



1991

Review of: John Peradotto, *Man in the Middle Voice: Name and Narration in the Odyssey*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990.

Sheila Murnaghan
University of Pennsylvania, smurnagh@sas.upenn.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://repository.upenn.edu/classics_papers



Part of the [Classics Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Murnaghan, S. (1991). Review of: John Peradotto, *Man in the Middle Voice: Name and Narration in the Odyssey*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990.. *Bryn Mawr Classical Review*, 02.03 (08), Retrieved from https://repository.upenn.edu/classics_papers/62

This paper is posted at ScholarlyCommons. https://repository.upenn.edu/classics_papers/62
For more information, please contact repository@pobox.upenn.edu.

Review of: John Peradotto, *Man in the Middle Voice: Name and Narration in the Odyssey*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990.

Disciplines

Arts and Humanities | Classics

John Peradotto, *Man in the Middle Voice: Name and Narration in the Odyssey*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990. Pp. xv + 193. ISBN 0-691-06830-5. \$24.95.

Reviewed by Sheila Murnaghan, University of Pennsylvania.

This dense, suggestive study offers both an interpretation of the *Odyssey* and a strong argument for reading classical texts with a knowledge of contemporary literary theory. Before engaging with the text itself, Peradotto opens with a chapter in which he speculates about why Classics as a discipline has been so especially resistant to theoretical developments outside the field. He notes classicists' tenacious allegiance to ideas of the autonomy of the human subject, the determinacy of meaning, and especially the referentiality of language that are challenged by the cluster of recent theories that Peradotto groups under the label "semiotics"; these are theories that in one way or another present language and other forms of representation as actively constituting the world as we know it rather than as simply describing an external, fixed reality. He then goes on to propose that we need an "archaeology of classical philology" along the lines of the broader "archaeology of knowledge" offered by Foucault in *The Order of Things*. He does not attempt to work this out in detail, but provides a useful summary of Foucault's argument and a provocative suggestion. The problem with Classics, according to Peradotto, is that the field is still caught in the transition out of Foucault's "Classical Age." During this period, which ended for most people with the close of the eighteenth century, the world was conceived in terms of successful representation: language was understood to have an arbitrary relationship to the world, but was also seen as an efficacious instrument for knowing the world and ordering it. Unlike other fields, Classics somehow never made it to the modern era, in which that conception gave way to a new sense of the historical contingency of language and with it of the slipperiness of language as a means of representation.

Such useful summaries of recent thinkers, especially European formalists, semioticians, and narratologists, show up throughout the book, as Peradotto juxtaposes the *Odyssey*'s key points of narrative self-consciousness with accounts of theoretical positions that can illuminate them. Focussing on those passages in which the poem itself seems most concerned to foreground the open-endedness of signification and narration, Peradotto evokes a poem that embraces and exploits the linguistic indeterminacy that modern theory describes. One of those passages is Teiresias' unusually conditional prophecy in *Odyssey* 11 which, as Peradotto shows through a close and original reading, is studiously ambiguous about the ultimate conclusion to Odysseus' story, leaving it open whether or not Odysseus will actually succeed in placating Poseidon and winning a gentle death. This analysis is grounded in an exposition of theories about what the shapes of narrative plots mean, with special attention to Bremond, and in an account of Bakhtin's view of texts as dialogic. Bakhtin's dialogism is perhaps the theoretical concept on which Peradotto relies most in developing his vision of the *Odyssey* as a polysemous text that incorporates contrasting voices. In Bakhtin's terms, these are variously centripetal voices, voices that impose unifying and ordering perspectives and uphold dominant political power, and centrifugal voices, voices that cut against impulses to unity and domination and express the perspectives of the politically dispossessed. Peradotto aligns this Bakhtinian dialogism with an opposition between myth, a form of narrative that enforces submission to the ordering principles of fate and

human limitation, and folktale, a form of narrative that indulges human desires for freedom and fulfillment.

