Hopman, M.G.


In the preface to her book, Marianne Hopman (henceforth H.) sets out her interest in the cognitive mechanisms by which people understand and organize reality. In an effort to investigate and understand ancient Greek constructs, she focuses on monsters as one of “the richest and most vibrant constructs that contemporary culture has inherited from antiquity” (1). Her monster of choice is Scylla, who appears in various forms in literature from Homeric epic on. Approaching Scylla as a complex sign participating in a cultural communication system, H. aims “to describe contextual and intertextual networks within which audiences and viewers were—and are—invited to make sense of a mythical name” through classical antiquity (8). To investigate the grammar of this symbol, the author uses the tools of semiotics, reader-response criticism, narratology, and cognitive linguistics (conceptual metaphor). In a nutshell, H. argues that Scylla as symbol uniquely combines three important and metaphorically related concepts: sea, dog, and woman.

Chapter 1 begins with the idea that the Odyssean Scylla draws upon traditional material, altered for the purposes of the poem. We can see glimpses of this tradition in both material culture and literature: a second-millennium Minoan seal featuring a canine sea monster, and other sea monsters that appear in heroic myth. Unlike most monster-slaying heroic tales, however, the Odyssey portrays Scylla (gendered grammatically as female) as invincible. H. argues that the poem incorporates “external and internal narrative paradigms that set into relief Odysseus’ failure by comparison with successful heroic trials” which shape the way audiences experience it (25). Here H. does a close narratological reading of the Scylla episode presented through the perspectives of Circe, the character Odysseus, and the narrator Odysseus. The episode’s language contains micronarratives that allude to the Argonautic, Iliadic, and Hesiodic traditions highlighting Odysseus’ failure to overcome the monster. Further, whereas Odysseus successfully escapes the Cyclops, the dense “allusions simultaneously construct the Scylla encounter as a failure at four different levels: as a navigational challenge, a war duel, a cosmogonic fight, and an Odyssean trial” (40-41).

In Chapter 2, H. examines the Scylla episode in light of the Odyssey’s “self-conscious interest in the conditions and effects of speech” (42), analyzing the implications of mimesis for the episode’s performance. In addition to threatening the lives of Odysseus and his men in the narrative, she also metaphorically threatens the performance of the poem itself. Odysseus loses his
distinctive mental and verbal cunning when confronting Scylla. His forgetfulness of Circe’s instructions and his inability here to use speech successfully, combined with references to competing heroic traditions, represent “a moment when the Odyssean performance contemplates the possibility of its own silencing” (50). While this is an interesting section, I remain skeptical of this claim. H. closes the chapter by examining the importance of the Odyssey to the later epic tradition: heroes must encounter Scylla in some fashion, although none except Heracles (in a Hellenistic tale) does so successfully. The Homeric Scylla “underlies and imparts meaning to non-epic treatments that self-consciously depart” from the narrative (51).

Chapter 3 examines Scylla’s threat through the Odyssey’s structuring motif of eating. H. analyzes semantics using the concept of “traditional referentiality”. That is, she tries to recover the Homeric monster’s semantic density by looking at the language used to describe her and other contexts in early Greek epic that use the same words and phrases. In particular, H. emphasizes “voraciousness” as a unifying thread that is closely connected to the Homeric Greek conception of the sea as a “devouring gullet” and the Odyssean poetics that makes a metaphorical analogy between Scylla’s jaws and her location. H. notes that it is hard to form a good mental picture of this super predator, for Circe’s description focuses on her activity: she devours with her necks, heads, and taws of teeth. In short, Scylla’s mouths function as a metonym for her entire body. H. shows that the monster is etymologically portrayed as a “she-dog” liminal between nature and culture. Throughout early Greek literature runs a fear that dogs might turn on their masters, killing and/or even eating them. Scylla is associated also with other creatures that devour inappropriately—the Cyclopes, the Laestrygonians, and the suitors. She is like a female flesh-eating ketos. In an especially interesting and effective section, H. ties Scylla’s voracity to a widespread fear evidenced in early Greek literature and art “that those who venture on the sea may be devoured by the mysterious creatures that loom below its surface” (61). H.’s discussion of this feature of the Greek cultural imaginary is made even more effective by her use of images to illustrate it. She points out that the term laitma, commonly used for ‘sea’ in Homeric epic, is related to the term laimos, or ‘throat’ and argues that the Homeric uses of laitma show that sea = throat was a living metaphor for poet and audience. This section is full of compelling examples. Scylla’s voracity extends to her space: her habitat (cave and straits) is visualized in the Homeric narrative “as metaphorical enlargements of her ravenous jaws” (65).

In Chapter 4 H. observes that audiences of the Odyssey do not encounter Scylla directly through the external narrator. Instead, we hear her described in Circe’s prophecy and in Odysseus’ tale to the Phaeacians. Circe’s language in