

# Interpretation

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Michelle M. Kundmueller, *Homer's Hero: Human Excellence in the "Iliad" and the "Odyssey."* New York: State University of New York Press, 2019, viii + 263 pp., \$95.00 (hardcover).

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Michelle M. Kundmueller is to be commended for taking seriously the claim that Homer is a great teacher and not merely a repository of quaint, if enthralling, cultic myths that no person alive—no sane person—could ever believe. Her new book, *Homer's Hero: Human Excellence in the "Iliad" and the "Odyssey,"* seeks to elaborate the Homeric understanding of human virtue, and it does so with a view to answering the question of the best way of life for a human being. At the same time, it opens the question of the relation between love or desire and virtue. In what way does the former determine the latter? Which desires produce which virtues, and which virtues are most worthy of respect? Like many of her contemporaries,<sup>1</sup> Kundmueller is also interested in the question of the status of women and the private family. She asks: Can women “ever exhibit the heroic virtues” (18)? Can the well-ordered private family, and the virtues cultivated therein, serve as the basis for a “just, speech-based politics” (17)?

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<sup>1</sup> See Helene Foley, “Penelope as Moral Agent,” in *The Distaff Side: Representing the Female in Homer's "Odyssey,"* ed. Beth Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 93–116; Arlene Saxonhouse, “Political Women: Ancient Comedies and Modern Dilemmas,” and Mary P. Nichols, “Toward a New—and Old—Feminism for Liberal Democracy,” in *Finding a New Feminism: Rethinking the Woman Question for Liberal Democracy,* ed. Pamela Grande Jansen (Lanham, MD: Roman & Littlefield, 1996), 149–70 and 171–92; Laura McClure, introduction to *Making Silence Speak: Women's Voices in Greek Literature and Society,* ed. Andre Lardinois and Laura McClure (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 3–16; and Ann Ward, “Mothering and the Sacrifice of Self: Women and Friendship in the *Nicomachean Ethics,*” *Thirdspace* 7 (2008): 32–57.

To answer these and related questions, Kundmueller undertakes a brisk and spirited analysis of six Homeric heroes. She begins with those she claims are single-mindedly devoted to honor (Ajax and Agamemnon); then she turns to those who are, as she puts it, “in transition or at least torn between the love of honor... and the love of their own private life” (47) (Achilles and Hector); then she turns to those she claims are best able to transcend the love of honor and who are, as a result, best able to satisfy their other, higher desires, such as the desire for “family, intimate friends, and the private household” (2) (Odysseus and Penelope). According to Kundmueller, Homer teaches that the pursuit of honor, as it is practiced in public or political life, is the chief obstacle to happiness or at any rate to the happiness of those who are able to be made happy by the highest things (1–2).<sup>2</sup> It is also an obstacle to justice (180, 188, 15; but cf. 176–77, 181–82, 189–90). To the genuinely virtuous, politics offers nothing truly satisfying (196, 187); yet, because “private happiness needs protection” (16), it is sometimes necessary for the genuinely virtuous to engage in politics (16–17, 135, 182–83, 187–88). Happily, the virtues cultivated in the private sphere are, in Homer’s view, “likely” to support a just and stable politics (183, 192, 17, 14). What that politics might look like, and how it will protect the “rights of others” from abuse (194), Kundmueller does not say, apparently because Homer himself is silent (1, 183, 192). She does, however, divine that it will be “based on consensus, deliberation, and discussion” (192); that it will be “oriented toward the common good” (192); and that it will be less conducive to the vain and competitive status-seeking that thrives in our own culture (196–98).

