

DEBORAH STEINER, *Homer. Odyssey Books XVII and XVIII*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, pp. xi + 242, ISBN 978-0-521-67711-0.

In book 17 the *Odyssey* offers one of its most significant episodes, the disguised Odysseus first begging among the suitors - the poem's most central statement of theoxeny, and in book 18, one of its most ambiguous - Penelope's appearance before the suitors. Deborah Steiner's new commentary on both books has some considerable strengths, as it guides the reader through the intricacies that comprise the narrative forming these two Books. The close attention given to a comparatively neglected book is most welcome. Though she asserts that hers is largely a literary commentary, emphasizing stylistic and structural matters, in reality it is a fairly well rounded work, covering virtually everything a contemporary audience expects from a commentary. In its greatest strength, she meticulously connects the specific motifs and components occurring in these books tracing them through the *Odyssey's* larger themes and thematic structure. In an additional distinction, she does a fine job of delineating the chief characteristics of the minor characters that inhabit these episodes, and drawing distinctions between some that may have too often been regarded as doublets or multi-forms (e.g., Eurynome and Eurycleia: 182-83). At particularly complex junctures, such as Penelope's motivations for appearing before the suitors, Steiner carefully analyzes several distinct narrative trajectories (e.g., 181, 196), allowing readers to follow through a number of different perspectives on the queen's behavior in this most complex of all episodes. She also does an excellent job of charting the changes in the dynamics between Odysseus and the suitors, how in each exchange he moves to a position of greater centrality or authority in the palace.

A 43-page Introduction first expounds (pp. 1-13) on "Homer and His Poetic Medium," deals with oral tradition, considers certain flexibility therein, how the *Odyssey* may rethink certain Iliadic values, how it encourages audience engagement, glances at alternate versions of certain episodes, and includes speculation about performance settings. The next eighteen pp. set Books 17-18 thematically within the *Odyssey's* larger context, emphasizing the central place of theoxeny, the role of the gods in the suitors' destruction, consider narrative indeterminacy, especially in the depiction of Penelope, and the multiple trajectories she could pursue. Shorter sections on the text, transmission, and Homeric meter, conclude the Introduction. The Commentary itself (79 pp. on Book 17, 67 on Book 18) proceeds by offering a short essay on a section of lines (e.g., 1-110 of Book 18), followed by detailed explication of specific words, phrases, episodes, or other issues.

The secondary literature on Homer is vast. It is nigh impossible for the author of a Homeric study to cite every relevant work, or even to include every relevant critical perspective. That said, Steiner employs a somewhat idiosyncratic selection that, while up to date in some regards (narrative indeterminacy, allusions to alternate *Odysseys*), seems slightly retro in others (the frequent assumption that the *Odyssey* is reacting to the *Iliad*, little attention paid to mythic traditions outside of Greece). Like many other observers, S. often considers the *Odyssey* through an Iliadic lens. While she does a fine job of revealing the depth of Iliadic allusions in the Irus episode (pp. 165-72), this is perhaps the best episode for such an approach (but cf. her analysis of Athena's beautification of Penelope and the *Dios Apatê*). Many other episodes in Books 17-18 not only lack parallels or counterparts in the Trojan epic, they do not really belong under the rubric of "heroic myth." Thus, when Steiner states, for instance, that the *Odyssey's* gods "display a novel concern with questions of ethical worth" (14), or "divine intervention on the side of justice and morality . . . belong among the *Odyssey's* striking innovations" (19-20), this is true when coming from an *Iliad*-based perspective, but is it necessarily true in a broader sense?

Is Homer necessarily *innovating* in the *Odyssey*, or is he employing traditional mythic types that are already extant in his time period, but fall *outside* of those specific types that together comprise the larger plot of the *Iliad*? As Steiner herself elsewhere notes (124, 140, especially, 175, and cf. 212), Hesiod's *Works and Days* employs a conception of divine justice more like that in the *Odyssey*. This suggests that since archaic hexameter Greek myth has multiple conceptions of divine justice, we should not necessarily privilege that featured in the *Iliad* and regard others as innovation.

Though she agrees that Cyprus may have played a central role in the transmission of Near Eastern elements in Homeric epic (134), Steiner offers very little specific engagement of any Near Eastern myths (no mention of *Gilgamesh*, or any specific myths from Mesopotamia, Ugarit or Egypt). Most of the episodes found in the second half of the *Odyssey*, not only those in Books 17-18, do not really fall under a conventional classification of heroic myth. The key centrality of hospitality, herdsmen, and fugitive prophets, in these parts of the *Odyssey* has far less in common with the *Iliad* than it does with Old Testament myth (which itself draws notably on earlier Mesopotamian, Ugaritic and Egyptian myth).

Consequently, it seems strange that Steiner cites almost none of the invaluable parallels Old Testament myth offers for this part of the *Odyssey*, other than noting, in passing, the parallels Elisha offers to Eurymachus' taunting the bald Odysseus (209). For instance, Steiner well notes the *Odyssey's* strategic use of "delayed recognition" (180), but does not consider that Old Testament myth, in Genesis's account of Joseph of Egypt, offers the closest parallels and most valuable context for interpreting this specific subtype of recognition scene. Perhaps even more significant are the instances of theoxeny Old Testament myth provides. Though Steiner makes a glancing mention (140), arguably Genesis 19's depiction of the mob assaulting Lot's household is the closest *comparandum*

ancient myth has for the *Odyssey's* depiction of the suitors (cf. also Elijah and Elisha's hospitable interactions in 1 and 2 Kings).

My specific criticisms notwithstanding, all in all, Steiner's commentary will be helpful to readers from a tremendous range of approaches, offers a wealth of specific detail, and is a welcome addition that scholars will want to add to their libraries.

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