

IRENE DE JONG. *A Narratological Commentary on the Odyssey*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001. Pp. xix + 626. ISBN 0 52 146 4781. \$120 hb; \$42 pb.

This is a work of generic innovation. Its form is that of a traditional commentary, with discrete entries following the sequence of the text commented on, but its content has the restricted scope of a monograph, being confined to what de Jong calls the “narrativity” of the *Odyssey*. De Jong gives the rationale for her approach in a separately published essay, “A Narratological Commentary on the *Odyssey*: Principles and Problems” (in *The Classical Commentary: Histories, Practices, Theory*, eds. R. K. Gibson and C.K. Kraus [Leiden: Brill, 2002]). With their emphasis on problems, their combination of many types of information, and their focus on individual words and lines, traditional commentaries can easily overlook important aspects of a text, such as the nuts and bolts of how it constructs its narrative. A full appreciation of a poem like the *Odyssey* depends on observations about how its events are told: by whom, in what order, from what viewpoint, with how much resemblance to other accounts of similar events. De Jong’s commentary does not so much aim at solving puzzles that may stand in the reader’s way as equipping the reader for that fuller appreciation. Something similar can be accomplished through the medium of a discursive

⁹ For discussion of poem as sacrificial victim in the Greek tradition, see J. Svenbro, “Il taglio della poesia. Note sulle origini sacrificali della poetica greca,” in *Sacrificio e società nel mondo antico*, ed. C. Grottanelli and N. F. Parise (Roma/Bari 1988), 231–52. I suspect that this connection between poetry and sacrifice is even more widespread than Svenbro suggests and that it represents a specific manifestation of G. Bataille’s analysis of human culture in terms of the “waste” of energy: see *The Accursed Share: An essay on general economy*, tr. by R. Hurley, 3 vols. in 2 (New York 1988–91).

account of the poet's techniques, as illustrated by de Jong's own earlier book on the *Iliad* (*Narrators and Focalizers: The Presentation of the Story in the Iliad* [Amsterdam: Grüner, 1987]) with its paradigmatic chapters on such topics as "simple narrator-text," "embedded focalization," and "character-text." But here she opts for the syntagmatic commentary form because of the importance of context for understanding any stretch of narrative. The use of particular techniques in a given episode acquires significance in light of what has come before and what lies ahead, and moving episode by episode allows her to attend to the combination of effects that gives each episode its peculiar flavor and significance.

De Jong's restricted focus still leaves her plenty to comment on; she attends in detail to such matters as how and when characters are introduced; dictional choices that reveal focalization (the implicit viewpoint from which an event is told); irony; the structures of speeches and dialogues; typical mechanisms for raising important issues (e.g. a suggestion that is rejected); allusions to events outside the time frame of the story; delays in the narrative that create suspense; recurrent motifs (the left-behind motif, the one against many motif, the smoke motif) or themes important to the meaning of the poem (Penelope's remarriage, cunning vs. force); and the deployment of type scenes (beautification scenes, dressing scenes, landing scenes, supplication scenes) and story patterns (delayed recognition, stranger meets with local inhabitant). These and other related features are defined in an initial glossary, and obelisks are used to signal glossed terms when they appear in the commentary. Many of these terms come from narratology, as developed by Tzvetan Todorov, Gérard Genette, and Mieke Bal, but de Jong is equally influenced by central traditions of Homeric scholarship. Especially important for her project is the analysis of type scenes, an activity pioneered by Walter Arend and developed, in the light of Parry's discoveries, by subsequent scholars, such as Mark Edwards and Bernard Fenik, who saw the connections between formulaic composition and the use of typical sequences for describing recurrent activities.

Many of de Jong's most useful comments involve identifying how fully a particular episode follows the patterns of its type. As a result, her efforts can confer on modern readers a form of competence in approaching Homer that would have been present, if only subliminally, in Homer's original audience. For example, de Jong is able to detail

ways in which the heated atmosphere of the assembly in Book Two is created through a largely irregular use of the assembly type-scene. This is, then, a narratological commentary that is responsive to the particular genesis of the narrative in question. One can imagine analogous projects for other authors, including Vergil, whose use of what Brooks Otis labelled the “subjective style” (in *Virgil: a Study in Civilized Poetry*, published in 1964) is a particularly rich instance of what a narratologist would call “focalization.” In Vergil’s case, such a commentary would presumably combine similar observations on techniques of narrative construction with the fullest possible attention to intertextuality.

