

## BOOK REVIEW

*The Many-Minded Man: The Odyssey, Psychology, and the Therapy of Epic.* By JOEL P. CHRISTENSEN. Myth and Poetics, 2. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020. Pp. 360. Hardback, \$39.95. ISBN: 9781501752346.

Most people would count themselves fortunate to master a single academic discipline in their lifetimes. In *The Many-Minded Man*, however, Joel Christensen shows that he has thoroughly digested not only the vast field of Classics – specifically Homeric scholarship – but also the equally immense realm of human psychology, although he modestly denies the latter (“the range of modern psychology and cognitive science that I do not know or over which I have too limited a command grows every day,” 283). This monograph reflects Christensen’s current thinking about combining the two fields in order to provide a comprehensive lens through which to read the *Odyssey*.

Christensen’s stated goal is to explore the *Odyssey* for its therapeutic value. He does “not mean to suggest that the Homeric epics anticipate the discipline of modern psychology” (21). Rather, he is interested in “Homeric folk psychology, the implicit understanding of the working of human minds reflected in the epics” (150). His recurrent theme is agency and how it is gained by controlling one’s narrative. After an introduction which gives context for what is to come, Chapter 1 lays out the basic theoretical framework; from the start, the *Odyssey* addresses the dichotomy between human agency and divine responsibility, with story-telling as mediator. The following chapters use cognitive theories and practices to provide new perspectives on traditional Homeric issues. The idea of learned helplessness explains why Telemachus does not behave as a twenty-something year old, and how his trips to Pylos and Sparta empower him to revisit his narrative (Chapter 2). Similarly, learned helplessness and isolation prevent Odysseus from leaving Calypso; only when he uses his previous knowledge of building and steering a raft can he control his own story and escape (Chapter 3). How Odysseus relates his adventures to the Phaeacians – and which he chooses to tell – is the topic of Chapter 4. Christensen considers this story-telling to be a form of narrative therapy, “a therapeutic process by which the hero re-authors his own

narrative to negotiate the relationship between divine agency and his own responsibility" (93); Odysseus cannot return to Ithaca until he demonstrates his control. Chapter 5 explicates how the lies he tells after his return continue this re-authoring, balancing coherence – "details that make sense together and communicate a self who functions in the world" – with correspondence – "the equivalence between events in the world and events in the story that we might label as facts" (121). Turning from Telemachus and Odysseus, Chapter 6 uses disability studies to show how slaves, both "good" and "bad," are marginalized through infantilization and vilification. And while Penelope seems to have some degree of agency, her notoriety does not necessarily derive from her own abilities, but rather from her subordination and acceptance of internalized oppression (Chapter 7). Appropriately, the last two chapters concern the end of the *Odyssey*. First, Christensen examines the political situation in Ithaca, finding collective trauma due in part to the overlapping of public and private affairs; the solution, amnesty, represents not intentionally forgetting what happened, but instead the adoption a new collective narrative (Chapter 8). Then he explores the psychological effects of closure, or the lack thereof, concluding that Book 24 presents the potential dangers of story-telling (Chapter 9). A conclusion ties everything together by looking at allegory, specifically that of the winnowing fan.

Christensen amply demonstrates the utility of reading Homer through the lens of cognitive science, and along the way shows his mastery of the two academic disciplines in a way that guides his reader gently. Two techniques stand out. First, he helpfully and frequently provides recapitulations, rephrasings and sign-posting to ensure nobody gets lost along the way. Second, through use of the first person singular pronoun Christensen allows the reader to follow along with his thought processes. It may seem trite when he says "[t]his book emerges out of my experiences of teaching, thinking about, and living alongside the *Odyssey*" (2). He goes on, however, to write of "[w]hen I first fell in love with Homer," and how the birth of his children and the death of his father affected his reading (3). Throughout, he peppers his analyses with such statements as "one aspect of the end of the *Odyssey* that has long confounded me" (166) and "[w]hile teaching, I have often offered a bland assurance that 'it all makes sense,' eventually" (265).

Of course, Christensen's monograph does not answer all questions. No matter how necessary they might be for reconfiguring his identity (124-7), the lies Odysseus tells to Laertes in Book 24 still strike me as unnecessarily cruel. While it is useful to recognize Eurykleia's marginalization and internal oppression (164-5), Christensen's discussion glosses over the inexplicable savagery of Odysseus

grabbing her by the throat. And I am interested in what this lens would reveal about the numerous instances of bathing in the *Odyssey*, especially the tale Helen tells of finding the disguised Odysseus in Troy (4.240-264).

But the reader should not approach this book looking for simple answers or great revelations. Reading Homeric epic through this multidisciplinary lens will likely confirm, strengthen and add depth to one's previously held interpretations. Christensen intends his readings to supplement those of previous scholars, reaffirming and introducing complexities. His goal is not to change minds; instead, he offers a deeply personal study, one that emphasizes process over product in a way that seems quite appropriate to both the *Odyssey* and modern psychology.

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