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Queens of the Castle: The Power of Helen and Arete in the Odyssey

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Although Odysseus may be the main character in the *Odyssey*, that doesn't mean that there isn't anyone more powerful than him. He comes across many different evils in his journeys, along with many characters who have power over him. His entire plot to kill the suitors starts with him being a powerless beggar. The women who hold power over Odysseus are rarely recognized for their feats. Specifically, Helen and Arete are often discounted in terms of their power over Odysseus and their husbands. They speak before their husbands, gloat about their successes, and give gifts. Helen and Arete exhibit their power over Odysseus and their husbands through their speech and storytelling.

ARETE

Scholars have proposed various theories regarding Arete's role in the *Odyssey* and the expectations that are set for her that don't seem to be met. At the beginning of the episode of the *Odyssey* that takes place on Scheria, Athena, disguised as a member of the community, takes Odysseus to the palace. On the way there she warns him that he must win the favor of Queen Arete if he wants to get home safely. She tells him, "We look at her as if she was a goddess . . . If she looks on you kindly in her heart, you have a chance of seeing those you love, and getting back again to your big house and homeland" (vii.71, 75-78).¹ Because of this interaction, along with Nausika's similar warning to Odysseus (vi.309-315), the audience is expecting Arete to play an important role in the homecoming of Odysseus. Helene Whittaker says, "Athena describes Arete as a woman whose life is not limited to the domestic sphere, and who exercises influence in the public domain."² Yet these expectations don't seem to be met. The question that remains is why didn't Arete play a larger role in this episode.

My answer to this question is that she did play a large role, but it wasn't necessarily an overt one. She disrupts the power roles of the palace but is forced to do so in private, behind closed doors. She does wield more power than a normal wife and queen would. Whittaker, in her article "The Status of Arete in the Phaeacian Episode of the *Odyssey*," posits that Queen Arete has so much power on the island because it's on the margins of both the fairy tale world and the real world.³ This is because a Queen like Arete would not hold as much power on a real island like Ithaca. Other scholars argue that the role of Arete is seen in the etymology of her name and how that interacts with her actions in the story.⁴ Others suggest that it is possible to see the role of Arete most clearly through Odysseus' story of the women in the underworld, possibly in the style of *Ehoie*-poetry, and her place in the audience of the story.⁵ I will be engaging in these ideas of Arete's role while I analyze two specific examples of Arete's power. This will demonstrate that Arete uses her speech, particularly in speaking before King Alcinous, to demonstrate her power over him and Odysseus.

The first meeting between Odysseus and Arete is when he comes to her court in order to win the favor of the royals (vii.82-227). This interaction comes when all the guests at the feast of

¹ Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Emily Wilson (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2020). All further translations are from this same text unless otherwise specified.

² Helene Whittaker, "The Status of Arete in the Phaeacian Episode of the *Odyssey*," *Symbolae Osloenses* 74, no. 1 (1999): 146.

³ Whittaker, "The Status of Arete."

⁴ Marios Skempis and Ioannis Ziogas, "Arete's words : Etymology, Ehoie-poetry and Gendered Narrative in the *Odyssey*," in *Narratology and Interpretation : the Content of Narrative Form in Ancient Literature*, (Boston: De Gruyter, 2009).

⁵ Skempis and Ziogas, "Arete's Words"; Lillian Eileen Doherty, "Gender and Internal Audiences in the *Odyssey*," *The American Journal of Philology* 113, no. 2 (1992) <https://doi.org/10.2307/295555>.

King Alcinous have left and only the King, Queen Arete, and Odysseus are left sitting in the hall. Arete is then the first to speak. She goes on to ask Odysseus multiple questions (vii.233-239).

