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## The Telemacheia

The opening books of Homer's *Odyssey* deal almost exclusively with the problems faced by the young Telemachus in Ithaca. The situation of his father is the object of speculation for mortals and the source of some contention among the gods, but for the most part Books I-IV display the effects of Odysseus' absence upon his household and especially upon his maturing son. Telemachus not only undertakes his own geographic journey in search of his father, but in a limited way pursues the inner goal of maturity as well. We see Telemachus confront the questions of responsibility, property, and authority against the background of both his father's reputation and the recurring image of Orestes and his vengeance. Telemachus must live with the anxiety of perhaps having to "measure up" to Orestes despite the fact that their circumstances are not wholly similar.[1]

Although such considerations make it undeniable that the first four books are concerned with the development of Telemachus as an individual in his own right (a task never quite accomplished),[2] there are several episodes within these opening books which demonstrate rather clearly that Homer has much more in mind than problems of viable characters or setting the stage for his hero's appearance. I would like to examine three episodes in particular which I think give us a sense of the extraordinary sensitivity Homer possesses with respect to his possible audience. These incidents reveal the extent to which the *Odyssey* is a self-conscious work, a work in which the poet has taken into account within the content of the poem several possible responses to his song and his activity of singing. These episodes also suggest several dimensions of what I see to be the poet's fundamental concern in the *Odyssey*, the nature of language, and in particular the complexity of speaking as the distinctive human act.

Near the end of Book I,[3] just after Athene has made her exit through a hole in the roof, Homer tells us we are to be introduced to Penelope who has been stirred from her chambers by the song of the court minstrel Phemius. Phemius has been singing a song about the return of the Achaians from Troy, a tale which Penelope finds too sad to bear. She asks, indeed pleads, that Phemius stop this song and sing something else so that she may not be reminded of her grief. It is at this point that Telemachus gives a speech which impresses Penelope with its "good sense". The speech is brief but covers a lot of ground, given that Telemachus is only coming into his own as an orator. The first point Telemachus makes has to do with the relation between the singer and his song; he claims that the singer is bound by a kind of necessity and must sing what he is "moved" to sing. The singer cannot be held responsible for the content of his song.[4] It is Zeus, not the poet, who is accountable for what happens to mortals. Disregarding any aesthetic or metaphysical problems involved in this statement, I think it is safe to say that Telemachus is telling Penelope to leave Phemius alone since he is but a voice. It is also not clear whether this assertion about poetry is part of what Penelope later considers "good sense".

Telemachus' second statement is meant as support for the first; he claims that the reason Phemius is singing the song about the Achaians is to please his audience for "it is always the latest song that an audience applauds the most".[5] Phemius is singing a song that men like the suitors want to hear; basically Telemachus views the singer as no worse than a harmless flatterer, though an inspired one. Exactly how Telemachus sees these two views complementing each other is left hazy; in fact his second statement would seem to make the suitors into Phemius' muse, since he sings what they want.

It is hard to see how this rather contradictory theory of poetry could have impressed a woman like Penelope as "good sense". Finally Telemachus tells his mother to go back to her loom since "Talking must be men's concern, and mine in particular; for I am master in this house".[6] It is more likely that it is this final show of authority which impresses Penelope as "good sense".

Of the three parts of Telemachus' "statement" I would like to look more closely at the second because I think it intimates a rather curious association between the suitors, as the audience of Phemius, and one possible kind of audience for any poet or singer. Telemachus clearly locates the suitors within that sort of audience which prefers the latest song. The limits of Telemachus' vision are also indicated by the fact that he thinks this is true of any audience. However, I think the implications

of this description are more significant for an understanding of how Homer views his own project as a poet rather than as a piecemeal critique of Telemachus' conceptual development. If Homer's song is to endure he must maintain his audience in spite of the fact that his song will not continue to be the "latest song" in the ordinary sense.[7] This is not to imply that Homer has anticipated the twentieth century and its literary critics, but I think it is possible that he anticipates at least one reaction to his own song in this speech of Telemachus. When one reads the written song of Homer, it is possible to discard the work before the end of Book I because it is not the "latest song", because it is one of those old books about another world and another time. One might easily prefer something like Heidegger's comments on "homecoming" in Holderlin because they seem more "timely". This speech of Telemachus points out that one can only have such a preference at the risk of being embarrassingly close in character to the suitors.

So I think the echo that we can hear in this episode with Telemachus is Homer's implicit linking of the listener who seeks novelty or the "latest" with the character of the suitors. Although the logic of Homer's suggestion is not impeccable (in fact it centres on a fallacy of accident), it is meant only as warning or suggestion not as syllogism. I think it is true that the reader who abandons Homer for reasons of novelty or relevance is himself imaged and ridiculed in the text of Book I. To love only the latest song is to be like a suitor and all that this implies; the life that consumes the works of others, remains superficial, parasitical, and second-rate. This guilt by association indicates to me that the suitors are more than the villains in a tale, and that they also represent one possible response to Homer and indeed to all literature; they are the "moderns" of the book, the squanderers of the achievements of another, the followers of fashion and novelty. On the immediate level of the poem itself this episode invites the careful reader to continue listening; the price of giving up seems to be the admission of at least a minimal identity with the character of the suitors. Behind all this is the rather formidable question which Homer puts to us as an audience, namely what song would we like to hear? And further, what connections exist between our likes and dislikes and the art of poetry? Homer is conscious that he is writing on a grand scale and has anticipated the reactions of an age which would pretend to be beyond him in every respect by placing a replica of "modern opinion" in the first book of his work. In doing so he seems to me to reveal the awareness that his song should be judged by standards other than its historical or temporal position.

