Bards, Self-Awareness, and the Effect of the Outsider Within Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*

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Homer's time-honoured epics, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, represent a foundational moment in literature of bardic performances being brought to text. They also provide us with a glimpse into what roles, and what influence, bards held in ancient society. While actual bard characters appear in both stories, I will argue that non-bard characters appropriate the roles of the storyteller for their own purposes. The characters Odysseus, Achilles, and Helen all embody the bardic role at some point in the narratives. Odysseus uses bardic performance as a method of manipulating the memory of his past actions, and thereby carving out an image of himself that he wishes to be remembered by. Achilles, while too heavily influenced by his own story to tell it himself, uses his understanding of bard-songs and their effect on glory (κλέος in Ancient Greek) to come to terms with his inability to affect his role within the narrative. Lastly, Helen shows similar dissatisfaction with her position within the narrative but has little ability to influence events. Helen is peripheral at this point in the Trojan War; however, she assumes the mantle of the bard not only by being an observer of

Priam and the citizens of Troy, but also by weaving her tapestry. These characters all strive to overcome their fear of mortality by taking control of their own renown. All three are outsiders to the central action within the stories at different points, thus giving them an objective knowledge of the reality of their own stories.

Discussing bardic performances, Ruth Scodel writes "song is the most powerful form of memory" (183). This concept echoes throughout both epics; the strongest form of honour comes from remembrance, and remembrance is achieved by having one's story told. In the case of Odysseus, it is not whether he will be remembered, but *how* he will be remembered that affects much of his story. Odysseus is the character that most replicates the qualities of a bard in these two epic poems. Multiple times within the text, Odysseus is compared to a bard:

> Like an expert singer skilled at lyre and song—
> Who strains a string to a new peg with ease,
> Making the pliant sheep-gut fast at either end—
> So with his virtuoso ease Odysseus strung his mighty bow.
> Quickly his right hand plucked the string to test its pitch (21.408)

He spends much of his own epic, *The Odyssey*, telling the story of his journey with little concern for truth.

Odysseus, on his journey home, his nostos (νόστος), relies on the generosity of others for both gifts and help; therefore, he has a reasonable excuse to embellish his story. Roger J. Porter discusses the autobiographical leanings of *The Odyssey* in a convocation speech written in 1999. Though flawed, his interpretation makes the point that Odysseus is writing his own biography within *The Odyssey*. The quality of his glory (κλέος) lies within his ability to effectively tell a story.

Though Odysseus possesses bard-like abilities, he has too many ulterior motivations to be a traditional bard. While Scodel claims that Odysseus is bard-like because "his tale is arranged artistically rather than with a view to persuasion" (182), within her boundaries of what makes and does not make a bard, Odysseus is too intimately connected to the stories he tells to be considered a bard. His personal stakes are too high for him to maintain objectivity. While Alcinous does ask him to perform (8.570), which in Scodel's view eliminates his chances of having concealed intentions, Odysseus's desire for gifts and help from the Phaeacians gives him motivation to entertain his audience. Additionally, Odysseus gets the opportunity to shape what story the future audiences will hear and make himself the infallible hero.

By Scodel's standard, a bard should be disconnected from their tale, and therefore the performance should not be used to influence the

opinions of the audience (171). Clearly, this is not the case with any of Odysseus' stories. As in the case with his Cretan Tales, he often embellishes and distorts the truth to fit the narrative of who he wishes to become. Theodor Adorno, who is quoted by Porter in his speech, once said, "for a man who no longer has a homeland, writing becomes a place to live" (87). Odysseus' constant search for home is intensified by his ever-changing identities. Odysseus exists within a paradox: he is both Odysseus and nobody. He searches for home while trapped in nostalgia (νοσταλγία).

The idea of song and its power over memory also greatly influences the actions of Achilles. Achilles' plot, after his disagreement with Agamemnon, is driven by his struggle with mortality and his search for assured glory (κλέος). Achilles consistently attempts to stall the inevitable, since he knows he will not return home from Troy. This knowledge, and his understanding of who he is within the narrative of *The Iliad*, brands Achilles a pseudo-bard within the story. He is a driving force of the plot, but also a keen observer. Achilles is not a fully willing participant in the siege of Troy; therefore, his bardic intentions are different from Odysseus. In book 9 of *The Iliad*, we see Achilles singing songs of other heroes who already earned their glory (κλέος):

> And they came to the huts and the ships of the Myrmidons, and found him delighting his soul with a clear-toned lyre, fair and richly

> wrought, whereon was a bridge of silver; this had he taken from the spoil when he laid waste the city of Eëtion. Therewith was he delighting his soul, and he sang of the glorious deeds of warriors. (9.180)

Later in book 9, Achilles threatens to go home, thus establishing his desire not to play his part within the war or the resulting story. Achilles explains the prophecy in which his fate is decided, although he does not return to battle to earn his honour:

> 'For my mother the goddess, silver-footed Thetis, telleth me that twofold fates are bearing me toward the doom of death: if I abide here and war about the city of the Trojans, then lost is my home-return, but my renown shall be imperishable; but if I return home to my dear native land, lost then is my glorious renown, yet shall my life long endure, neither shall the doom of death come soon upon me.' (*Iliad* 9.414-9.415)

This line of verse demonstrates Achilles's struggle between his desire to be immortal and the reality in which he will die. While Odysseus seeks to take control of his narrative, Achilles strives to receive the acknowledgment of a story. If he is not the great hero that *The Iliad* positions him to be, he will not be immortal in the only way mortal men can be. Achilles' narrative arc throughout *The Iliad* pre-empts his

inevitable death and, despite not actually being depicted in the poem, this certitude weighs heavily on the text.

