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Rhetorical Dominance: How Homeric Dialogue Defines Characterization

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INTRODUCTION

In studying the *Odyssey*, many notice the dialogical quirks of various characters. People ask why Telemachus is so rude to his mother, why Odysseus lies so much, and why Athena often takes the identity of mortals when speaking to the Ithacans. Oftentimes, the way the characters speak sticks out more than the actual stories they are telling. In this paper, I am seeking to review what the speech patterns of certain characters reveal about their respective roles in the text, as well as the role of speech in the text at large. Homeric texts are distinct in their extensive use of direct speech. Especially in the *Odyssey*, many of the most recognizable scenes do not actually occur in the text, rather, they are recounted by Odysseus. The way characters speak of themselves and how they speak to and about others indicates their position in the social hierarchy. Rhetoric is the most powerful tool used by the heroes of the *Odyssey*, and how each character employs it reveals much about their role in the text.

ODYSSEUS AS A POETIC NARRATOR

One of the largest passages of direct speech in the text is Odysseus' recount of his journeys to king Alcinoos. From books nine to twelve, Odysseus takes the role of the poetic narrator. In previous books, much of the narration of conversations is from the third person narrator. Each conversation is set up in a reply-introductory format.¹ That is, with each change in speaker, there is a repeated phrase that follows a similar metrical format. One such example of this would be “τὸν δ' ἀπαμειβόμενος προσέφη πολύμητις Ὀδυσσεύς // Odysseus of many-councils said to him in reply” (9.1). While the subject and epithet is swapped depending on the character speaking, the phrase “said to him in reply” occurs frequently in the text, not counting variations that accomplish the same metrical goal. The reader quickly becomes accustomed to this style, these lines begin to read like punctuation. When characters are relaying conversations, it is adapted slightly. Examining these shifts illustrates the motives behind the character speaking.

When Odysseus takes over the role of narrator, this format remains, but it is in first person. “ὣς ἐφάμην, ὁ δέ μ' αὐτίκ' ἀμείβετο νηλεῖ θυμῷ // So I said, and he answered at once with a ruthless heart”(9.272). These phrases that trigger dialogue remain, however there is a notable difference in tone. As Deborah Beck notes in “Odysseus: Narrator, Storyteller, Poet,” Odysseus often applies more emotional descriptors to these formulas. “While Odysseus apparently has no interest in relating what his men have to say, he is much more likely than Menelaus to tell his audience about the emotions of most other people with whom he speaks.”² As Odysseus takes the role of the narrator, he takes control of the story. As a cunning character, he indirectly breaks the fourth wall, positioning the reader as King Alcinoos, listening not to the story of the *Odyssey*, but the in fiction narrative of Odysseus' story. This positioning shifts the reliability of the narrator, and invites further textual examination.

The difference between the style of the poetic narrator and Odysseus illustrates his character as a storyteller, or more inferred, a liar. When he takes the role of storyteller in book

¹ Beck, Deborah, “Odysseus: Narrator, Storyteller, Poet?” *Classical Philology* 100, no. 3 (2005): 213–27. <https://doi.org/10.1086/497858>.

² Beck, 222.

nine, he is telling his own version of the story, rather than the seeming impartiality of the poetic narrator. This is indicated by the epithet used as the narration is passed off to Odysseus. “τὸν δ’ ἀπαμειβόμενος προσέφη πολύμητις Ὀδυσσεύς // Then, crafty Odysseus answered him, and said” (9.1). The epithet *πολύμητις* translates to crafty, shrewd, or of many devices. This indicates to the reader that what he is about to say is likely to be extremely calculated. In the following passages, Odysseus presents himself as a cunning, wise leader. However as Beck points out, he only reports one response from a member of his crew during the entirety of his story. This appears in book ten, where Eurylochus begs Odysseus not to make him return to Circe’s palace (10.265-269). The trigger phrase Odysseus uses is not kind to Eurylochus. “αὐτὰρ ὃ γ’ ἀμφοτέρησι λαβὼν ἐλλίσσετο γούνων καί μ’ ὀλοφυρόμενος ἔπεα πτερόεντα προσηύδα // He grasped my knees and begged me tearfully” (10.264). By describing his crewmates as cowardly, he makes himself appear all the braver. Odysseus is always saving his grateful, happy crew from danger. Considering how many of his sailors die or are injured on the journey, the idea that his crewmates never responded to his plans negatively is unlikely. In these books, Odysseus presents a positive, heroic picture of himself to Alcinous. This has an immediate material boon, Alcinous grants Odysseus the materials he needs to return to Ithaca. Odysseus’ storytelling ability is the reason he is able to finally complete his homecoming journey.

