Susanne Moraw: Die *Odyssee* in der Spätantike. Bildliche und literarische Rezeption. Turnhout: Brepols 2020 (Studies in Classical Archaeology 7). X, 359 p., 53 ill. € 120.00. ISBN: 978-2-503-58379-2.

The uninterrupted reception of the Homeric epics from the time of their earliest readers until today continues to attract much scholarly attention.[1] Regarding Late Antiquity, seminal studies such as Robert Lamberton's "Homer the Theologian"[2] and Filippomaria Pontani's "Sguardi su Ulisse"[3] have focused on the philosophical reception of the poet and the exegetical traditions surrounding the *Odyssey*, while the booming interest in late antique literature in recent years has prompted an increase in studies on the reception of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* in the literary culture of the period.[4] Susanne Moraw's "Die *Odyssee* in der Spätantike" contributes to both the history of Homeric reception and the study of Late Antiquity by exploring the literary and, especially, the visual reception of the *Odyssey* in the Later Roman Empire in the predominantly Greek-speaking East as well as the Latin West. Chronologically, the study covers the understudied period from the turn of the third century AD – when the reception of Homer underwent changes that would influence later reception – to the middle of the seventh century, after which no representations of the *Odyssey* are found (p. 10). To further our understanding of the reception of the *Odyssey* in the chosen period, Moraw asks which aspects and episodes of the poem are the subject of late antique (visual) representations, why specifically these aspects and episodes were selected in literature and art, and why the reception took the exact forms it did.

1 See, indicatively, C. O. Pache (ed.), in association with C. Dué/S. Lupak/R. Lamberton: The Cambridge Guide to Homer. Cambridge 2020, esp. "Part III – Homer in the World", pp. 409–608; Ch.-P. Manolea (ed.): Brill's Companion to the Reception of Homer from the Hellenistic Age to Late Antiquity. Leiden/Boston 2022 (Brill's Companions to Classical Reception 22).

2 R. Lamberton: Homer the Theologian. Neoplatonist Allegorical Reading and the Growth of the Epic Tradition. Berkeley, CA/Los Angeles, CA/London 1986 (The Transformation of the Classical Heritage 9).

3 F. Pontani: Sguardi su Ulisse. La tradizione esegetica greca all'Odissea. Rome 2005 (Sussidi eruditi 63).

4 See e.g. the relevant chapters in Manolea (note 1) with earlier bibliography. Moraw states that the study takes into account bibliography mostly until 2015 (when it was accepted as *Habilitationsschrift*), which means that some of the more recent literature is left out of consideration.

By exploring these questions, Moraw's study aims to shed light on both the role of mythical images in Late Antiquity and the *Mentalitätsgeschichte* of the period (pp. 14–15).

The book's first chapter ("Einleitung", pp. 1–18) introduces the aims and methods undergirding the analysis of the visual and literary material presented in the subsequent chapters. It sets out the four main premises that inform the author's approach to the material: (I) the selection of episodes and the exact ways in which traditional motifs are depicted are not random but governed by motivations grounded in contemporary society and broader cultural discourses; (II) contrary to previous negative evaluations of the 'originality' of late antique artists, the images under consideration demonstrate that their makers had a good grasp of mythography, were iconographically competent, and invented new ways of presenting traditional themes; (III) the spatial and conceptual contexts of the images determine the selection of the visual motifs and their interpretation; (IV) in many cases, the late antique reception does not directly refer to the *Odyssey* itself; there is a long intermediate tradition of literature and art acting as a prism through which later reception needs to be viewed. Moraw therefore argues for a relatively open reception model that allows for inter- and transmedial influences. Drawing on film studies, she identifies two mechanisms or two possible reactions to the images which complement rather than exclude one another: identification (which includes imagining how it would be to be the represented person) and appropriation (which involves objectification of the represented figure). Moraw adds a third reaction, the (ethical) reflection on what is seen, for example on the definition of heroism or the implications of power. The chapter also briefly introduces the Greek and Latin sources relevant to the late antique reception of the *Odyssey*; a brief general introduction to the material sources would have been a welcome addition to this otherwise rich preliminary chapter.

The core of the book focuses on the discrete episodes of the *Odyssey* that dominate its late antique reception. The emphasis is on Odysseus' wanderings, in particular his encounters with Polyphemus, Circe, the Sirens, and Scylla. The events upon Odysseus' return to Ithaca, to which Homer devotes almost half of the poem, feature less prominently in late antique literature and art – and, hence, in Moraw's discussion. Each of the core chapters follows the same structure: they first present a summary and interpretation of the relevant episode of the *Odyssey*, which is supported by modern Homeric

scholarship; an overview of the late antique Greek and Latin literary reception of the episode in question follows; the Homeric text and its literary reception set the stage for the sufficiently illustrated analysis of the visual material in the third part of each chapter, which is always followed by a concluding section summarizing the chapter's main points. As the literary reception is mainly meant to contextualize the visual reception, the discussion of the passages is inevitably selective and concise, without a consideration of the broader role of Homer and ancient myth in the selected works or authors. The analysis of the visual material, on the other hand, is always firmly grounded in the relevant archaeological and art-historical contexts.