The episode with Haliserthes the seer in Book II[8] also demonstrates, but in a more pointed way, Homer's cultivation of his audience into a good listener. It is quite appropriate that the audience should be given such a preliminary "education" if the quite incredible songs of Odysseus are to be fully appreciated.[9] In other words, in these initial books of the *Odyssey* the real listeners are being selected and groomed by means of the implicit comparison with the anti-audience of the suitors.

The episode with Haliserthes concerns the interpretation of a bird sign. Haliserthes is said to know more of birdlore and soothsaying than anyone else in Ithaca. He addresses his interpretation of the sign directly to the suitors; he takes the two eagles and their struggle to mean that Odysseus will soon return and seek bloody revenge. The response of the suitor Eurymachus is swift and violent; he claims that reading omens is more suitable for an audience of children and insists that he is a better interpreter than the old man anyway. Finally he says the bird sign has no meaning at all.

Here we have two possible reactions to an event in nature, the magical response of Haliserthes and the realistic response of Eurymachus. We know the response of Haliserthes to be highly probable because Homer has as much as told us through Athene that Odysseus will soon be home;[10] the rash response of Eurymachus, who immediately relegates such omen-reading to the nursery and to superstition, we know to have ironic consequences. I think it is important to notice that Eurymachus' response, though foolish within the world and events of the *Odyssey*, is, outside such boundaries, the more objective and scientific response. From the reader or listener's point of view things are a bit more complex; not only do we have this particular instance of bird-interpreting to consider, but Athene has also vanished as a bird in Book I and will continue to do so throughout the work. So the listener is placed in the position of being an interpreter of bird signs as well. This may not be a problem at first sight because within our suspended disbelief we must allow the poem to take its course and so, on this level, allow Athene to vanish like a bird, all the time realizing that this attitude does not really penetrate into our own personal conception of the world and our own experience. There, where it really counts for us, we probably come closer to agreeing with Eurymachus. Thus the security of epic convention allows us to safeguard our own beliefs while still "appreciating" the poem.

I think it is important here to notice that if we relegate our sympathy for the view of Haliserthes to the closet of imagination or to the disbelief we have conjured up for the sake of the poem, we are much like

Eurymachus when he confines Haliserthes and his interpretation to the world of children. In other words the figure in the book who most clearly draws the line between fantasy and reality, fiction and fact, superstition and science, is the suitor Eurymachus. Homer has once again anticipated our possible stance as an audience by confronting us with the question of the status of imaginative space, the space where the world of the *Odyssey* exists. If we choose to make the distinction between imagination and reality in a facile manner, as Eurymachus does, then we probably are not the audience we ought to be, since our replica, Eurymachus, is clearly a fool, given what we know of the impending return of Odysseus. Thus Homer breaks up the barrier between fictional and personal dimensions, rendering the perspective of the uncommitted critic insecure.

We cannot then remain detached from the two interpretations of the birdsigns and appreciate the story on some harmless aesthetic level because detachment itself, the safety of an empirical rationality, is one of the interpretations the poem parodies. This episode once again demonstrates Homer's consciousness of the relation between poet and listener. In a fundamental way his entire song is a "bird sign" with respect to us the audience. Once again it would hardly be to our credit to adopt a position toward art which is in any way reminiscent of Eurymachus' attitude to the bird sign. The effect of this interpretive challenge is to expand the boundaries of the poem so that it includes the listener and his responses within its very content. We can no longer treat Homer and his gods as a curiosity; rather we must begin to wonder what possessed us when we thought of the poem as external to us in the first place. The words and events of the *Odyssey* continually mirror our reactions to it and gently persuade us that Homer's prophecies and anticipations of our responses in some mysterious manner include us and our whisperings in his singing. As we continue to see ourselves appear, our commentary on what the poem brings forth becomes his chorus. On the less speculative level of the action of the poem, episodes like the two I have considered so far serve to prepare us for the stories of Odysseus and the magical world in which they take place. Once again Homer is engaged in a project of rehearsing us as listeners so that we can appreciate the full scope of Odysseus' songs.

The third episode of the Telemacheia which I would like to examine places in perspective some of the more speculative suggestions derived from the previous two. Menelaus' tale of Proteus in Book IV provides what is probably the central metaphor of the entire poem (the theme of change and disguise)[11] and displays more fully Homer's conception of the relation between the poet and his audience.