τοῖσιν δ' Ἀρήτη λευκώλενος ἤρχετο μύθων:
ἔγνω γὰρ φᾶρός τε χιτῶνά τε εἶματ' ἰδοῦσα
καλά, τὰ ῥ' αὐτὴ τεῦξε σὺν ἀμφιπόλοισι γυναιξί:
καί μιν φωνήσασ' ἔπεα πτερόεντα προσηύδα:
'ξεῖνε, τὸ μὲν σε πρῶτον ἐγὼν εἰρήσομαι αὐτή:
τίς πόθεν εἰς ἀνδρῶν; τίς τοι τάδε εἶματ' ἔδωκεν;
οὐ δὴ φῆς ἐπὶ πόντον ἀλώμενος ἐνθάδ' ἰκέσθαι;'

And white-armed Arete began the speeches
for having seen the beautiful garments she knew both the mantle and the frock
which she herself made with her female slaves.
And making winged words she said to him
Stranger, I will ask you this myself first:
What man and from where are you? Who gave you these garments?
Indeed did you not say roaming hither you came over the sea?⁶

After Arete asks him these questions, Odysseus goes on to describe his hardships on the island of Ogygia with Calypso and how he washed ashore on the island of Scheria. The Queen seems to feel that this answer is acceptable and is receptive to further tales of Odysseus.

One important piece of this passage that speaks to the power of the Queen is the fact she specifically “ἤρχετο μύθων” or “begins the speeches” (vii.233). Queen Arete also “ἤρχετο μύθων” after Odysseus tells his story of the underworld (xi.335). Generally, we see the male leaders of places that Odysseus visits speaking to him first. Granted, the King speaks to him first in public, but it is worth noting that Alcinous might give the Queen more power in private than she has in front of all of his generals and nobles. This also may be evidenced by the fact that it is Echeneus, an elder among the Phaeacians, who reminds the audience after Queen Arete offers more gifts to Odysseus that even though they may agree with her, King Alcinous gets the final say. Echeneus tells those in attendance, “Our wise queen has hit the mark, my friends. Do as she says. But first Alcinous must speak and act” (xi.346-348).

This policing of Arete’s speech shows the discomfort that the court seems to have with her power and sway. It seems that in private King Alcinous has no qualms with allowing Arete to speak before him and receive guests; therefore the problem must be with the wider court and advisors who seem to be less comfortable with Arete exerting influence than the King is. By reminding those present at the palace that King Alcinous has the final say in gifts and praise, Echeneus is attempting to do some damage control for the Phaeacians. If word spreads too far that Queen Arete settles disputes among men and is looked upon as a goddess, the entire island and society could be seen as weaker and less advanced. This is due to the fact that in Homeric epics, “it is clear that male and female roles were sharply defined and clearly distinguished, and that social and political power was part of the male sphere of activity.”⁷ Through Nausika’s knowledge of Arete’s power along with the respect that the village holds for her, we can see that it is not a secret what Arete’s status in the palace is. If those close to the king are trying to

⁶ This translation is my own.

⁷ Whittaker, “The Status of Arete,” 146.

disguise her influence then they are failing. The Phaeacian people trust her judgment as they say, “She is extremely clever and perceptive; she solves disputes to help the men she likes” (vii.73-74). This also makes Odysseus’ actions toward her make more sense as it is specified that she solves disputes to help the men that she approves of. Odysseus wants to become a man that she likes in order to gain her help.

Another important aspect of the passage is the mention of Arete making these beautiful garments herself. She “ἀὐτὴ τεῦξε” with the help of her female slaves. This means that Arete has the ability to weave clothes that are beautiful and individual enough that she can recognize her own handiwork. Whereas the men of Scheria are incredible sailors, the women on this island are said to be above all others in their ability to weave and craft clothes (vii.109-112). They are even seen as equal in value to many other precious metal gifts that are given to Odysseus throughout his journeys. Arete even warns Odysseus that he should lock the chest containing both clothes and gold so that they are not stolen from him as he sleeps (viii.439-445). Both Helen and Arete give clothing they made as a gift everyone sees as valuable.

Arete is also displaying her power through her speech in this passage by taking charge and asking Odysseus questions. We can see this formulaic series of questions asked of Odysseus by many other characters in the *Odyssey*, all of which are men. One specific instance of this is when Telemachus asks very similar questions of Mentos who is Athena in disguise. He also asks her “τίς πόθεν εἰς ἀνδρῶν;” or “What man are you and where from?” which is the exact phrasing that Queen Arete uses (i.170). She is clearly familiar enough with the practices of hosts and ξενία, or hosting practices, to know what the usual questions are along with how to ask her own questions about his clothing.

