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Reviewed Work: *The Wrath of Athena: Gods and Men in the Odyssey* by Jenny Strauss Clay

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Comments

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REVIEWS

JENNY STRAUSS CLAY. *The Wrath of Athena: Gods and Men in the Odyssey*. Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 1983. Pp. xii + 268.

This book boldly invites controversy by highlighting its most provocative and debatable point in its title and in its organization. Clay contends that the *Odyssey* is decisively shaped by anger on the part of Athena toward its hero Odysseus and that this anger, while it may be played down in the text, actually determines the structure of the poem and is of central thematic importance throughout. The prominence given to this point may, however, result in a misleading impression of the book as a whole. For it is not in fact a sustained attempt to develop a single argument, but rather a series of investigations into various aspects of the poem grouped together under the broad rubric reflected in the subtitle and elsewhere defined as "the relationship between the divine and the human in the *Odyssey*" (p. 7).

Clay's technique is well illustrated by her opening chapter, "The Beginning of the *Odyssey*." There she scrutinizes the opening lines of the poem, fixing on certain details which she seeks to illuminate through an investigation of parallels and other relevant material in Homeric and other Greek poetry. The fact that the poet begins by calling on the Muse leads her into a discussion of poetic inspiration in Homer and the difference between the knowledge normally available to mortals and the special knowledge of the gods and their activities imparted to the poet by the Muse. From this she returns to other aspects of the poem: the omission of the hero's name, the poet's evident partisanship toward the hero, the choice of a starting point for Odysseus' story.

The second chapter centers on the figure of Odysseus with the same technique of coming at its subject from a variety of different angles: Odysseus is approached through his name, his Autolycean heritage, the boar's-tusk helmet that he wears in *Iliad* X, his bow and his role as an archer (especially in relation to Heracles), the relationship between Odysseus and Achilles suggested by the first song of Demodocus, and his behavior during the key episode of his encounter with Polyphemus.

In the third chapter, Clay turns to the relations between gods and men in the poem, exploring the various qualities that define the gods' difference from men: their freedom from death, their agelessness, their knowledge of *moira*, their ability to transform the outward appearances of things, their power to control mortal life through demonstrations of favor and wrath. The two remaining chapters are somewhat more specifically focused: the fourth is an analysis of the encounter between Odysseus and Athena in Book 13, partly aimed at defining the cause of Athena's wrath, and the fifth, entitled "The Double Theodicy of the *Odyssey*," documents and attempts to reconcile a fundamental theological discrepancy in the poem between the view that the gods are just and intervene in human life to assure proper punishments and rewards for human actions and the view that the gods give men good and evil at random.

Throughout these discussions Clay's approach is for the most part straightforward and avowedly commonsensical. She stays close to the text of the *Odyssey* or of the related works to which she turns for parallels (most frequently the *Iliad*), espousing what she at one point characterizes as a "humble phenomenology" (p. 138). This approach allows her to accumulate a collection of valuable insights into the outlook and assumptions of the *Odyssey*, some confirming impressions one may have arrived at less systematically in reading through the poem, others opening up unexpected perspectives that will undoubtedly inspire readers to develop them further and to rethink their own interpretations of various passages. Just to choose a few examples, a careful look at the uses of the word *atasthaliai*, which plays so large a role in establishing the moral context of the story from the outset, leads to the conclusion that it is a term used "to place the blame for a destructive act on one party while absolving another" (p. 37), a refinement that should complicate in interesting ways our sense of how the poem casts its story in moral terms. In a later chapter Clay shows that human *metis* and divine intervention have parallel effects, a point that opens up an illuminating perspective on the way in which human capacities and limitations are represented in Homeric narrative.

The central achievement of the book is the accumulation of such observations, which combine to construct, not a dynamically unfolding argument, but a more richly informed point of view from which to return to the text. Rather than taking her reader through a pointed reading of the poem, Clay prepares him or her for a more thoughtful and well-informed reading of his or her own. Because she usually refrains from pressing specific conclusions, Clay leaves a number of loose ends, insights that call for further development or inconsistent claims that are neither reconciled nor commented on; but she is also able to avoid reductive readings and to fulfill well her announced intention of confronting, and acknowledging as authentic features of the text, the contradictions and discrepancies that have led analyst critics to find distinct, irreconcilable compositional layers. This approach is especially well attuned to one of the projects that guides much of her discussion, the project of appreciating the nature of the *Odyssey's* many-sided and elusive hero and of the quality of *metis* that is his definitive characteristic.

But in those parts of her discussion that she has chosen to highlight, her treatment of the wrath of Athena, Clay's approach is rather different, for there she gives a great deal of weight to what is barely present in the text. Athena's anger toward Odysseus, if it exists at all, is already in the past for the whole of the *Odyssey's* story; indeed Clay's interest in the theme stems from her belief that the cessation of Athena's wrath determines the starting point of the *Odyssey's* narrative. If Athena's wrath is a significant feature of the *Odyssey*, its significance derives from its negation. Thus Clay's decision to give such prominence to this theme invites two questions: first, whether traces of this wrath really can be found in the text; and second, the broader question of how to incorporate awareness of what is perceptibly played down, suppressed, or (as in this case) suspended into one's reading of a text — a question that is especially compelling when applied to highly traditional texts like the *Odyssey*.