As the structure of her work would suggest, Kundmueller regards Odysseus and Penelope as the best of Homer’s heroes (2). They are the best because they know and love their own (141, 181, 186–87), because they love “that which is good” (134), and because they love private life and the family (182, 186–87, 192). Odysseus in particular is deserving of praise since, unlike his honor-loving peers, he possesses the intelligence, courage, and self-restraint needed to secure his “first priority” (122), namely, his return to his family (15, 186). He is flawed, to be sure, by “an inadequate understanding of justice” (17; cf. 189, 196); but, all things considered, his injustices are “relatively paltry” (176) and surely extenuated by the fact that he harms others to help his friends, that is, his much-deserving family (166–67). No doubt many readers would say all this is “obvious,” indeed “painfully obvious” (100, 153). Yet, in Kundmueller’s

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<sup>2</sup> “The core of human life and its happiest fulfillment is harmony and unity with that which is one’s own and the prospect for this happy state to continue insofar as humanly possible” (187).

view, the “painfully obvious” reading stands in need of defense, since there exists a small minority of scholars<sup>3</sup> who claim that Odysseus never desired to return home, or came to desire his return only after much time away; the most radical of these go so far as to claim that Odysseus’s apparently loving and happy marriage is in fact “nothing more than a ploy managed by Odysseus on Penelope and by Homer on overly sentimental readers” (153). Adducing as evidence “the length of Odysseus’s voyage, his capacity to tell convincing lies, and the stakes in Ithaka,” these scholars maintain that Odysseus prolonged his voyage, neglected his kingly duties, and lied about his delay, the truth being that he was altogether absorbed in the pursuit of other, higher goods, variously understood as knowledge or immortality (100–101, 15–16). It is against these scholars that Kundmueller wishes to contend: she writes “for the sake of the skeptical,” to put their doubts to rest (153).

Contra the skeptics, Kundmueller claims that, so far from regarding his wife as an object of “political strategy or manipulation” (153), Odysseus thinks of Penelope as his friend, indeed as his “greatest friend” (155). Their friendship, according to Kundmueller, is founded on like-mindedness, similarity in virtue, and honesty (14, 135, 154–55, 181, 184). This might provoke one to ask: Is not Odysseus famously dishonest? Is he not the liar par excellence? Kundmueller concedes that he is (see, e.g., 103, 141). Yet this by itself proves nothing, since a consummate liar is not an indiscriminate liar, as even the skeptics would admit. The question, then, is whether Odysseus can be honest with Penelope—it being perfectly clear that if Odysseus cannot be honest with Penelope, he cannot be a good friend to Penelope, much less her “greatest friend.” Thus Kundmueller must find the support she needs in the proof that Odysseus is honest with Penelope.

This proof constitutes the most important part of her work. The weightiest evidence she presents is the story Odysseus tells Penelope in book 23. This story appears to be the same story Odysseus tells the Phaiakians in books 9–12. It would seem, then, that Odysseus’s capacity to be honest with Penelope,

<sup>3</sup> Kundmueller identifies as members of this camp Ahrens Dorf, Benardete, Ruderman, Bolotin, and—more ambiguously—Howland, Deneen, and Clay. See Peter J. Ahrens Dorf, *Homer on the Gods and Human Virtue: Creating the Foundations of Classical Civilization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Seth Benardete, *The Bow and the Lyre: A Platonic Reading of the “Odyssey”* (Lanham, MD: Roman & Littlefield, 2008); Richard S. Ruderman, “Odysseus and the Possibility of Enlightenment,” *American Journal of Political Science* 43 (1999): 138–61; David Bolotin, “The Concerns of Odysseus: An Introduction to the *Odyssey*,” *Interpretation* 17 (1989): 41–58; Jacob Howland, *The Republic: The Odyssey of Philosophy* (Philadelphia: Paul Dry Books, 2004); Patrick J. Deneen, *The Odyssey of Political Theory: The Politics of Departure and Return* (Lanham, MD: Roman & Littlefield, 2003); Jenny Strauss Clay, *The Wrath of Athena: Gods and Men in the “Odyssey”* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997).

