonial (re)union. Dova occasionally alludes to mystery cult (8, 14–15, 19–20), suggesting that heroes are defined relative to the status of an initiate, but never sets this running discus-

sion on a firm foundation and does not justify her use as evidence of “Bacchic” tablets from the 4th century.

Part II uses Odysseus’ encounter with Heracles to segue into an extended discussion of Bacchylides 5, in which Heracles visits the Underworld and meets the hero Meleager. Here Dova’s method of close and inventive reading is perhaps most rewarding, given the compression and allusiveness of the poem itself. Her argument that the poem responds to a lost Heracles epic reconstructable from Apollodorus is not very persuasive, though this should not detract from her point that Bacchylides’ philosophically disposed Heracles probably departs from earlier tradition. Dova discusses at length how the poem alludes to and adapts aspects of Meleager’s story and the likely paradigmatic meaning of the myth for Bacchylides’ external audience. Meleager’s speech, and of course the myth itself, leads in turn to a discussion of Achilles in Book 9 of the *Iliad*. This represents Dova’s most extended departure from the subject of *katabasis* proper and seems largely extraneous. The argument focuses on the well-worn subject of conflicting social values in heroic society and starts to sound like a canned lecture on the Embassy to Achilles. The idea that Achilles’ gradual reconciliation to death is a kind of “inverted *katabasis*” (104) provides only a slender connection with Bacchylides’ poem or the rest of the book.

Part III deals primarily with the myth of Alcestis but begins with a series of essays on Plato. Achilles’ famous response to Odysseus (“I would rather be the servant of a laborer than king of the dead,” *Od.* 11.488-91) is criticized as evincing fear of death in *Republic* 3 but quoted approvingly in *Republic* 7 as illustrative of the enlightened cave-dweller’s attitude. Dova argues that Socrates means to imply that “poetry can decipher the human psyche better than any other art” (147) but seems to foist her own reading of *Odyssey* 11 onto Plato, whose citations of Homer can sometimes be more casual than rigorous. Another Socratic criticism of Achilles, his excessive mourning for the death of Patroclus, leads to a discussion of Achilles and Alcestis as ideal lovers in the *Symposium* and, finally, of Euripides’ *Alcestis*. Dova believes that both the Platonic and the Euripidean accounts of the Alcestis-myth reflect a “folk tradition of rivalry between the parents of the groom and the new bride” (156). This approach seems reasonable, but the “original folktale” is only briefly described (165), while other details emerge arbitrarily wherever the argument requires them and no real reason is given to believe that the folktale ever existed in the form hypothesized. In any case, the fact that Euripides jettisons all the themes of the alleged folktale in preference to his own hardly makes his play into a “deconstruction” (177) of the older version.

Given the variety and breadth of subjects discussed, it is surprising that the book lacks any conclusion or epilogue. Also in such a case, a thorough index is indispensable, but Dova's index seems both cluttered and incomplete. Strangely, she lists not only every single scholar cited in the notes, but actually each individual scholarly work. The consequence is that (for example) "Nagy, G." enjoys no fewer than seven discreet entries whereas "Circe" and "*kleos*" receive none. In general, the book appears to be more richly annotated than its essayistic format should require; endnotes account for nearly a third of the text overall and often discuss tangential matters at considerable length in a way that adds even more discontinuity to the conscientious reader's experience.

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