

## REVIEWS OF BOOKS

### LITERATURE

GRETHLEIN (J.) *Die Odyssee: Homer und die Kunst des Erzählens*. Munich: C.H. Beck, 2017. Pp. 329. €26.95. 9783406708176.  
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This book serves two aims. First, it appeals to the non-specialist reader as a judicious introduction to aspects of scholarship on the *Odyssey* and its interpretation. Secondly, it advances a thesis on the significance of narrative form for and within lived experience. In combining the two, the book places a higher priority on the first. The contemporary general audience is well served: extensive recapitulations remind readers of the plot, all quotations are in translation and concepts in transliterated Greek appear with explanations. Grethlein also makes the case for the importance of the *Odyssey* through periodic reminders of its reception history and influence.

The book comprises eight chapters. The introductory first chapter includes summaries of the plot of the *Odyssey*, the Homeric question and Homeric style, and outlines the central concepts of narration (*Erzählung*) and experience (*Erfahrung*). The main chapters approximately follow the progress of the *Odyssey* and combine expositions of plot and interpretation with discussions of the role of narration. Chapter 2 presents the Telemachy, and broadly distinguishes modern novels, wherein tension arises from uncertainty about the story's outcome, from Homeric epic, where tension arises from how an already known ending will be reached. This chapter also argues that the Telemachy is not a *Bildungsroman* because modern emphases on the inner lives of characters are not applicable to Homer. Chapter 3 focuses on storytelling in Phaeacia, hitting expected topics like the effects on audiences of the stories of Demodocus and Odysseus, the trustworthiness of Odysseus as narrator and the schematic logic of the Apologue. On narration, Grethlein argues that Odysseus builds his identity and gains mastery over his sufferings by putting them in narrative form. Chapter 4 contains two

independent discussions of the Polyphemus episode: first, the episode is discussed as a reflection of the experience of colonization and encounter with other peoples; second, the popularity of Archaic visual depictions of Polyphemus' blinding is explained through a meta-pictorial link between the eye of Polyphemus and the faculty of sight – representations of sight remind us that we are looking at a representation. Chapter 5 rejoins the plot of the *Odyssey* with Odysseus' homecoming and recognitions. The emphasis on vision from the previous chapter continues in discussions of the ambiguities of sight and recognition as part of homecoming, followed by further examination of the dependence of self-identity on storytelling in the context of Odysseus' lying tales. Chapter 6 argues for the injustice of Odysseus' massacre of the suitors, despite Homer's efforts at cover up and against the impression, given by Zeus' theodicy in book 1, that the *Odyssey* is ethically more advanced than the *Iliad*. Chapter 7 discusses the ending of the *Odyssey*; against efforts to excise dissonant passages of books 23 and 24, this chapter asserts the importance of openness as well as closure in endings. Grethlein offers an attractive reading of Odysseus and Penelope telling each other their stories as the *Odyssey*'s climactic culmination: storytelling is here lifted out of time as Athena holds back the dawn. Finally, chapter 8 is an epilogue on reception, emphasizing Primo Levi's use of the *Odyssey* and the figure of Odysseus in narrating his experience of the Holocaust, while briefly raising the complexities of positively identifying Odysseus with enlightenment in the context of Theodor W. Adorno's critique.

The book is strong in opening up existing interpretative questions to the general reader, while refraining from developing those questions beyond received categories. For instance, the discussion of the justness of the gods in chapter 6 presents convincingly exhaustive arguments that no coherent ethical system can be extracted from the *Odyssey*, despite Zeus' self-justification that men bring suffering upon themselves beyond 'the

fate which the gods have allotted them' (228). But past this important corrective, further considerations are left to the reader (for instance, the notion that fate in the Homeric poems is allotted by the gods is immediately complicated by repeated moments in the *Iliad* where Zeus yields to what is fated).

The needs of the general reader are perhaps also responsible for the sometimes cursory engagements with other scholarly and theoretical arguments. In discussing the story of Odysseus' scar, for instance, Erich Auerbach (*Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, Princeton 1953, 3–23) is used as a foil, but closer engagement might have helped make the rather conventional readings favoured here – digression increases suspense and lends symbolic weight to the scar – more convincing (179–89). The thesis of the book's central contribution – narrative gives form to lived experience and offers mastery over it, thereby bestowing identity – is notably Aristotelian and Freudian, and would benefit from more detailed considerations of modern philosophical and theoretical discussions of language and subjectivity than questionable generalizations about 'the postmodern isolation of language from life' (281). Fortunately, the author's previous publications remedy this somewhat, in particular *Das Geschichtsbild der Ilias* (Göttingen 2006) and *Aesthetic Experience and Classical Antiquity* (Cambridge 2017).

In sum, this book is a solid introduction to the *Odyssey* and its interpretation for readers of German (although discussions of gender are notable for their absence). No technical problems mar its production aside from some cited works not being listed in the bibliography. The competing demands of the general audience and this book's theoretical thesis mean that specialists may wish to prioritize the author's other publications.

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ALDEN (M.J.) **Para-narratives in the *Odyssey*: Stories in the Frame**. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. Pp. xii + 424. £80. 9780199291069.

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The book under review is, in Alden's own words, a 'companion volume' to her *Homer Beside Himself* (Oxford 2000), which deals with what

she terms 'para-narratives' in the *Iliad*. In the introduction (1–15), Alden presents some core concepts and sets out the basic tenets of her approach. 'Para-narrative' has a wide application. On the one hand, it embraces analogous or parallel situations narrated by the poet in his own voice; thus the narrative about Telemachus is analogous to that about Odysseus in that both leave islands where they have been acutely depressed, both make journeys, return from abroad, etc. On the other hand, there are narratives about events prior to, or independent of, the main plot, whether told by the poet (for example the *paradosis* of Odysseus' bow) or by a character (Menelaus' homecoming, Odysseus' *apologoi*). Alden's interest is not in provenance or form, but in function: how para-narratives are relevant to their immediate and/or wider contexts and how they relate to the main narrative by meditating or commenting upon it and thereby sending a message to the audience, whether internal or external.

Various clusters, types and aspects of para-narratives are treated in the following eight chapters, of which three are quite long: (2) 'Para-narratives of return' (16–75); (4) 'Penelope' (101–52); (9) 'The first person: para-narratives of trial and pity' (256–303). Shorter chapters treat the Oresteia story in the *Odyssey*, para-narratives for Telemachus, paradigms for Odysseus, the songs of Demodocus and the Cyclops story.

Alden's concern with parallels may be illustrated by looking at the second chapter, since it offers a whole kaleidoscope of patterns for return, which are similar to or unlike the main narrative in (often) significant ways. Menelaus' long absence abroad is a negative example for Telemachus, who should not stay away from home too long (21); Proteus has a clear parallel in Polyphemus, another shepherd who was tricked (24); Aegisthus' lookout at Agamemnon's return corresponds to the suitors' lookouts (26, cf. 88); Odysseus' tale of his arrival at Calypso's island is designed to be the perfect analogy for his arrival in Scheria (31) and his leaving the two female 'detainers' Circe and Calypso makes clear that Nausicaa will not be able to detain Odysseus in Scheria (35). Alden has a flair for finding veiled hints. Thus the *apologoi*, whose string of setbacks parallels the Phaeacians' repeated postponements of Odysseus' return (8), are told in the hope that the Phaeacians will speed up his onward journey; they function as an argument (254). The Cyclops' punishment warns the