Two interesting points to consider regarding this interaction are why Queen Arete waited until she and her husband were alone with Odysseus to ask about his clothes and why she wanted to know where he got his clothes from if she already knew they were of her own making. In my interpretation, the answer to the first question is that she was aware of the tension that her asking these questions in front of an audience would cause. As I mentioned earlier, women were not seen as being a part of this political sphere of influence. It likely would have been unclear to those present what they should do if the Queen took this position of power. Should they watch silently or object to her self-insertion? Because of this, Queen Arete is rebuked, especially by Echeclus, for talking before the King or about things that the King should decide. If she is aware that she will once again just be reminded of her place in the court, why would she want to ask in front of people?

Regarding the second point, scholars have different thoughts about the reasoning behind her questions. It could be that Arete is asking about the clothes because if he received them from her, he must have previously been a guest at their house. This means that they already know that he is friendly and they could resume this positive relationship with him. If this answer is correct, it shows even more knowledge on Arete’s part of the practices of guest friendship and hosting in the *Odyssey*. Another explanation is that she recognizes that he has run into Nausika before coming to the palace when she went to the river to wash the clothes. This would also explain why she waited to ask him about this point until they were alone. If he had met with Nausika when there was no one around to chaperone the encounter, it would put the standing of her daughter on thin ice. A mixture of these two possibilities could be the case. She might understand that he has met a member of their family before due to the clothes that he is wearing and understands that it was likely Nausika at the river. She trusts her daughter’s judgment and understands that it is likely that Nausika took steps to ensure that he was an ally to their kingdom

and she can be more comfortable with his presence. Even with this knowledge, she wants to test him herself to make sure she can personally trust him. It is possible she uses the familiar question “τίς πόθεν εἰς ἀνδρῶν;” in order to intimidate Odysseus and to remind him that she has the power in the current conversation. This is accomplished by comparing herself to the male hosts that are seen throughout the epic.

The second interaction between Arete and Odysseus that I argue illustrates her power is the scene just after Odysseus mentions all of the women that he saw in the underworld (xi.85-344). In this book of the *Odyssey*, Odysseus relates his journey to the underworld where he saw many famous dead, starting with his comrade Elpenor and then to a long line of high-status women. In her article “Gender and Internal Audiences in the *Odyssey*,” Lillian Doherty posits that Arete is the most privileged audience member in this part of Odysseus’ story. He is telling this with really only her in mind. She says, “the first half of the Nekyia seems designed, at least in part, as a tacit compliment to Arete...” and that “she is a member, and a privileged one, of the *implied* audience of Odysseus’ tale.”⁸ Odysseus is telling this story, with the women in mind, in order to win the favor of Arete. As I mentioned earlier, he is told multiple times that in order to get home, he must be on the good side of Arete. By telling a story that includes his own mother along with other powerful and respected female characters, he is looking to please Arete, someone who is a mother and a powerful female in her own right. He not only includes women in his story but also tells it in a specific style of poetry that is traditionally used in describing heroines.

Another theory that speaks to the importance of Odysseus’ tale in the relationship between Arete and Odysseus comes from an article by Marios Skempis and Ioannis Ziogas have written an article which provides an interesting look at the possible etymological meanings for the name Arete and how they relate to her role in the story. More importantly for the sake of my argument, they describe how *Ehoie*-poetry might be used by Odysseus in order to appeal to Arete. *Ehoie*-poetry refers to the style of the Catalogue of Women, also known as the *Ehoiai*.⁹ The authors point out that there are many similarities in the style of the poetry that Odysseus uses and the style of the *Ehoiai*, including phrases surrounding marriage and genealogy. Even the way that Athena describes Arete to Odysseus can be seen as related to *Ehoie*-poetry, which could be a clue to him to push him to also use that framework in his interactions with the queen. Specifically, the way in which Athena puts forward Arete’s genealogy starts this female-centered narrative mode that Odysseus then continues.¹⁰ Another specific connection to *Ehoie*-poetry is how the union between Arete and Alcinous is described. The formulaic phrase “ποίησατ ἄκοιτιν” or “he made her his wife” is used to describe these two, but it is also seven times in the *Ehoiai* to describe other couples.¹¹ After these instances, it was clear to Odysseus that in order to please Arete he should use a female-centric narrative pattern, and thus came his story about the famous women he met in the underworld in the style of *Ehoie*-poetry.

