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The Raft of Odysseus: The Ethnographic Imagination of Homer's Odyssey

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BOOK REVIEWS

The Raft of Odysseus: The Ethnographic Imagination of Homer's Odyssey. By CAROL DOUGHERTY. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001. Pp. [viii] + 243. \$52.00.

In *The Raft of Odysseus*, Carol Dougherty wishes to read several major episodes of the *Odyssey* as ways of imagining colonial experience, and as informed by the discourse of colonial foundation. Odysseus can be compared to an ethnographer, who gains self-knowledge through a process of “decoding” a foreign culture and “recoding” it for one’s own, so that “the strange becomes familiar and the familiar strange” (p. 10). At the same time, he is also a colonist, whose experiences among the Phaeacians and Cyclopes offer complementary images of colonial encounters, and a traveling poet, who trades his stories for commercial profit. I am sympathetic to D.’s approach, having interpreted the *Cyclopeia* and *Mnesterophonía* as cultural and political foundation narratives in my own work (1995). I was thus curious to see what was gained by shifting the focus to “colonial” foundation, but must confess I found myself so exasperated by the sheer number of errors contained in this book—a “catalogue of slips” alone would exceed the space allotted this review—that at first I could not see what it contributed to the study of Homer or ancient ethnography.

In chapter 1, D. seeks to demonstrate an association of seafaring with song, arguing *inter alia* that the Iliadic Catalogue of Ships is an unmotivated “poetic tribute to the sea voyage ten years earlier” (p. 23). She notes the obvious objection that the Catalogue reproduces a political map of Greece, and argues Homer superimposes the map onto the sea journey, thus treating the journey itself as somehow inherent (p. 24).

D. next proceeds to a discussion of ancient shipbuilding techniques. Nothing supports her claim that “sewn boats” were the most prevalent type of boat during the Bronze Age, that they were in “common use throughout the ancient Mediterranean,” or that the Greeks adopted the “more sophisticated” mortise and tenon technique in the eighth century (pp. 27–29). L. Casson (1994, p. 35), whom she cites, states categorically that the Greeks built ships with mortise and tenon at all periods. S. Mark, however, does argue (*AJA* 1991) that the latter technique passed out of use after the Bronze Age, while that of sewing continued into the Archaic¹ (neither he nor D.

1. There is some scattered evidence for sewn ships on which D. could have drawn, but none of it is before 600, most is western, and not all of it Greek: P. Pomey, “L’Épave de Bon-Porte et les bateaux cousus de Méditerranée,” *Mariner's Mirror* 67 (1981): 225–43, “Les Épaves Grecques et Romaines de la Place Jules Verne à Marseille,” *CRAI* (1995), 459–84, “Mediterranean Sewn Boats in Antiquity,” *Sewn Plank Boats*, BAR-IS, 276 (1985), 35–48; M. Bound, *The Giglio Wreck: A Wreck of the Archaic Period (c. 600 BC) off the Tuscan Island of Giglio*, Enalía Suppl. 1 (Athens, 1991); and Y. Kahanov, “The Ma’agan Mikhael Ship (Israel): A Comparative Study of its Hull Construction,” *Construction navale maritime et fluviale: Approches archéologiques, historique et ethnologique. Actes du septième Colloque international d’archéologie navale, Ile Tatihou, Saint-Vaast-la-Hougue, 1994*, *Archaeonautica*, 14 (Paris, 1998), 155–60. The recent discovery of a laced vessel in the East may weaken my own view; cf. E. Greene, “Endless Summer: The 2002 Excavation Season at Pabuç Burnu, Turkey,” *Institute of Nautical Archaeology Quarterly* 30 (2003): 3–11.

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observes that Pacuvius' *Niptra*, being an adaptation of Sophocles, is potentially a fifth-century witness).