Chapter II ("Polyphem", pp. 19–54) explores the reception of Odysseus' encounter with the Cyclops Polyphemus in the ninth book of the *Odyssey*. The chapter's section on the literary reception surveys how the episode was interpreted from historicizing, philological, allegorical, and philosophical points of view in Greek and Latin authors such as Porphyry, John Malalas, Dictys Cretensis, and Fulgentius. Moraw argues that Christian authors showed less interest in Polyphemus than in the female figures whom Odysseus encounters during his travels, perhaps owing to their focus on the *Odyssey* as a poem centred on *voluptas*. Especially in Latin sources, Odysseus receives an unequivocally positive evaluation built on *virtus* and *sapientia* as key aspects of ideal Romanness. Odysseus thus becomes a figure of identification for Roman readers – and viewers, as Moraw repeatedly argues with regard to the visual material analysed in this book. The geography of the *Odyssey*, with Odysseus' wanderings traditionally situated on and around the Italian peninsula, further encouraged its close connection with the Western Roman Empire. The visual reception of the Polyphemus episodes consists of only a few images, all from the Western part of the empire, an important indication that textual and visual traditions did not develop hand in hand. The images appear in widely different contexts: a cake tin, a floor mosaic from the Villa Romana del Casale near Piazza Armerina, and various sarcophagi show Odysseus offering wine and blinding the Cyclops; a marble statue, another floor mosaic, and contorniates show Odysseus hanging under a ewe (or about to) during his escape from Polyphemus' cave. In her analysis, Moraw consistently takes the users and/or spatial settings of the objects into account in an effort to reconstruct the meaning of the images to their original viewers: the cake tin and contorniates make Odysseus a hero of the common man; the wealthy owner of the villa and his visitors may have

been prompted to reflect on the problematic nature of power when seeing the Cyclops devour one of Odysseus' companions; in a funerary context, the blinding of Polyphemus might represent the hero vanquishing death, even if Moraw acknowledges that it is difficult to establish with certainty that such an allegorical reading was indeed intended.

Chapters III–V explore Odysseus' encounters with various female figures in ascending degrees of alterity and monstrosity: Circe (pp. 55–83), the Sirens (pp. 85–119), Scylla (pp. 121–147). In many late antique texts and, in Moraw's interpretation, in many late antique visual representations, these figures represent the dangers of female sexuality and the risks inherent in the sensual world. The late antique reception, Moraw argues, thus turned these encounters into confrontations between man and woman. Especially in Latin texts, the complexity of the Homeric figures was starkly reduced – a conclusion the book draws for the Latin reception of the *Odyssey* as a whole. The female 'monsters' are mostly presented as unequivocally negative, in contrast to the overwhelmingly positive evaluation of Odysseus despite his ambivalent status in Homeric poetry and its early reception. When Circe changes Odysseus' companions into pigs, Greek and Latin authors interpret their metamorphosis in philosophical terms as a change for the worse, more specifically a change into animal-like beings under the influence of female sexuality. Latin texts emphasize Circe's sorcery (e.g. Servius, Boethius, Sidonius) or connect her with the origins of the Roman circus (e.g. Tertullian), which might explain her appearance on contorniates from Rome. The visual material is again concentrated in the West and always depicts the moment when Odysseus overpowers Circe by brandishing his sword. In Moraw's reading, the images might emphasize the correct social order, with women subordinate to men; or, in a moral sense, they may represent the need for the intellect to overpower lower impulses. Contorniates would have been widespread among different social classes and might have been particularly popular among the lower social ranks, which again turns Odysseus into a model for the common man.

Chapter IV focuses on the Sirens, who enjoyed a rich reception from antiquity onwards as a representation of the beauty of poetry and song on the one hand and as the dangers of sensual pleasure on the other. In Moraw's reading, the Greek pagan reception keeps the Homeric ambiguity of the Sirens more or less intact and does not evaluate them as unequivocally bad, in contrast to the Christian Greek and Latin reception, in which Odysseus becomes

regarded as the wise victor over these dangerous seductresses. The visual reception focuses on the physical beauty of the Sirens and again comprises many different objects and contexts. In maritime-themed mosaics, they (like Scylla) can represent the sea, at once beautiful and dangerous. When they appear on lamps, they might offer Odysseus to the user of the lamp as a model of someone who does not give in to temptation but manages to escape; a similar message may have sanctioned the reuse of a sarcophagus with their image in a church. In a funerary context, Odysseus' confrontation with the Sirens might represent a confrontation with death and offer the hope of conquering it. Moraw again acknowledges the dangers of overinterpretation (to which her analysis is perhaps not always wholly immune): it is difficult to establish the presence of an allegorical message with certainty as the images do not themselves directly point to a deeper layer of meaning. A unique exception is a sixth-century mosaic from Beth Shean in modern-day Israel, in which the Jewish patron in an inscription directly compares himself to Odysseus facing the Sirens (and Scylla) and prays to God to save him from imminent danger.