Odysseus’ use of *Ehoie*-poetry and the fact that he made Queen Arete the most privileged member of his audience both speak to the idea that Arete is holding some power over Odysseus on Scheria. He realizes that he must work to gain her favor and does so through how he speaks to her. Arete is the first to praise Odysseus after his story of the women he met in the underworld, and she does so even though she must know how this speech will be received by the other

⁸ Doherty, “Gender in the *Odyssey*,” 168-169.

⁹ Skempis and Ziogas, “Arete’s words,” 228.

¹⁰ Skempis and Ziogas, “Arete’s words,” 229.

¹¹ Skempis and Ziogas, “Arete’s words,” 230.

members of the audience. Through not only the Nekuia but also his response to her first questions, Odysseus has won the favor of Arete and she will help him get home however she can. “. . . do not send him away too fast, and when he leaves, you must be generous. He is in need, and you are rich in treasure, through the will of gods” (xi.341-344).

HELEN

In contrast to Arete’s power, which is seen through how Odysseus curates their interactions, Helen’s power can be seen through the stories that she tells about Odysseus. Helen and Odysseus do not interact with each other face-to-face in the *Odyssey*. The only way that the audience learns about the history between the two is when Helen and her husband Menelaus each tell a separate story about Helen and Odysseus in Troy. Each story has a different perspective and motive that must be taken into account, but each shows us in some way how Helen wields power over Odysseus. Even though these stories are supposed to tell Telemachus about the power of his Father, Odysseus, they really become about Helen and Odysseus.¹²

Helen’s story recounts how she recognized Odysseus when he came into Troy disguised as a beggar (iv.234-265). She brought him back to the palace, bathed him, and convinced him to reveal his identity to her. She explains that she wanted to help Odysseus because she missed her husband and her homeland. By having Odysseus reveal his identity to her, she is doing something that most characters in the story cannot do. Odysseus’ identity is something that he is very cautious with, and he does not generally give it away freely. It shows a level of power on Helen’s part, then, that she is able to convince him to reveal who he is to her. This story, although intended by Helen to show her allegiance to the Achaeans and her longing for home, also showcases her ability to persuade Odysseus to do what she wants. Illustrating her power may not be the primary purpose of this story, but it would be clear to an audience that Helen was able to convince Odysseus to let her into his secret in Troy.

Menelaus’ story in response, on the other hand, can be read as critical of Helen in Troy. He describes how Helen tried to trick the Achaean soldiers into coming out of the Trojan Horse by mimicking the voices of each of their wives (iv.266-289). It can be understood that this story contradicts Helen’s assertion that she wanted to help the Achaeans because she suddenly missed her home. Menelaus is trying to point out that she was already married to another man, “Deiphobus was following you,” and that she was actively aiding the Trojans by trying to foil the Achaean plan (iv.276). Even though this story is meant to contradict the portrait of herself that Helen paints earlier, it still showcases the power that she has over Odysseus and his soldiers. Odysseus doesn’t fall for the trick of Helen, but many other soldiers do (iv.280-284). This means that it is likely that Helen would have succeeded in luring men out of the horse if Athena hadn’t pulled her away (iv.288-289).