It is, then, implausible that *sparta* at *Iliad* 2.135 refers to the ligatures of sewn ships, not least because describing them as worn-out would be completely unremarkable, nor a particular cause for alarm. D. is right to say Aeschylus *Supplikes* 134–35 refers to a sewn boat, which is, however, Egyptian. Her citation of the scholia ad loc, “the phrase in Homer ‘mending ships’ indicates sewing them together,” is misleading: Homer uses the phrase *neas akeiomenon* only once (*Od.* 14.385), nor would it be safe to generalize even if the scholia were right (which is unlikely).

If the Greeks did not commonly “sew” their ships at any period, and Archaic authors nowhere refer to them as such, the claim that metaphors of sewing link ships to poetry is a priori invalid. That a connection between poetics and seafaring is “tri-angulated” by the language of textile production admits at the outset that they are never directly related; indeed, the connections D. draws are forced. For example, after noting the sail of Odysseus' raft is called *speiron*, she finds an echo when Odysseus asks Nausicaa for an *eiluma speiron* to wear: “While his immediate request is for clothing, his need for sails and a ship is no less pressing” (p. 31).

On such foundations D. builds her case for identifying Odysseus' raft as “metapoetic.” If the raft did represent poetry at some level, its destruction “in seventeen short days and just a few lines” would seem rather unfortunate. D. addresses “this apparent contradiction” by arguing that it “captures the contingent nature of oral poetry, in which bits of songs are put together . . . to fit a specific occasion” (pp. 35; 82). The raft is not, however, taken apart and “rearranged” but smashed to bits in a hurricane, and nothing in the account suggests building a song in reverse. Many Homerists will also find it impossible to reconcile D.'s interpretation of the raft as reflecting the composition of oral poetry with an intertextual model that finds significant resonances in words as common as *poieo* or stock epithets such as *polugomphos*.

In chapter 2, D. proceeds to an ideology of exchange, in which she treats *xenia* and piracy as polar opposites. At one end of the spectrum are the Phaeacians, who practice a “gift-exchange” that is all giving, and at the other the Phoenicians, whose rapacious profit seeking assimilates them to the status of pirates. To illustrate, D. cites *Odyssey* 15.451, describing the child Eumaeus as *kerdaleon de toion*, which she interprets as meaning he “would be a great source of profit” (p. 47). She justifies this remarkable translation seven pages later with the claim that the semantic field of *kerdos* ranges from *metis* to commercial profit (p. 54), citing one of five articles treating *kerdos* by H. Roisman, who in fact argues that, with one exception, Homer never uses the word in an economic sense (*RhM* 1994, *ICS* 1990, *TAPA* 1987, 1990, *Phoenix* 1988; summary in *The Odyssey Re-formed* [1996], 168–73). In the present case, D. also reverses the force of *kerdos* from designating the resourcefulness by which one secures a personal advantage, to the individual as a source of another's profit, thereby also erasing its primary meaning of craft(iness).

More generally, from the discussion of exchange theory one might conclude that no progress had been made in the field since Sahlins, and D. pays scant attention to the category of “symbolic” exchange. She thus argues that Odysseus' “songs are not embedded in social relationships” but rather “negotiated on the open market” (p. 52), which, in addition to creating a false dichotomy—based on an equally false

identification of Odysseus as a traveling poet—greatly impoverishes our reading of the *Apologue* and Cretan tales.

In chapter 3, D. argues that the raft represents song as mobile and adaptable. To make her case, she claims Eumaeus “challenges Odysseus to sing a song” (p. 68). The reference is missing (14.131), but it comes after Eumaeus dismisses the stories of wanderers and remarks that the beggar too would “fabricate a story” for clothing. There is no challenge to sing a song here, or in the actual request (14.185–90). Now that, as D. observes, a wordplay between *alethea* and *alaomai* has been activated at 14.120–27, one should not overlook the echo at 14.361–62, when Eumaeus responds to the beggar’s story with: ἤ μοι μάλα θυμὸν ὄρινας / ταῦτα ἕκαστα λέγων, ὅσα δὴ πάθεις ἠδ’ ὅσ’ ἀλήθης. Eumaeus clearly believes the beggar, but continues with a qualification: ἀλλὰ τὰ γ’ οὐ κατὰ κόσμον οἴομαι, οὐδέ με πείσεις / εἰπὼν ἄμφ’ Ὀδυσῆϊ. D. ignores the echo because she wants Eumaeus to imply the whole story is “out of order” and “wanders idly from place to place just as [Odysseus] did” (p. 69). This misrepresents the force of τὰ γε, which indicates Eumaeus considers only the part about Odysseus “out of order,” and only in the sense of its being “false.”

