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Whose Story Is It? Issues of Narrative Control in the "Odyssey"

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WHOSE STORY IS IT? ISSUES OF NARRATIVE CONTROL IN THE *ODYSSEY*

The most interesting context in which I have been teaching Homer recently is in a team-taught course on Homer and Joyce, on which I collaborate with a Joycean, Vicki Mahaffey. We have taught this course twice now, and we are still working on getting it exactly right, but one thing that we are both committed to is making sure that the *Odyssey* does not take on the character of background to *Ulysses*. We read the two texts in tandem, rather than sequentially; we try to keep the comparisons going in both directions; and we do everything we can to dispel the notion that, just because the *Odyssey* is much easier to read, it is therefore simpler and less sophisticated than *Ulysses*. It is an explicit goal of the course to highlight the Joycean *Odyssey*, stressing features of the ancient epic that Joyce's modern version helps to bring into focus.

In that spirit, one of my aims is to get students to see that the *Odyssey*, even if it does belong to the earliest phase of classical literature as we know it, is a modern work, that is to say a work that is belated, conscious of coming at the end of a long tradition, and experimental. Students tend to think of the *Odyssey* as simply providing the raw material that Joyce then turned into a great masterpiece by retelling it in an interesting way. I want them to understand the kinds of pointed, deliberate, interested choices behind what may seem like the straightforward presentation of a self-evident story. Here a pedagogical goal intersects with one of the main directions of Homeric scholarship, which involves trying to reconstruct on the basis of available evidence the tradition that the *Odyssey* both inherits and transforms. This approach is broadly associated with neo-analytic criticism, though not everyone engaged in the project would describe him- or herself under that rubric.

To this end, I like to spend some time on the songs of Demodocus in *Odyssey* 8 and to talk about them in terms drawn from scholarly discussions like that of Gregory Nagy in *The Best of the Achaeans*. I talk about how the unspecified cause of the conflict between Achilles and Odysseus described in the first song can be reconstructed from a scholion that tells us these two heroes quarreled over whether Troy would be taken by *bie* (force) or *metis* (cunning). This allows students to understand what is at stake when Odysseus requests and elicits the story of the Trojan Horse in the last song. From this, students begin to see that the choice of a myth to tell is far from neutral and to realize that the *Odyssey* is, in some sense, a brief for its own hero. They can go back to the opening of the poem and see how from the outset this is not *the* story of Odysseus, but a narrative that is itself committed to his interests, that is partial and even partisan.

The partisanship found in the opening lines of the *Odyssey* is especially pronounced in the treatment of Odysseus' companions. The poet nervously blurts out an apology for Odysseus, insisting that the companions' deaths were all their own fault. I find that contemporary students are fascinated by the companions and love to talk and write about Odysseus' relationship with them; generally, they have a hard time reconciling his failure to bring his men home with his heroic status. While I am afraid this is largely conditioned by an over-emphasis on "leadership" in their curricula, I do think they are on to something. Here students may be ahead of the scholarship, which has recently focused on other characters

whose stories are foreshortened by the poem's allegiance to Odysseus, such as Penelope and now increasingly Telemachus, but has so far not paid much attention to the companions.

The question of whether the companions are treated fairly is an excellent point of entry into broader questions about Odysseus' first-person narrative in books 9–12 and whether that narrative can be considered objective. One of the aims of our course is to promote a thoughtful assessment of the degree to which Homer does and does not take account of individual subjectivity. So one of the first things we do is ask them to read the chapter on "Odysseus' Scar" in Auerbach's *Mimesis* in conjunction with the whole of book 19. The portrayal of Penelope in book 19, and the indirection on both their parts that characterizes her dialogue with Odysseus, make it hard to accept Auerbach's contention that everything in the *Odyssey* is on the surface. We hope that students will see from this that the *Odyssey* is in its own way as much concerned with the issue of perspective as *Ulysses* is, even if it does not display the same conspicuous stress on interiority or idiosyncratic style. Other parts of the *Odyssey* that invite consideration of perspective include the competing stories of Helen and Menelaus in book 4 about Helen's role in the Trojan War and the portrayal throughout of Athena as instigating the plot and intervening in its progress. All in all, we hope to convey a sense of the *Odyssey* as a story that did not have to be told in exactly the way that it is.