Another interesting aspect of this episode of the *Odyssey* is that Helen gives a drug to those present at the banquet where the stories are being told. These drugs are “to take all pain and rage away, to bring forgetfulness of every evil” (iv.221-222). It is even said by the narrator that no one who drinks the mixture would shed tears even at the most heinous of occurrences (iv.223-227). This drug seems to be another extension of the power of Helen, and one that gets mixed up with her duties as a host. Because Helen and Menelaus are hosting this banquet, they are expected to provide the wine. When Helen mixes the drugs into the wine that they are providing their guests, she is extending her power over them as a hostess and making space to

¹² Timothy W Boyd, “Recognizing Helen,” *Illinois Classical Studies* 23 (1998): 1–18, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23065278>.

tell her story about herself in an environment where none of the negative emotions pertaining to it will come up. Ann Bergren, in her essay “Helen’s ‘Good drug,’” states that Helen uses the drug in order to make painful memories painless. “A song of the λυγρός ‘baneful’ genre for some will sound like κλέος and will be heard by all without loss or suffering.”¹³ By allowing her story to be told and sound only like κλέος, Helen is taking power from the hands of traditional hosts, the men, and using it for her own personal gain.

Scholars have also explained some of Helen’s power by suggesting that she is a witch. In his article entitled “Recognizing Helen,” Timothy Boyd posits that Helen uses witchcraft, specifically in her encounter with the Trojan horse, in order to have power over Odysseus and the Achaeans.¹⁴ This is evidenced by the fact that it is specifically said that Helen turns around the horse multiple times and strokes it, which is something that is also done when Circe changes Odysseus’ men back from being pigs (iv.277-280, x.391-396).¹⁵ Boyd also argues that Helen has powers that come from Aphrodite, which means that the power struggle between Odysseus and Helen is really a metaphor for the power struggle between Athena and Aphrodite. This aligns with the fact that the Homeric Epics, and the *Iliad* in particular, are viewed as stories about the gods that are played out through mortals. If this is true, and we move forward under the assumption that Helen is a witch with powers from Aphrodite, it gives her that much more power over Menelaus and Odysseus.

HELEN AND ARETE

Helen and Arete are two female characters in the *Odyssey* who wield more power than others. This power can be seen especially in their interactions with Odysseus and their husbands. They are also similar in that they are both seen as such anomalies to the norm that scholars have theorized that they are not mere mortals who are powerful women. There must be some other explanation for why they have so much power. For Arete, the argument is that she is part of a fairy tale world that isn’t real in the same way that Ithaca is.¹⁶ Her power signals to Odysseus that he hasn’t made it back to his reality because a woman would not have so much power over the society in Ithaca. For Helen, this means saying that she was a witch who got her power from Aphrodite.¹⁷ By attributing the power of these women to outside sources as opposed to their own capabilities, scholars seem to be downplaying their roles as powerful women in the story. Whether consciously or unconsciously, such dismissal of the women’s roles in this story is harmful to all women reading and discussing the *Odyssey*. Scholars must be clear that these women play powerful roles in Odysseus’ journey both in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

Along with these similarities, there are also differences between the two women and their use of power in the *Odyssey*. The most glaring is that the audience witnesses a direct interaction between Queen Arete and Odysseus whereas they only hear of Helen’s interaction with Odysseus from her and Menelaus’ stories. Both of these ways of transmission, however, are evidence of the power that these two women hold in their homes and their societies.

Helen and Arete are both powerful women who exert a fair amount of power over Odysseus in the *Odyssey*. Arete takes the lead role in hosting Odysseus when she asks him

¹³ Ann Bergren, “Helen’s ‘Good Drug,’” in *Homer’s Odyssey*, edited by Lillian E. Doherty, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) 324.

¹⁴ Boyd, “Recognizing Helen.”

¹⁵ Boyd, “Recognizing Helen,” 8-9.

¹⁶ Whittaker, “The Status of Arete”

¹⁷ Boyd, “Recognizing Helen.”

where he's from and offers him gifts and praise after his story. Helen paints a picture of Odysseus who willingly reveals her identity to him, making him vulnerable, and allows this story to be told in such a way that no one remembers her negative part in the story by drugging the audience. Both of these characters are using their conversations and stories with and about Odysseus and their husbands to exert their power over them. It is clear to me that the two women are often overlooked when it comes to their roles in the Odyssey. Helen is often spoken about as if she has little agency and Arete is seen as a character who doesn't meet the full potential set out for her. The stories and speech of these two characters is overlooked and misjudged. They are powerful individuals who cunningly use their words to influence others and show their prowess.

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