Unlike her male counterparts, Helen plays both an active and inactive role in *The Iliad* and *Odyssey*. To say she is simply an observer does injustice to her role as the catalyst of the Trojan War and the agency she exudes during the story; however, to say she is active eliminates her role as an outside spectator. In this sense, Helen is a paradoxical character, like Odysseus. While Helen takes full responsibility for the actions that spur the events of *The Iliad*, the rest of the characters refuse to blame her and point blame elsewhere. Ruby Blondell notes that Helen is often the target of objectification, but "she is almost never a mere object. She is an agent as well as a victim, a viewer as well as viewed, active as well as passive, a generator of signs as well as a sign herself" (1-2). Helen is both inside and outside the narrative because she is both a character within the tale and a narrator of events. This paradox is evident in her introduction in book two of *The Iliad* when she sews a tapestry depicting the events of the story that are taking place around her. This sewing establishes Helen's position as a bard within the story who weaves together the plot as she weaves together a tapestry. The tapestry itself is an ekphrasis, a rhetorical device formed into a physical object within the text. Andrew Becker writes that "[the tapestry's] history cannot be narrated, since it is a work that we experience as it is being made, as the

Shield of Achilles or a performance of epic song itself" (55). This framing of Helen is a crucial set up for how the audience will view her character. Directly following this scene, she mounts the walls of Troy and describes to King Priam who each fighter is on the Achaean side:

> 'Howbeit this will I tell thee, whereof thou dost ask and enquire. Yon man is the son of Atreus, wide-ruling Agamemnon, that is both a noble king and a valiant spearman. And he was husband's brother to shameless me, as sure as ever such a one there was.' (3.179-3.180)

While this scene may seem out of place in the story, especially nine years into the siege of Troy, it once again depicts Helen in a narrative role disclosing the characters' names and stories. It also plays an eerily similar role to the Catalogue of Ships in *The Iliad*. Without Helen telling him, Priam would not know who the Achaean soldiers were. Similarly, without the Catalogue's recitation, the audience would not know which cities and heroes took up arms against Troy. Ultimately, Helen's storytelling remains relegated to weaving. In both *The Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Helen is seen either weaving or having woven something that, according to Melissa Mueller, is a way for women to attain honour: "Helen's peplos attests to the potential for handcrafted objects to immortalize those who have made them" (1). Therefore, Helen's weaving is also an

action through which she can immortalize herself and her story, much like Odysseus and Achilles both strive to do. Helen's tapestry also memorializes those who fought in the war, much like the actual epic does.

At different points of the story, Odysseus, Helen, and Achilles each operate as outsiders to the action of their narratives. Achilles removes himself from the war and is left to question the validity of the Achaean war against Troy. He asks "'but why must the Argives wage war against the Trojans? Why hath he gathered and led hither his host, this son of Atreus? Was it not for fair-haired Helen's sake?'" (9.335). Achilles' questioning of the war develops from his slight at the hands of Agamemnon, but it is still an example of his ability to see the full scope, consequences, and magnitude of the siege of Troy. Throughout the entirety of *The Iliad*, Helen is separated from her family, friends, and the main action. She sits and watches as her decisions influence many lives from the sidelines. This is most clearly depicted near the beginning of book 3, when Helen is seated above and apart from the battle describing each warrior Priam points to. Helen is not only an outsider from the Greeks, but also the Trojans. Like Odysseus, her sense of self-identity seems fluid. She is a queen, but she is alone and without purpose.

> '…If so be any other spake reproachfully of me in the halls, a brother of thine or a sister, or brother's fair-robed wife, or thy mother—

> but thy father was ever gentle as he had been mine own—yet wouldst thou turn them with speech and restrain them by the gentleness of thy spirit and thy gentle words.' (24.768)

The Trojan women ostracize Helen despite her residence in Troy for nearly 20 years. However, she has a charm over the men of Troy because she can sweet-talk them and allure them into pitying her. Blondell notes that this ability is another way in which Helen grasps the narrative position because "the speeches with which she disarms the men around her also serve, in collaboration with the poet's narrative voice, to disarm the epic's notionally male external audience" (13). Helen uses performance to instil in the audience a lasting memory of the pains of the war bride and, by extension, the suffering of non-combatants on all sides.

Finally, it is Odysseus who fully embodies the role of the outsider. For most of his journey, Odysseus is forced to perform as a different person for everyone he meets and he can therefore never fully be himself. Even in his homecoming, Odysseus must remain in disguise until he recognizes the right time for him to reclaim his own identity. His position as the outsider ties in heavily with his bardic tendencies. Particularly notable is his time with the Phaeacians since he comes in as a stranger and, until can take control of the narrative, he remains that way. Porter notes that "[t]he autobiographer himself is a kind of exile, enraptured by

the past which is like the unreachable place to which he may not return" ("Convocation"). While the comparison to an autobiographer is a tenuous one, the association with an exile is apropos. Odysseus is driven from place to place, seeking home as well as a worthy story. Just because Odysseus says he faced all these trials does not necessarily make it true. The stories, especially those told to the Phaeacians, might just be another guise in which Odysseus can change his past.

Bards and the bardic tradition play a central role in the narrative of Homer's epics. Both *The Iliad* and *Odyssey* rely not only on their external storyteller, but also on narrative drivers within the plot. Helen, Achilles, and Odysseus play keystone roles within the tale while also serving as important representations of the bard. In his speech, Porter says, "forgetting is a form of death ever present within life" (2). All three characters must struggle with the anxiety around death and the desire to live forever. Immortality and lasting honour are the highest achievable goals for a Homeric hero or heroine. To have songs written about oneself is to transcend one's mortal limits. Ancient Greeks understood that only gods could be truly immortal, and they traditionalized another way for their heroes to live on.

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