On the first question, Clay can only cite one passage in which Odysseus is specifically named in connection with Athena's general wrath against the re-

turning Achaeans, Hermes' speech to Calypso at 5.105-11, and even there a distinction is drawn between Odysseus' companions, who have all been drowned, and Odysseus himself, who has been washed up on Calypso's shore. This one trace of the notion of Odysseus as the object of Athena's anger is thus linked to a distinctive fate, his sojourn with Calypso, which entails his exemption from the destruction that is otherwise the result of Athena's wrath. While the delay brought by his wanderings and his stay with Calypso may cause suffering for Odysseus and his family and may hold the threat of oblivion, it is also a saving concealment that allows him to survive until the proper moment for his return (and thus akin to the disguise that he later adopts with Athena's aid) and so ensures the eventual triumph that sets him gloriously apart from the other Achaean heroes. To the extent that Odysseus suffers from Athena's wrath, he does so in a distinctive way that leads not to annihilation but to a happy conclusion that is only possible because it is delayed, and that important difference should be taken into account in any discussion of this theme. But to turn to the second of my questions, Clay tends not to stress the significance for an understanding of the *Odyssey* of Odysseus' emancipation from Athena's wrath. She concentrates on the poet's deemphasis of Athena's wrath in Odysseus' case as a sign of his bias in favor of his hero rather than as a key to what he has created, presenting it as a form of evasion rather than of imaginative reshaping of the tradition. Thus unlike many neo-analytic critics, whose methods hers at many points resemble, she does not seem to be investigating Homer's departures from tradition as a way of throwing into relief his distinctive creation. For example, she has little time for the wrath of Poseidon, whose unarguable prominence in the text seems to be integrally related to the *Odyssey's* conception of its hero as escaping the wrath of his particular patron, characterizing it as an "alibi" which "many critics gullibly swallow" (p. 44). The result is an interpretation that is stimulating and sensitive to some often-ignored nuances, but also out of tune with the poem's own emphases and preoccupations.

The dangers of reading the poem with such a slant become apparent when Clay turns to an analysis of the encounter between Athena and Odysseus in Book 13. Any interpretation of this conversation as a coherently unfolding dialogue necessarily involves reading between the lines, and when Clay does that, she naturally reads in the issues that she has decided are central. For her, what happens in that scene is that Odysseus essentially performs the overstepping of mortal limits that characteristically provokes divine wrath, in this case through an exercise of extraordinary intelligence that allows him to see through Athena's attempt to blame Poseidon for her absence, but he conceals it, choosing to say nothing because he recognizes his dependence on Athena's help. This is certainly a problematic interpretation, since it depends on Clay's questionable claim that the wrath of Poseidon is simply a red herring and since it makes something that does not happen the central event of the scene. It also seems to lose sight of what is so striking about the scene: the extraordinary affection with which Athena treats Odysseus, asserting her divine superiority as she tricks him by disguising both Ithaca and herself, yet doing so not to destroy him, but as a playful prelude to giving him her unqualified support.

Clay's tendency to play down Athena's affection for Odysseus also leads to a rather tepid explanation of her return to active support for his cause. Accord-

ing to Clay, Athena stops being angry in order to bring about a just resolution of the crisis on Ithaca; she does this, not because of anything to do specifically with Odysseus, but because the gods must occasionally uphold justice in an exemplary fashion in order to retain the worship of humans. This explanation comes in the course of the final chapter, in which Clay does an excellent job of setting out the difficult problem of the poem's conflicting views of divine involvement in human affairs. This is certainly not an easy problem to resolve, but Clay's own discussion is perhaps more revealing than she allows. In the course of it she points to several ways in which the *Odyssey* suggests that the idea of justice is essentially a human construct: it is invoked by mortals in their wishes and hopes but not in their accounts of what they have experienced from the gods, and it is fulfilled only in that part of the narrative that is set in the world of human civilization. And that realization should at least allow us to appreciate the way the *Odyssey's* plot intertwines unparalleled divine support for the individual aspirations of its hero with unparalleled divine support for collective human aspirations toward a reliable system of just punishments and rewards.

This is not a book that is easily summarized (many of its most interesting points have not been touched on here) or one that will easily win assent for all its conclusions. But rarely does a book that sparks as much disagreement as this undoubtedly will also offer as much illumination and command as much respect. Clay's discussions are invariably vigorous, well-stated, and thoroughly informed about previous scholarship; taken together they form an engaging book that at some points sheds rays of light on the text from a variety of angles and at others challenges its readers with provocative but also stimulating claims.

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