With chapter 4 begins a study of the *Odyssey*’s “ethnographic imagination.” D. argues that Shakespeare’s *Tempest* combines New World and Golden Age discourse, finding that “description by negation” of European civilization characterizes the former, while the latter includes the fertility of Prospero’s island. D. finds a similar conflation in the *Phaiacis*, where sailing belongs to New World discourse, and preternatural fertility and proximity to the gods to the Golden Age (citing Hes. *Op.* 120, which should be bracketed).

D. next turns to de Certeau’s work on de Léry’s *Histoire d’un voyage fait en la terre du Brésil*: the story begins with a simple polarity between civilized Europe and primitive other. This is followed, however, by a reclassification of “over there” from hypo- to hyper-civilized, so that the New World itself becomes polarized into “nature” and “culture.” The process allows “over there” to represent “same” as well as “other”: that is, “same” is an idealized version of civilized Europe (culture), while “other” represents its negation (nature). Familiarization of “over there” is an essential component in negotiating a return home, where it helps articulate a new sense of self in a changing world. Into this scheme, D. slots *Odyssey* 5–12, and concludes that the Cyclopes and Phaeacians are antithetically paired, corresponding to the opposed views of “other” in de Léry (pp. 98–99).

This is certainly the most interesting and compelling part of the book, and I gained some valuable insights from it, including a deeper understanding of the juxtaposition between the Phaeacians and Cyclopes. I wish, however, D. had attempted to relate de Certeau to work by her fellow classicists, for had she done so she might have avoided the oxymoronic union of “Golden Age” with “hyper-civilization” on Scheria, or the exclusion of “primitive” from “Golden Age,” in the *Cyclopeia*.

Underlying these distinctions seems to be an equation of “Golden Age” with idealizing “mythology,” and of “New World” with refracted “contemporary history.” As B. Gatz (*Spudasmata*, 1967) has shown, however, the Golden Age is defined by the motif of the *automate Ge*, which, as D. observes, informs the *Cyclopeia*, while the (agri)culture practiced on Scheria is exclusive of it. J. Romm (1992) has also shown that “the edges of the earth” (*eschata*) and “Golden Age” are typologically coextensive, while M. Davies (*Prometheus*, 1987, 1988) has shown that Golden Age life is

regularly described through negation of Greek culture. Thus, not a single motif D. assigns to the Golden Age is out of place in traditions of the *eschata*, while the one thing readily accommodated by the latter but not the former is hyper-civilization.

In chapter 5, D. explores the link between the Phaeacians and the Phoenicians: above all, the Phaeacians are “famous for their ships” (*nausiklutoi*), an epithet they share with the Phoenicians. D. finds seafaring inscribed into the physical layout of Scheria: “At both the periphery (two beautiful harbors) and the center (the precinct of Poseidon), the city of the Phaeacians is organized to facilitate and celebrate their close relationship with the sea. Instead of allotments of land distributed equally to all citizens, in Phaeacia each ship has its own slip. The marketplace (*ἀγορή*) built around the precinct of Poseidon, is not the focus of political or commercial transactions, as one would expect in a historical Greek city, but rather the center of nautical activity” (p. 114). Yet seafaring also epitomizes the difference between the Phoenicians and Phaeacians, for whereas the former are merchant-sailors, the latter “do not travel themselves, nor do they convey goods overseas for profit” (p. 116).