Another area in which, for me, teaching intersects with other kinds of professional activity is that of translation. I began to think more consciously about translation as a practice when I worked with Stanley Lombardo on his translations of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. I started emphasizing translation as issue in my teaching in intermediate Greek courses, because students in those courses were always asking, "Is it OK to translate it this way?" and I found myself giving increasingly complicated answers. There is a growing theoretical literature on translation, but I find that students themselves readily arrive at the major questions simply through being confronted with competing translations of the same passage. They quickly get tangled up in instructive metaphors involving fidelity, authenticity, and transparency. Whether they can read the original or not, students tend to be surprised at how much difference it makes what translation they read, and that difference certainly clarifies the broader issue of how much the meaning of a story is bound up with who gets to tell it. They also tend to have passionate views about individual translations, often somewhat conservative. Many, for example, are troubled by the colloquial aspect of the Lombardo translations. They do not think Achilles should tell Odysseus, "Don't try to sell me on death," or that Melanthius should describe Odysseus as "this walking pile of shit," and these reactions can open up interesting questions about their expectations of the classics.

In the context of courses like the one on Homer and Joyce, translation can be a wonderful tool for thinking about adaptation, and we certainly talk about the ways in which *Ulysses* can and cannot be thought of as a translation of the *Odyssey*. Translation is also a good metaphor for thinking more broadly about encounters across languages and cultures. In our course, we make use of Brian Friel's play, *Translations*, which exploits that metaphor in the context of a plot about English soldiers making a new map of Ireland, replacing Irish names with English ones. And so a set of issues that arises for classicists in the specific problem of how to

gain access to an ancient text like the *Odyssey* proves to have wider applicability. And an extended sense of translation as an unavoidable operation can also help us to discuss moments within that text when characters who are all using Homeric Greek seem nonetheless to speak different languages: when Odysseus meets the Cyclops, for example, or when the ragged beggar meets the suitors, or when the disguised Odysseus converses with Penelope.

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**CLASSICAL ASSOCIATION OF THE ATLANTIC STATES
 CALL FOR PAPERS**

Fall Meeting, October 5–7, 2006
 Baltimore, Maryland

We invite individual and group proposals on all aspects of the classical world and the classical tradition, and on new strategies and resources for improved teaching. Particularly welcome are presentations which aim at maximum audience participation and those that integrate the concerns of K–12 and college faculty. Undergraduates are encouraged to submit proposals for a special panel spotlighting outstanding undergraduate research in classics.

The special sessions being planned include the new Latin reader on the *Worlds of Roman Women* by Raia, Sebesta, and Luschnig; the New York State Latin Regents Examination, past and present; the changing demographics of Latin study and teaching; and new directions in teaching and research on ancient Greek and Roman religion. This year's limited enrollment workshop will focus on anti-racist teaching and learning strategies, and there will be a poster session on Latin pedagogy: those interested in presenting at this session should contact Thomas Hayes; e-mail: hayestk@aol.com.

Abstracts should clearly indicate the thesis and original contribution made by the proposed presentation, and situate this contribution in a larger scholarly context, both in the text of the abstract itself and in a brief bibliography. Abstracts for individual proposals should be no more than 300 words (500 for panels and workshops) and should be submitted electronically, as Word or RTF files. Abstracts for individual papers should have the title of the paper, panel, or workshop as their file name, and—as they will be refereed anonymously—not indicate the name of the author or authors. This information should be included in a companion electronic submission, a “cover letter” which provides the title of the abstract, and the name, postal address, phone number, and e-mail address of the author. The “cover letter” should contain a brief c.v. of the author as well. Deadline for submission is April 10, 2006.

E-mail submissions of the abstracts and “cover letters” to both Judith P. Hallett (jeph@umd.edu) and Minna Canton Duchovnay (mcduchov@caas-cw.org).

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