RHETORICAL TRAINING: ATHENA AND TELEMACHUS

The *Odyssey*, among many things, is a crash course on decorum and tact. In most cases within the text, it is not a character’s physical ability that allows them to succeed, it is their ability to maneuver through social conflicts. Various characters accomplish this to various degrees of success: Odysseus is able to trick Polyphemus into reopening the cave (9.447-470), and Penelope is able to deceive the suitors for years (2.97-108). One character who has a notably poor grasp on the art of social interaction is Telemachus, ironically the son of two people who have seemed to master it. With Odysseus missing, Telemachus is a contender to take up the mantle of king of Ithaca. However, he does not possess the skills required, and the suitors have been able to run rampant through his palace for several years. He only begins to act after his encounter with Athena, disguised as Mentos. The conversation between them acts as a sort of rhetorical training ground, in which the Goddess’ presence teaches Telemachus how to engage in social situations.

Book one of the *Odyssey* shows the journey of Telemachus from being passive to being assertive. From the introduction of his character, we can see that he himself is adverse to taking action. “ὄσσόμενος πατέρ’ ἐσθλὸν ἐνὶ φρεσίν, εἴ ποθεν ἔλθων μνηστήρων τῶν μὲν σκέδασιν κατὰ δώματα θεΐη, τιμὴν δ’ αὐτὸς ἔχοι καὶ δώμασιν οἷσιν ἀνάσσοι // in his mind he saw his father coming from somewhere, scattering the suitors and gaining back his honor, and control of all his property” (1.115-116).³ From the start, we know that Telemachus wants the suitors gone, but is not thinking about what he should do about it. Instead, he is daydreaming about his father, whom he staunchly believes to be dead, appearing and dealing with the men for him. If we examine this passage as a training sequence to set Telemachus up as a strong ruler, this is an obvious flaw that he must be dissuaded from entertaining. Athena pushes him to take action. “ἢ κεν νοστήσας ἀποτίσεται, ἦε καὶ οὐκί, οἷσιν ἐνὶ μεγάροισι: σὲ δὲ φράζεσθαι ἄνωγα, ὅπως κε μνηστήρας ἀπόσσει ἐκ μεγάροιο // But whether he comes home to take revenge, or not, is with the gods. You must consider how best to drive these suitors from your house” (1.268-270). She

³ Homer, *The Odyssey*: Translated by Emily Wilson. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2018.)

is pushing him away from daydreaming, and towards strategizing. As Telemachus begins to speak with Athena we see another of the boy's fatal weaknesses, honesty.

In the *Odyssey*, conversations are battles, and being mindful of what information they provide is vital to the survival of many characters. In the beginning of book one, Telemachus not only tells the truth, but provides his opinions and personal information unprompted. Most damningly, he openly admits to Athena that he is unsure of his parentage. “‘τοιγὰρ ἐγὼ τοι, ξεῖνε, μάλ’ ἀτρεκέως ἀγορεύσω. μήτηρ μὲν τέ μέ φησι τοῦ ἔμμεναι, αὐτὰρ ἐγὼ γε οὐκ οἶδ’· οὐ γὰρ πῶ τις ἐὼν γόνον αὐτὸς ἀνέγνω // Dear guest, I will be frank with you. My mother says that I am his son, but I cannot be sure, since no one knows his own begetting” (1.214-216). Not only is this entirely unprompted, if Mentos (Athena) had not been there to guide Telemachus, this could have risked the safety of his family. By introducing doubt that Odysseus is not his true father, Telemachus could have provided someone with ammunition to dispute his right to rule Ithaca. Athena trains Telemachus in how to adjust his words as she speaks to him, revealing how to speak without giving away too much information. We can see her skill in this in the way she introduces herself to the boy. “‘τοιγὰρ ἐγὼ τοι ταῦτα μάλ’ ἀτρεκέως ἀγορεύσω. Μέντης Ἀγχιάλοιο δαΐφρονος εὖχομαι εἶναι υἱός // So then, I’ll tell you this quite exactly. I claim I’m Mentos, son of skilled Anchialus” (1.179-180). Here we can see how Athena’s word choice indicates her rhetorical prowess, in that she deceives without even lying. This deception hinges on the use of εὖχομαι, she *claims* that she is Mentos. Someone can claim anything, and they cannot technically be called a liar if someone is deceived by such a statement.