The sea-god Proteus is a master of shapes and disguises, some of which, for instance water and fire, are quite strange. The curiosities about Proteus can be approached from several perspectives; here I would like to consider only those aspects of the figure which are most intriguing to me and which seem to have a bearing on the subject of this paper. It is quite striking that Proteus, master of shapes, is unable to recognize the disguise of Menelaus and his men. Perhaps the best disguise is what is most familiar. Despite this limitation, there seems to be no restriction on the possible shapes Proteus can assume.[12] If we temporarily suspend some rules which we are used to accepting and open up all the possibilities we can imagine, there is then nothing in principle to prevent Proteus from taking any shape he chooses.[13] I think the most interesting avenue of possibility is to consider the case where Proteus chooses to become *words* or *speech*. In the story it is only when Proteus returns to his "original shape" that he finally breaks into speech and tells Menelaus what he wants to know. I think we discover some interesting things about the *Odyssey* if we take the original shape of Proteus to be language, or, perhaps more safely, interpret the figure of Proteus as representative of human language, especially the language of the poet.

The refusal of Menelaus and his men to let go until Proteus appears in his true form can be instructive for the listener who attempts to understand the language of the poem. Many of us frequently despair at the many shapes our language can take; we may find ourselves in a condition similar to that of Menelaus, seeking the original shape, the fundamental sense or meaning of a reality which continually changes and slips away. If Proteus is the image of the poet's language, then Homer has once again placed a replica of our relation to his language in the story of Menelaus and Proteus. Homer is thus warning us that his language is the sort of thing which can create shapes and assume different forms; in fact the poem of Homer is soon to become the speech of an alter-ego when Odysseus himself takes up the task of story-telling. We will see Odysseus, in both his own tales and in Homer's, transforming himself into father, hero, assassin, woman, child, beggar as the circumstances demand. Thus the image of Proteus also prefigures the "resourceful" Odysseus as well, a more believable master of shapes, both physical and linguistic.

Finally, at the most general level, Proteus is an image of each man's psyche, his central unchanging core surrounded by its many faces and appearances to the extent that this complexity is embodied in Odysseus. Proteus not only represents the dialogue, the language which connects

each of us with others, but also the dialogue each speaker has with possible other selves or other dimensions of self. These relationships are crucial for an understanding of Odysseus since most of his story-telling will be constituted with reference to a particular audience and a particular self-image.[14] Thus Homer's abdication of his position as poet, in favor of Odysseus, is a means by which he can place a replica of himself in the poem; in other words, the poem expands to the extent that it not only includes the various perspectives of the audience in its images and situations, but even the perspective of the poet himself as he sings for his audience.

## NOTES

1. Citations from Homer in my text are to Homer, *The Odyssey*, Loeb Classical Library (London: Heinemann, 1953). The Orestes theme is mentioned several times in the *Odyssey*: I, 26-30; I, 298-300; III, 195-200; III, 255-275; III, 303-310; IV, 524-540; XI and XXIV. The translation utilized is that by E.V. Rieu, *The Odyssey* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1974). Howard W. Clarke, *The Art of the Odyssey*( Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1967), p. 11 notes that the feast motif has replaced the bath murder in the *Odyssey's* version of the Agamemnon story and that the desecrated feast becomes a dominant theme of the book.
2. Clarke, *op. cit.*, p. 40 mentions Homer's technical problems in developing Telemachus' character. Earlier, p 32-34, he has summarized the task of the first four books as the harmonizing of Telemachus' inner and outer selves by overcoming the feminine attraction to place. I substantially agree with this analysis with respect to the overt purpose of these books, but I will try to show that these books serve other, more implicit, purposes as well.
3. *Odyssey* I, 328-331.
4. This is exactly the same claim Phemius will later make to Odysseus in order to save his life. This view of poets and poetic inspiration is discussed by M.I. Finley, *The World of Odysseus* (New York: Viking Press, 1965), p. 36 as well as by Adam Parry, "The Language of Achilles," in *The Language and Background of Homer*, ed. G.S. Kirk (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1967), p. 53.
5. *Odyssey* I, 351. W.J. Woodhouse, *The Composition of Homer's Odyssey* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1969), p.12 calls this history's first piece of literary criticism.
6. *Odyssey* I, 356-359.
7. I disagree strongly with Albert Bates Lord, "Homer's Originality: Oral Dictated Texts," in G.S. Kirk, *op. cit.* p. 74 where he claims that Homer did not concern himself with the future hearers of the poem. Homer may not think it possible that his song be lost, but he is concerned that it be responded to in a certain way.
8. *Odyssey* II, 161-176 and II, 177-207.
9. Clarke, *op. cit.*, p 39 claims that book IV in particular is meant to ease the audience into the Odyssey proper due to the similarity between Odysseus' fate and that of Menelaus.
10. *Odyssey*, I, 200-203.
11. Clarke, *op.cit.*, p. 23.
12. In the most extreme case it is even imaginable, though not likely, that Telemachus is in fact speaking to a Proteus who has assumed the shape of Menelaus. Although this moves things in a rather bizarre direction, it would be quite in line with the narcotic haze over Menelaus' palace.
13. Unless perhaps he is limited to sensible shapes.
14. See the Cretan tales to Athene and Eumaeus in books XIII and XIV.