BOOK REVIEW


The Odyssey is a complex poem of intersecting stories, and Loney’s study aims to organize these often-competing narratives using the paradigm provided by the revenge tale (tisis). The focus is squarely on the structure of the revenge tale, the often ambiguous ways in which the Odyssey’s narratives fit into it and the consequences of such ambiguities for our ethical evaluation of the principal avenger, Odysseus.

The book comprises six chapters grouped in three pairs. The first two chapters set up tisis as a cultural logic in its archaic context and as a narrative structure for the Odyssey. Archaic tisis Loney demonstrates, is not simply tit-for-tat, but rather structured according to three considerations: First, the time of vengeance emphasizes immediacy; in contrast to exchanges of gifts, which are delayed to produce the appearance that gift-giving is spontaneous rather than transactional, tisis demands that punishment follows as soon as possible after the offense, in order to emphasize the appropriateness of the avenging act. Second, the punishment is (notionally) calculated as to its magnitude to fit the crime. Third, the person who decides whether the punishment fits the crime is significant; it is often not a third party, but the aggrieved himself. Next to these three salient aspects of tisis, Loney shows that vengeance in the Odyssey is a specifically narrative happening. Unlike boasts of having exacted vengeance on the battlefields of the Iliad—relatively simple exchanges of killings—vengeance in the Odyssey only takes shape through being told as a story which organizes the bare events into the tisis framework. This raises the problem, explored later, that different perspectives on events can produce conflicting vengeance stories. ἀτασθαλία, “recklessness,” emerges as a key term: When an Odyssean narrative attributes ἀτασθαλία to an agent, he is being set up as an appropriate target of vengeance.

From the paradigmatic story of Orestes’ revenge upon Aigisthos, Loney derives a “generic tisis sequence” that structures revenge tales from “background conditions,” through “unheeded warning” and “precipitating offense,” to
“retributive act” and “new conditions.” Chapters 3 and 4 fit a series of revenge tales from the Odyssey into this sequence. These include (in Chapter 3) Zeus’ destruction of the companions who ate Helios’ cattle, Poseidon’s grudge against Odysseus for the blinding of Polyphemus and Poseidon’s punishment of the Phaiakians for helping Odysseus home, as well as (in Chapter 4) the principal narrative of Odysseus’ vengeance upon the suitors. These chapters work hard to fit the variety of stories they address into the tesis framework, often with insight and subtlety. An example is Loney’s analysis (147-51) of the killing of Antinoos, bringing out the symmetry between his punishment and his offense of consuming Odysseus’ household (which Loney reads as symbolic cannibalism through the substitution βιοτός/βιος: He is shot through the λαιμός, “gullet” (closely associated with eating in Homeric diction), and his blood spouts as if returning the wine he drank.

Where the middle chapters are concerned with identifying narratives as revenge tales, the final two chapters are devoted to the failures of the tesis structure to contain the multiple meanings of Odysseus’ triumph. Chapter 5 proposes that the Odyssey is not a univocal celebration of Odysseus (perhaps not as novel a position as it is presented here) by seeking disturbing correspondences between the deaths of the suitors and of Agamemnon, and in the well-known ambiguities of the verb δόλωσι (as in the phrase δόλαις ἀπὸ πάντας ἔταιρος—is it “lose” or “destroy”?). The final chapter focuses on the ending of the Odyssey. The poet expects the audience to recognize that the narrative of tesis that justifies Odysseus’ destruction of the suitors is only “superficially laudatory” and contains “unspoken flaws” (203). The book concludes with a novel emphasis on the divinely enforced amnesty that ends the poem, not merely “a pact not to remember” but rather literal amnesia (222), paralleling other figures of induced forgetting (Lotus Eaters, Circe, Helen). This is an appropriate ending for the Odyssey because the neat conclusions of the tesis structure have repeatedly been shown to fail under scrutiny. The apparent approbation of Odysseus is undermined.

This book is successful within the bounds of what it sets out to do, while its very success can leave the reader chafing at the limitations of its approach. The method of fitting narratives into the paradigmatic sequence of the revenge tale is suited to finding parallels and identities, but less alert to formal differences between narratives. For instance, in the analysis of Zeus’ punishment of Odysseus’ companions for killing Helios’ cattle, Loney recognizes that Zeus acts “out of a more objective inclination to uphold the principles of justice” (90), but this produces no significant effect on the analysis. There is a significant formal difference
between an agent taking retribution for injuries to himself—a dual relationship between offender and avenger—and a god enforcing a universal notion of justice—a triple structure of offender, victim and “law.” In Odysseus’ revenge tale, Loney notes that the suitors, uniquely, receive warnings against their conduct only after already having committed their offense (121). This is explained as a narratological expedient (“to depict as much of Odysseus’ tisis narrative as possible in the 41 days of story time”) like the displacement of the Iliadic teichoscopia, eliding the vertiginous anachronies of too late and too soon that run through both Homeric poems. An investigation of how Homeric temporality pulls against the synchronicity demanded by the ideal tisis narrative would be a valuable extension of this study, which has perhaps already proved its worth by making such questions possible.

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