and therewith his capacity to reciprocate her friendship, stands or falls by his capacity to be honest with the Phaiakians. Odysseus's capacity to be honest with the Phaiakians Kundmueller makes to stand on Homer's capacity to be honest with his readers. According to Kundmueller, Homer always tells his readers when Odysseus is lying; he never deceives us; his testimony is "unimpeachable" (104; cf. 72, 106). For example: "When Odysseus, disguised as a beggar and still undetected, tells his false history to Penelope in book 19, the line following his speech explains that he 'knew how to say many false things that were like true sayings.'... A few lines later... Homer explains that Odysseus hides his tears and 'deceived her'" (104). Because Homer nowhere calls into question Odysseus's speech to the Phaiakians, Kundmueller concludes "that Odysseus tells the truth in his longest and most complete version of the story of his voyage" (104). Later, "when Odysseus tells Penelope about his voyage from Troy, Homer provides no evidence that Odysseus is lying or telling less than the complete story of his adventures" (105). "Homer could not be clearer about the completeness of Odysseus's tale" (155; cf. 234nn43–45; 221n20).

It is certainly true that Homer says that Odysseus told Penelope everything, "the complete story," leaving nothing out. It would seem, then, that if we are to take Homer at his word, we must be prepared to believe, first, that after tearfully reuniting with his wife, Odysseus told her the truth not only about the measureless toil still awaiting him, to be completed far from home, but also about his past infidelities, knowing full well that by doing so he risked spoiling the tender reunion he had sought for so long (compare 10.289–306 and 10.333–47 with 23.320; 12.447–53 with 23.333–37; consider 23.264–67); and, second, that he did so under the auspices of a god who delayed the coming of dawn so as to permit him to bring his tale to completion (23.241–46). This is surely not incredible; for who among us has never been moved to tell the truth—the painful truth—to a friend, even or especially when doing so may dissolve the friendship and imperil our own happiness?<sup>4</sup> And who has not felt, in moments of deep satisfaction, in moments of sublime and self-forgetting joy, the complete stoppage of time?

Still, a credible claim is not a true claim, and a feeling is not an argument. Given the great weight Kundmueller places on Homer's testimony, it is surprising that she spends so much time talking about the Platonic myth of Er (10–15, 25, 33, 46, 95–96, 156, 158, 161, 176, 183) and so little time

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<sup>4</sup> Compare to Bolotin, "The Concerns of Odysseus," 49–50.

investigating the Platonic critique of Homer or the ancient claim that he was a pleasing liar who spoke with hidden meanings.<sup>5</sup> If there is a weakness in Kundmueller's account, it seems to me to be this: she does not adequately reflect on Homer's mode of writing or on the question of whether or to what extent he felt the need to accommodate himself to his audience. Homer himself seems to have thought this question an important one; at any rate, he all but begins his most prosaic work, the *Odyssey*, with a disavowal of art (1.9–10) and a reproof of a singer (1.337–44; compare 1.153–54, 22.344–53, 23.133–36). The reproof is especially revealing, as it comes from the lips of Penelope. In her first speech in the work, she blames the singer Phemius for singing a song she does not wish to hear, a song that pains her. She does this even though the song appears to have had a civilizing effect on the suitors (compare 1.325–26 with 1.132–34). To her tearful demand that he sing a different song—one that will do the same trick without touching so close to home (1.337–40)—her son, Telemachos, gives this harsh reply:

Why, my mother, do you begrudge this excellent singer  
his pleasing himself as the thought drives him? It is not the singers  
who are to blame, it must be Zeus is to blame, who gives out  
to men who eat bread, to each and all, the way he wills it.  
There is nothing wrong in his singing the sad return of the Danaans.  
People, surely, always give more applause to that song  
which is the latest to circulate among the listeners.  
So let your heart and let your spirit be hardened to listen.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Cf., e.g., Plato, *Republic* 377d–378d, 386a ff., and 601a ff., esp. 602b, 605b–d, 606a–d; Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 1.2.58–61 and *Symposium* 3.6; Thucydides, *War of the Peloponnesians and Athenians* 1.21.1–2, 1.9.4, 1.10.3.

<sup>6</sup> Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Richmond Lattimore (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 1.346–53.