With this in mind, I believe it is important to reconsider the epithet very commonly used for Telemachus, *πεπνυμένος*, often translated as *prudent*, other common options include *inspired* or *breathed into*. Researching the semantic range, I find a translation that better captures the idea that Athena has taught Telemachus. *Πεπνυμένος* has also been translated as *to be conscious*, or to me most interestingly, *to be in full control of one’s faculties*.⁴ When used in the middle passive voice, this could be interpreted as an idea of being awakened mentally i.e., *being made conscious*. I believe this interpretation of Athena as sparking Telemachus’ progression into adulthood and skill to be worthy of consideration, especially noting that the epithet is not used until after he sees the Goddess.⁵

By the end of book one, Telemachus is employing these tactics in conversation with Penelope and the suitors. We can see that he is able to use these tactics separately, but he has not yet grasped that they must be used in tandem with one another. He immediately confronts Penelope publicly and bluntly, positioning himself as the leader of the household. “‘ἀλλ’ εἰς οἶκον ἰοῦσα τὰ σ’ αὐτῆς ἔργα κόμιζε, ἰστόν τ’ ἠλακάτην τε, καὶ ἀμφιπόλοισι κέλευε ἔργον ἐποίχεσθαι: μῦθος δ’ ἄνδρεςσι μελήσει πᾶσι, μάλιστα δ’ ἐμοί: τοῦ γὰρ κράτος ἔστ’ ἐνὶ οἴκῳ // Go in and do your work. Stick to the loom and distaff. Tell your slaves to do their chores as well. It is for men to talk, especially me. I am the master” (1.356-359). While this is not a tactful response, and outright disrespectful, it is one of the first signs of assertion that we see in the boy. Perhaps this is just the beginning of his journey to becoming a masterful speaker. We can also see him attempting to deceive the suitors when discussing the identity of the man he was speaking to. Just as Athena claimed, Telemachus tells the men that it was Mentos (1.413-419). In the immediate next line, we are given an insight to his thoughts, “ὥς φάτο Τηλέμαχος, φρεσὶ δ’ ἀθανάτην θεὸν ἔγνω // Those were his words, but in his mind he knew she was a god” (1.420).

⁴ Cunliffe, Richard John, and James H. Dee, *A lexicon of the Homeric dialect*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2012.

⁵ Line 113 (the epithet *θεοειδής* is used), *πεπνυμένος* does not occur in the text until line 213.

Athena's presence has immediate results, however we can still see that Telemachus is not perfect. He has learned how to establish dominance and how to deceive, but he has not yet grasped the art of tact. In speaking to his mother, he establishes his role as the head of the household, but at the cost of being disrespectful to his family. He harshly sends her away, which has the possibility of worsening his social positioning. It is the ability to speak tactfully that puts more rhetorically skilled characters above Telemachus, even after this training.

HERMES, CALYPSO AND ODYSSEYS: RHETORICAL WARFARE

Looking further into how rhetorical strategy is employed, we can see three characters, being Hermes, Calypso and Odysseus, engaging in a dynamic conversation in book five. Where Telemachus and Athena's conversation is by no means an even matchup, the three speakers in book five contest each other on quite equal footing. Hermes travels to Ogygia to inform the Nymph Calypso that she must release Odysseus. She engages with him, laying out her reasonings behind why she believes she has the right to hold Odysseus. Calypso relays the news to Odysseus, with a final attempt to convince him to stay of his own will. Finally, Odysseus enters negotiation with Calypso, tactfully ensuring his safe release.