The categories D. constructs in these chapters lead her to find numerous “inconsistencies” in the poem. For example, she finds it jarring that the Taphians are pirates, since the “profitless” trading of Mentis relates them to the Phaeacians (p. 119). The Phaeacians, however, may be described as engaging in piratical activity when Homer remarks that Alcinoos acquired Eurymedusa in a general division following a voyage (*Od.* 7.8–9). D.’s surprise that the “marketplace” (her consistent rendering of *agora*) is not a focus of political transactions ignores the assembly Alcinoos calls to announce Odysseus’ return, and her further surprise that it is not a center of commerce ignores the absence of such activity in any *agora* in Homer. As for its location, the activities performed there clearly situate it on the isthmus, and the claim that instead of citizen land allotments their ships have slips ignores the one feature of Scheria’s foundation that is clearly colonial, the land-division by the *oecist* Nausithoos (*Od.* 6.10).

In chapter 6, D. argues that the Phaeacians and the Cyclopes form another dyad based largely on hospitality, which she resolves into an opposition between marriage and cannibalism. In the course of developing her argument, D. asserts that by marrying Nausicaa, Odysseus would be heir to the kingdom (p. 131), though that is an issue I imagine Laodamas would have wished to discuss with his father.

The episode begins, however, by echoing another “common motif” of colonial discourse, involving rape, when Odysseus first greets Nausicaa. Of course, Odysseus is not a colonist or colonial leader, but a solitary shipwrecked wanderer trying to return home, and neither rapes nor marries Nausicaa. D. cites the myth of Apollo and Cyrene to answer such obvious objections, but even accepting D.’s classification of the myth as a colonial foundation—on which cf. Dougherty 1993, 65–67—Odysseus is not a god either, nor is Nausicaa an eponymous nymph. D.’s case thus rests on the strength of association between rape, marriage, and colonization, but not every rape is a colonial foundation, and while it is true that colonization is often described as an act of violence, so are foundations of any kind.

In short, one surely needs something more than a narrative of Scheria’s foundation two generations earlier to identify the mere potential of rape or marriage as evoking colonial discourse. D. points to the weakness of her argument with overheated claims such as that when “Odysseus awakens to the sound of young girls. . . all the signs point at first to a rape narrative. . . . But, in spite of all our expectations, Odysseus

does not rape Nausicaa" (p. 133). Leaving aside the author's own programmatic remarks and characterization of Odysseus, it is significant that he compares Nausicaa to Artemis hunting wild animals immediately before he compares Odysseus to a lion. Such narrative moves forestall the possibility, not only of rape, but of a sexual encounter of any kind and suggest Odysseus-the-lion is himself in mortal danger.

After thus characterizing the *Phaiacis* as a colonial narrative, D. contrasts it with the *Cyclopeia*, arguing that cannibalism reflects anxiety about the violence of colonization (p. 137). Archaic myth does not, however, consistently locate cannibals at the *eschata*, nor are they especially associated with colonial discourse. More generally, whereas the *Odyssey* has been shown, by M. Katz (1991) and others, to develop a homology between *xenia* and *gamos*, an analogous homology does not exist between *gamos* and cannibalism, unless one were to press the notion of "incorporation" rather harder than I am willing to do.

D. then reduces the Laestrygonian episode to a "negative synthesis" of the *Phaiacis* and *Cyclopeia*, so that the episode represents a "terrifying perversion of these colonial options" (p. 140). How the theme of marriage might pervert the "option" of cannibalism, or render cannibalism still more terrifying, is not entirely clear to me, but I do note that in order to make her case, D. must use the motif of meeting a girl at a well to import Alcinoos' offer of marriage into the episode, along with its presumed colonial overtones.

In chapter 7, D. extends the pairing of the Phaeacians outside the poem to include the Euboeans. Scheria's Near Eastern features are said to reflect the interconnectedness of Euboean and Phoenician commercial and colonial activities. To buttress her reading, D. turns to the "shipwreck" *krater* from Pithekoussai, which, she argues, is evocative of Homeric shipwrecks. She seems to misunderstand Ridgway's explanation for the—possibly—Corinthian identity of the vessel on the *krater*: "the ship itself looks Corinthian, the type of vessel probably used by Euboeans in the eighth century, and suggests that the Euboeans may have taken advantage of a *diolkos*, or canal, to the Corinthian Gulf to provide easier access to the west" (p. 153). But, the *diolkos* is not a canal and did not exist in the eighth century, and I can make no sense of why a Corinthian ship would suggest its use. More importantly, the pairing forces D. to conflate "Euboean" with "Greek" (e.g., p. 150), so that the *Odyssey* can remain a Panhellenic epic embodying the ethnographic imagination of Archaic Greece.