Like most commentaries, this one is especially valuable in its provision of parallels. Someone working on a scene or episode can go there to find out where else in the *Odyssey* or in the Homeric epics something similar happens, or similar issues are raised, or similar themes are sounded. Particular passages can be brought into clearer focus through information about whether they are routine or exceptional, whether they are stressing an ongoing theme or introducing a novel perspective. Encountering a theme or motif in a specific location, the reader is also routed through asterisks and the index to synoptic discussions inserted at strategic points. Thus someone interested in the Nausicaa episode in Book Six can recognize it as an example of the stranger-meets-local-inhabitant story pattern; can appreciate how it is constructed out of type scenes for dreams, departure by car, arrival by car, supplication, and beautification (possibly turning to general discussions of those type scenes); can find all the passages in which a possible marriage between Odysseus and Nausicaa is suggested; and can attend more closely to the intimacy created when Nausicaa – in an instance of “periphrastic denomination” — addresses her parents as “father” and “mother” rather than by name. Also very useful are de Jong’s extensive bibliographical footnotes (covering scholarship through 1997), which help readers find their way to discussions of larger themes and episodes rather than just noting contributions to the solutions of specific problems. The book ends with six helpful appendices on topics including the “fabula” of the *Odyssey* (all of the events it tells or alludes to in chronological order); the interlacing of the three storylines involving Odysseus, Telemachus, and events on Ithaca; the recurrent elements in Odysseus’ false tales; and several type scenes.

Any reader, and especially one who has acquired some competence in narratology and/or Homeric compositional technique, is bound to find some of what is noted here self-evident ("The charm of the exchange between Nausicaa and her father lies mainly in what is *not* said," 155) or sometimes to wonder what difference it makes ("Nausicaa is the only Homeric character to enter the story while lying asleep," 153). And the information given here has its natural limits, conveying only so much of what is really important about a given passage. It is certainly useful to know that, when Odysseus sheds his disguise before Penelope in Book Twenty-Three, the importance of the moment is signaled by the way a typical bathing scene is combined with a typical beautification scene and that these motifs typically signal a return to civilization. Or that Odysseus' angry speech at the suggestion that his marriage bed might be movable displays "multiple ring-composition" (557). But those technical features do not, in the end, account for the particular power of those moments.

While de Jong certainly manages to avoid focusing on problems, there are some famous problems in the *Odyssey's* narrative that she has to comment on. Not surprisingly, she tends to find solutions for those problems in the narrative habits of the poem. This can be seen in her treatment of the difficult moment in Book Eighteen when Penelope suddenly announces to the suitors that she will remarry following Odysseus' instructions before he left, and Odysseus rejoices because he concludes, on no explicit basis, that "her mind had other intentions" (18.283). De Jong deals with the baselessness of Odysseus' conclusion by categorizing his thought as "embedded focalization," and she answers the question of whether Penelope is sincere, by noting that the expression "her mind had other intentions" is used twice before of the trick with the web, which "leaves the narratees no choice but to conclude that she has something up her sleeve" (450). This interpretation of Odysseus' supposed instructions as Penelope's invention is confirmed for de Jong when Penelope says nothing about them in her private conversation with "the beggar" in Book Nineteen.

On this principle that our best guide to interpretation is what is said and not said at the surface of the narrative, de Jong rules out arguments that our text is shaped by unacknowledged variants of its story or by unspoken motivations on the part of the characters. Thus she dismisses all claims that Penelope recognizes Odysseus in advance of his open

revelation. To the analytic view that we can see traces in our poem of a different story in which husband and wife worked openly together, she opposes those passages in Book Nineteen in which Odysseus strives to maintain his disguise. To more psychological readings of Penelope as intuiting Odysseus' presence, she opposes those passages in which Penelope voices skepticism or despair about the prospect of Odysseus' return. When in Book Twnty-Four one of the Suitors, Amphimedon, gives an account of the return in which Penelope is in on the plot, de Jong sees this as a logical inference and evidence of Amphimedon's sense of victimization, rather than the intrusion of a different version, although she does suggest that the poet may be deliberately reminding us of the more familiar plot he chose not to follow. This is in accord with her generally sympathetic stance toward the *Odyssey's* poet, whom she portrays, not as someone who might create problems, whether by imperfectly combining multiple traditions or by sending mixed messages, but rather as a masterful, unflinching provider of the information necessary for the full comprehension of his narrative. Even when Odysseus needlessly torments Laertes by concealing his presence in Book Twenty-Four, de Jong finds "narratorial motivation" for the delay in the need to give the scene dramatic weight, and Odysseus' "actorial motivation" in a parallel: "the narratees may invoke the parallel of his reunion with Penelope" (576).

Other students of the *Odyssey's* narrative might want to comment more suspiciously than de Jong does on the unspoken biases that inform it, especially its bias in favor of its hero. In considering the inclusion the Cattle of the Sun episode in the proem, one might want to add to de Jong's good points about the parallel to Aegisthus in the Agamemnon story and the timing of that episode as the last before the story begins, some observation about the poet's evident defensiveness about Odysseus' loss of his companions and solo triumph. In discussing Penelope's Athena-inspired appearance to the Suitors in Book Eighteen, de Jong notes that this is an unusual case of an action in which the motives of a mortal and a god do not coincide; one could go on to ask why it is Penelope in particular who cannot be allowed to follow her own instincts. In pointing out the kinds of questions de Jong does not entertain, my purpose here is not to complain so much as to note how thoroughly this commentary is defined by the project of understanding Homer's narrative in its own terms. From De Jong'

patient, detailed attention to the terms of Homeric narrative, combined with her expert and well-explained use of narratological terminology, all readers of the *Odyssey* stand to gain a much sharper appreciation of the skill with which its story is told.

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