Scylla's reception as explored in Chapter V has much in common with the previously discussed female figures. The literary reception offers a wide variety of interpretations, from rationalizing Scylla as rocks or a cliff (e.g. Nonnus, Isidore of Seville) to reading her metaphorically and allegorically as a representation of heresy (e.g. Ambrose), false friendship (e.g. Themistius), and aggressive female sexuality (Jerome, Fulgentius). The visual reception of Scylla is again concentrated in the West and often lacks the context of the *Odyssey*. In maritime-themed mosaics, for instance, Scylla appears without Odysseus as embodying the dangers of the sea. In addition to fish tails for legs, she is often presented with dog heads appearing from her waist, representing her aggressive sexuality. On a maritime-themed sarcophagus of an aristocratic woman, however, she instead appears, in Moraw's reading, as a victim of sexual aggression herself. Together with Odysseus she appears on contorniates, which may have been used as amulets symbolizing an escape from danger through good fortune. The contorniates present Odysseus with a spear, ready to overpower the physically stronger Scylla, which, in Moraw's interpretation, turns the scene into a rape fantasy, with Odysseus' weapon as a phallic symbol.

Moraw's interpretation here (and elsewhere) would have benefited from further socio-historical contextualization as regards broader discourses on

women, rape, and sexual violence in late antique society: would it be appropriate to present a rape fantasy on contorniates meant to be handed out among the populace? And on a sarcophagus for a woman?[5] Moraw suggests that an aristocratic lady would not identify with the suppressed Scylla as represented on the sarcophagus, whereas women from lower social classes might. Such an interpretation threatens to oversimplify the process of identification: recent research on role models and exemplarity has argued that *exempla* do not need to correspond to the gender and social status of the moral agent to achieve their transformative effects.[6] Moraw's discussion here – and throughout the book – would have gained much from a more solid theoretical framework for the notions of identification and exemplarity that are so central to her analysis of the visual reception of the *Odyssey*.

Chapter VI ("Heimkehr nach Ithaka", pp. 149–204), finally, is devoted to the events taking place upon Odysseus' return to Ithaca, in particular the recognition scenes with the dog Argus and the nurse Eurycleia. A central role is reserved, in both the *Odyssey* and its reception, for Penelope, whose chastity and spousal loyalty receive much attention from late antique authors, as does her more ambiguous cleverness as represented by her ruse with the weaving of the burial shroud for her father-in-law Laertius. The few images that survive – from both West and East – mainly focus on the conversation between Penelope and the beggar Odysseus. In Moraw's interpretation, a silver vessel found in Scotland may present Penelope as a figure of identification for elite women; a mass-produced lamp with Penelope, Odysseus, and Eurycleia may instead offer the possibility for men, women, and servants to identify with the figures depicted. In a funerary context, Penelope might have served as a judge over life and death; a mosaic from what was possibly a philosophical school might present Penelope as an allegory for philosophy. For these last cases, Moraw again carefully discusses the limitations of the evidence and the difficulties of interpretation that they cause. Chapter VII ("Fazit",

5 Moraw similarly suggests that the naked victim being devoured by Polyphemus on the floor mosaic from the Villa Romana del Casale may represent a pederastic rape fantasy. This interpretation, too, would benefit from further contextualization within the broader sexual discourses of the time.

6 On the dynamics of exemplarity in a Roman context, see especially R. Langlands: Exemplary Ethics in Ancient Rome. Cambridge 2018 (with references to further scholarship).

pp. 205–213) summarizes the main conclusions of the study and briefly adds examples of Odysseus' reception outside the context of the *Odyssey*.

This brief discussion cannot do justice to the wealth of material offered by Moraw's study. By bringing together texts and images, "Die *Odyssee* in der Spätantike" provides a more comprehensive picture of the multifaceted reception of the *Odyssey* in late antique culture and society. Moraw's analysis demonstrates how important it is to understand reception as governed by the sociocultural contexts of the receiving society. The book's chapters are accompanied by an appendix with the relevant textual excerpts in the original and in German translation (pp. 215–271) as well as a catalogue of visual material with detailed descriptions and information about dating, find spot, and current location (pp. 273–318). The book offers a rich case study in the late antique reception of ancient literature and mythography beyond the predominantly elite audiences of most of the written sources. It is therefore of interest to students and scholars of Late Antiquity from different disciplinary backgrounds as well as to anyone interested in the long history of the reception of Homeric poetry.

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