When Hermes arrives in Ogygia, it is important to note that he is unable to fail in his mission. Zeus has already decreed that Odysseus be released, Calypso is unable to do anything about it. It is not a leap in logic to assume that she would be enraged by this, and Hermes is quick to shift the blame toward Zeus. “τὸν νῦν σ’ ἠνώγειν ἀποπεμπέμεν ὅτι τάχιστα: οὐ γάρ οἱ τῆδ’ αἴσα φίλων ἀπονόσφιν ὀλέσθαι, ἀλλ’ ἔτι οἱ μοῖρ’ ἐστὶ φίλους τ’ ἰδέειν καὶ ἰκέσθαι οἶκον ἐς ὑψόροφον καὶ ἐὴν ἐς πατρίδα γαῖαν // Zeus orders you to send him on his way at once, since it is not his destiny to die here far away from those he loves. It is his fate to see his family and come back home, to his own native land”(5.112-115). This rhetorical device serves to place a barrier between the effect of what is being said and the speaker. Hermes is able to establish the authority of his decree by saying Zeus has decreed it is Odysseus' fate to return home, while also shielding himself by asserting that it is not his own idea, he is simply a messenger.

When Calypso relays this information to Odysseus, she shows a much darker side of the rhetorical strategies we have examined so far. She employs many of the tools we have examined so far to attempt to manipulate Odysseus into staying with her. She knows that she cannot force him to stay without facing rebuke from the gods, so she begins to push him into choosing to stay of his own accord. Firstly, she withholds the information that his release has been ordered by the Olympians. “κάμμορε, μὴ μοι ἔτ’ ἐνθάδ’ ὀδύρεο, μηδέ τοι αἰὼν φθινέτω: ἤδη γάρ σε μάλα πρόφρασσ’ ἀποπέμψω // Poor man! Stop grieving, please. You need not waste your life, I am quite ready to send you off”(5.160-161). She makes sure to present Odysseus' release as her own idea. Considering her speech to Hermes just before this conversation, it is unlikely that she has been swayed into just letting Odysseus walk free.(5.117-140) She positions herself as a gracious figure who has recognized her captor's sadness and is freeing him out of the goodness of her heart. This lays a groundwork of sympathy for her to further push Odysseus into staying on Ogygia.

Odysseus is immediately skeptical of this release, as he has been held on Calypso's island for years. As a skilled conversationalist himself, he forces the nymph to guarantee his safety should he leave. “οὐδ’ ἂν ἔγωγ’ ἀέκητι σέθεν σχεδῆς ἐπιβαίην, εἰ μὴ μοι τλαίης γε, θεά, μέγαν ὄρκον ὁμόσσαι μὴ τί μοι αὐτῷ πῆμα κακὸν βουλευσέμεν ἄλλο // No, goddess, I will not get on a raft, unless you swear to me a mighty oath you are not planning yet more pain for me” (5.177-

179). Calypso cannot refuse this without telling Odysseus that she is being forced to let him leave. His immediate proposition of an oath reveals much about his rhetorical ability. He is dealing with a divine figure much more powerful than he is, and he immediately works to even the playing field. By requesting this oath, he forces Calypso to work at his level, preventing her from using any power or influence to complicate his journey home. Interestingly, the epithet *θείοιο*⁶ is used to describe Odysseus in this passage. This is perhaps a reference to his ability to keep up with Calypso intellectually.

CONCLUSION

Rhetoric in the *Odyssey* serves just as much narrative purpose as physical conflict. In fact, many of the most recognizable scenes from the text are sections of dialogue. Athena appears as a manifestation of Telemachus' journey to reach the level of ability of his parents. Whether taking her appearance as a literal trainer, or a thematic representation of Telemachus educating himself, her power as a divine figure is represented as her ability to communicate tactfully and deceptively. The main epithet for Telemachus, *πεπνυμένος* directly coordinates with the lessons Athena gives to him. He is literally being breathed into by the Goddess and made stronger at rhetoric. The rhetorical battles reach a climax in book five, wherein a mortal Odysseus is able to contest a divine figure in a conversation, successfully and gracefully escaping Calypso. We can see that the characters who are the most successful in the text are also the most skilled at tactful communication, as well as the punishments that come along with a lack of tact or ability to deceive. Odysseus, as the protagonist, is the greatest example of this, literally taking the role of the narrator and telling his own version of the story. Often, textual analysis focuses on the general meaning of a passage. However, by examining word choice and rhetorical strategies, we can synthesize completely new interpretations.

⁶ Often translated as divine, or godlike.

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