

BOOK REVIEW

The Ethics of Revenge and the Meanings of the Odyssey. By ALEXANDER C. LONEY. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2019. Pp. xii + 265. Hardback, \$78.00. ISBN: 978-0-19-090967-3.

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. ἀτασθαλῖαι, “recklessness,” emerges as a key term: When an Odyssean narrative attributes ἀτασθαλῖαι 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 Polyphemos 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 *tisis* 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 βίστος/βίος): 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 *tisis* 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 ὄλλυμι (as in the phrase ὄλεσας ἅπο πάντας ἑταίρους—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 *tisis* 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 *tisis* 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.

YUKAI LI

Carleton University, yukaili@cunet.carleton.ca