The other passages that particularly interest Peradotto are those which have to do with naming: the opening lines of the poem in which its hero is identified, Odysseus' encounter with the Cyclops in Book 9, the account of Odysseus' naming in Book 19. He prefaces his examination of these passages with a survey of the debate among philosophers from Mill to Searle about the implications of bestowing a proper name, and he concludes that the poem deliberately draws back from any attempt to use naming as a way of closing off possibilities or locking in a particular description of the self. For Peradotto, the poet's initial failure to name the poem's hero and Odysseus' subsequent identification of himself to the Cyclops as "Outis" are not difficulties that the poet and hero must overcome as the poem unfolds, but creative, definitive refusals of meaning. Indeed, this embrace of indeterminacy is only furthered when "Outis" gives way to the hero's proper name since, in an argument that owes much to the work of George Dimock, Peradotto notes that "Odysseus" preserves the ambiguity between hating and being hated of the verb *odusasthai*. This ambiguity springs from the verb's appearance in the middle voice, a grammatical category that provides Peradotto with a neat emblem for the *Odyssey's* presentation of human experience: as balanced between disparate outlooks and conflicting outcomes, and constructed by the voice or voices in which it is told.

In his opening chapter, Peradotto several times insists that there is no unbridgeable gap between the newer critical methods he so knowledgeably champions and the traditional humanist approaches that have dominated classical studies up till now, and his own argument ultimately brings about a rapprochement between the two. His conclusion is that, while the *Odyssey* is marked by its fostering of several viewpoints and its avoidance of determinate meanings, it does finally favor its centrifugal over its centripetal voice. At a certain point, there appears to be shift in the argument, through which the openness that originally betokens a balance between the two voices ultimately comes itself to signify the centrifugal.

In the self-consciousness of his art, the story-teller creates a subject at once *polytropos* and *outis*, a secret basis for open predication, rather than a determinate sum of predicates, and thus represents a paradigm for a view of the self as capable, dynamic, free, rather than fixed, fated, defined. (169)

In its very polyvocality, the text takes on the wish-fulfilling character of its centrifugal side, and yields a vision of the self as self-sufficient, original, and creative. This is, of course, precisely the vision cherished by the traditionalists, who in the first chapter were seen to be impeding the progress of classical studies. The implications of this conclusion for specific issues of Homeric composition are equally compatible with a conservative position, for Peradotto sees the epic poet as sharing the freedom of his characters, actively shaping his material without being unduly hampered by external limitations, in this case the weight of poetic tradition; thus he allies himself with those who, reacting against the implications of Parry's findings, downplay the role of the oral tradition and of social context in shaping the epics and cultivate an image of Homer as an autonomous poetic genius.

Peradotto's procedure of finding the concerns of modern theory mirrored in the concerns of the *Odyssey* is an excellent strategy for advocating the use of theory in reading this and other ancient texts, for it both proves that theory is not alien to the text and removes theory's sting. What makes various semiotic approaches with their stress on aspects of signification that are "intended, virtual, anonymous, compulsory,

unconscious" (12-13) so threatening is their suggestion that language and other systems of meaning are more powerful than their users: meaning gets away from those who attempt to impose it; systems of representation implicate their users in meanings they never thought they intended; or, in the particular terms of Homeric studies, a poet is the mouthpiece of an entire tradition rather than of his own personal outlook. This threat is mastered when the manifold possibilities of language are thought to be recognized, foregrounded, and exploited by a brilliant poet like Homer or a brilliantly clever character like Odysseus.

The methodologies that Peradotto argues for here can be used, and are being used, in ways that assume a less perfect harmony between the purposes of the critic and the purposes of the text, and for that reason they will always be resisted by some. For example, the *Odyssey* can be read with less optimism about the poet's ability always to control the meaning of his words, more stress on the unequal distribution of power among the poem's various voices, and more attention to points at which the text attempts, whether successfully or not, to impose an ideological viewpoint. The particular advantage of Peradotto's approach, which he pursues with impressive learning and energy, is that it allows him to make a much-needed case for recognizing that modern theory is not alien to classical literature, that theory can be used to locate the continuities that really do exist between the concerns of ancient poets and those who have absorbed the outlook of the modern era.