In chapter 8, D. pursues her identification of Odysseus as a proto-ethnographer, arguing that Odysseus returns home with knowledge that he uses to refound prewar Ithaca in the "New World" of Archaic Greece. D. calls attention to the nautical imagery surrounding the *mnesterophonia*, which thanks to her I now see is more prominent than I had realized; and I am prepared to find an allusion to the *Cyclopeia*, though again I find no significant verbal echoes. On the other hand, she notes, but passes over, the full significance of the lion simile describing Odysseus after the *mnesterophonia*: if anyone on Ithaca is guilty of omophagic cannibalism, Odysseus is.

In the conclusion, D. argues that Odysseus' raft becomes reconfigured as his marriage bed, representing a domestication of the ethnographic imagination. It is true that Odysseus uses similar, if not quite the "same," skills in building his raft and bed, and their construction is described in similar terms, though only a pair of verses, *Odyssey* 5.245 and 23.197, share formulae. But what is gained by assuming the bed "evokes" the raft? D. now claims that "in a way typical of the complicated narrative

movement of the *Odyssey*, Odysseus' account of building the marriage bed before he left for Troy provides a consolidation or reification of the skills that stem from his subsequent travels and experiences overseas" (p. 180). She concludes that through such allusions, the bed "evokes Odysseus' raft with all its ethnographic associations" (p. 181), which I assume helped make for a lively and informative wedding night. A less creative scholar might have argued that the skills Odysseus brought with him as a cultured Greek, exemplified in the construction of his marriage bed, are what ensured his survival in and return from an alien world. In principle, I welcome such attacks on "common sense" because when they do succeed "the strange becomes familiar and the familiar strange." In some important ways D. has managed to accomplish precisely this, though I felt throughout as if I were being forced to negotiate with a Phoenician merchant for a metascholarly cargo in which we both knew that something truly valuable lay buried.

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Speaking the Same Language: Speech and Audience in Thucydides' Spartan Debates.

By PAULA DEBNAR. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001. Pp. [x] + 244. \$54.50 (cloth).

This is one of the best kinds of books. Paula Debnar offers us a close reading of the speeches offered to Spartan audiences in Thucydides' *History*, and asks these speeches an important and intrinsically interesting question, namely, how do they reveal their listeners? The Spartans are excellent subjects for this kind of investigation. D. points out (p. 222) that they listen to ten deliberative speeches in the *History*, but themselves deliver such speeches only four times. Thucydides' Spartans listen much more than they speak or respond, then, and D.'s study, which considers the Spartans in their character as an audience, offers a focused study of an obviously pertinent, but previously neglected, window onto their elusive character.

Serious scholars of Greece, Sparta, and Thucydides will therefore want to read this book, which deploys a variety of analytical perspectives while providing a chronologically ordered account of the Spartan reaction to speeches. Throughout, for instance, D. remains aware of the fact that both laconic speech and Spartan silence are cultural markers that in themselves speak volumes about the Spartans. The Spartan audience is therefore partially constructed, she argues, by the ethnic and social identity it brings to every speech. D. also takes account of the effect of secondary internal audiences. The Spartan audience was aware that the gist of any speech would always pass to the other cities, their own allies in particular. D. is alive to the possibility that this awareness conditions their responses. Finally, she takes account of the reading audience itself. She makes a thought-provoking argument that Thucydides' difficult prose was intended to construct a particular kind of reader. She argues that Thucydides calculated for the difference in difficulty between reading and deciphering deliberative oratory on the spot. Readers have the text, and can reread as much as they like. Those *in situ* must comprehend and remember the speech all at once. They are therefore in a much more difficult position. Thucydides reestablished equality between his readers and the audiences of fifth-century rhetoric by