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Riley R. Mayes
University of Southern Maine, rileyrm11@gmail.com

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Cover Page Footnote

Thank you to Professor Katherine Peters, who believed in my ideas; and Thomas Grebouski, for his gracious editing criticism.

Subverting Social Order

Investigating Class Critique in Homer's *Odyssey*

Riley Mayes

Homer's *Odyssey* hails as one of the most distinguished works of literature in the Western canon. The mythology of Odysseus's journey home and his encounters with sirens and cyclopes and sea monsters are so ubiquitous within modern culture that they appear to form paradigms of explanation that are remembered instinctively. Interestingly, the primary concern within analyses of *The Odyssey* often centers on Odysseus's problematic identity: he fails to accommodate the criteria of a typical epic hero. His greatest strength lies not in battle, but in deception; he often feels fear and falters in courage; he is selfish, whereas the epic hero is widely generous. It is these narrative complexities that intrigue me: those disorderly moments when the portrayal of Odysseus as heroic becomes disputed, and when storytelling blurs into critique. Investigating the contradictions in *The Odyssey* reveals a degree of class consciousness that disrupts the utopic vision often created and reinforced by mythology. Adorno and Horkheimer's position that "by appropriating the myths, by 'organizing' them, the Homeric spirit opposes them" (109) allows us to understand *The Odyssey* not only as a powerful artifact of ancient mythology but also as a testimony of class disparities that stratified the ancient world. We will see that this creates a pathway that subsumes oral

tradition under the grand title of “mythos,” thereby excluding the potential for class critique in examinations of ancient oral tradition.

1. Realpolitik Recontextualization

To examine how Homer’s *Odyssey* implies a critique of class structure, it is imperative first to investigate the world from which *The Odyssey* was born. In this way, we can begin to answer the exigent questions: what was Homer critiquing? And how does his social position as a bard uniquely position him to do so? Locating Homer in the real world, of course, has proven controversial: the particularities of the fictional Homeric world—as it relates to the real world—have been vigorously contested across historical scholarship. It has been asserted that Homer was drawing from imagination, but others, such as Thucydides, contended that he was describing the people of Minos (Geddes 1). Thucydides’s claim was more or less verified when Heinrich Schliemann found the remains of Mycenae nearly two thousand years later, at which point a Mycenaean identity was attributed to Homeric society, including its monarchical structure or “loose feudalism” (Geddes 1). Now, Mycenaean society entertains an important platform in the investigation of Homer, allowing us to elucidate commonalities between the two worlds. Regardless of what contemporary historians have decided upon, it is correct to say that we cannot definitively identify who Homer was; rather, we may only identify the structures and social patterns from which his legends were born. For the scope of this essay, we may keep in mind that the most relevant distinction is that each society in the Ancient Greek world contained a vertical hierarchy of noble elites, warrior class, and women and servants (Kirk n.p).

Identifying this hierarchy is necessary as it clarifies the social position and role of bards in Greek society, allowing us to draw reasonable comparisons between Homer and the other *aidoi*¹ within the story and develop a composite image of who the storyteller may have been. For example, we know that “nobles of the Greek renaissance . . . may well have adorned their houses with poets who could monumentalize in song the great deeds of the past . . . a good bard enhances a good feast” (Segal 115). This role is evidenced by the two bards

1 *aidoi*, Greek bards.

within *The Odyssey*: Phemius, the court singer who is “forced” to sing a song to Telemachus’s unwelcome guests (I, 155), and Demodocus, who lived in the town of the Phaeacians and sang for the nobles in Alcinous’s palace (VIII, 472). These two characters, while considered on par with the servant class, were nonetheless in proximity to the elite class as the observers and defacto documentarians of their lives. Consider, for example, how Demodocus sings of the Trojan horse: “He started with how the Greeks set fire to their camp / and then embarked and sailed away. Meanwhile, / Odysseus brought in a gang of men / into the heart of Troy, inside the horse” (VIII, 501–4). This song is critical to the concept of the Homer-Mycenaean-mimesis, as it demonstrates how the practice of storytelling was not only a mode of entertainment but of documentation as well. Drawing connections from Phemius and Demodocus to Homer reveals the bards’ inherently conflicting role: praising and flattering the hosts while still maintaining a level of truth-telling. This contradiction is precisely the irony that Adorno and Horkheimer emphasize in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, where “the epic dissolves the hierarchical order of society by the exoteric form of its presentation, even—and precisely there—where it glorifies this order” (109). In other words, the role of the bard is uniquely positioned for social critique in that it uses the language of laypeople to disseminate news and monumentalize the elite, thereby positioning the experiences of nobility in the hands of the lower classes, which, in turn, throws class disparities into sharp relief. The anthropological data which indicate how Homer would have borne witness to the acute class disparities sharpens this claim (Segal 115). This causes us to consider the many contradictions within the story, in which the verisimilitude of its epic hero becomes challenged, as a testimony to the problematic nature of class disparities in Hellenic cultures of Ancient Greece.

2. Textual Contextualization

The testimonial nature of *The Odyssey* is put to trot when examining the many contradictions within the epic tale that complicate the idea of Odysseus as heroic. Perhaps the most conscious decay of social stratification can be located in Homer’s account of the relationship between Odysseus and his crew (the latter with whom our composite Homer would likely have identified

himself more readily, at least in terms of social status). Though Odysseus is ultimately painted as the cunning victor of the story, there are nevertheless cracks in the facade of loyalty and social order through which the potential for Homer's class critique shines through. This is particularly evidenced by Homer's depiction of Eurylochus, one of the crew members of Odysseus's ship. Throughout the epic, Eurylochus is afforded special narrative attention: not only is he chosen by Odysseus himself to lead the crew onto Circe's island, but he is also the only one to abstain from Circe's trickery. He warns his fellow crewmates, "Fools! Why would you go up there? / Why would you choose to take on so much danger?" (X, 432-34), demonstrating himself to be the most discerning member of the crew and the most likely to heed Odysseus's warnings. Considering the energy devoted to elevating Eurylochus's character, it is curious why he would be the one to rebel and ultimately muster the strength to speak out against their leader: "You are unfair to us, Odysseus . . . we men / have had no rest or sleep; we are exhausted. / And you refuse to let us disembark" (XII, 280-83). Indeed, when Odysseus refuses him yet again, Eurylochus takes it upon himself to instruct the crew to disembark the ship, reminding them: "Listen, my friends! You have already suffered / too much" (XII, 339-41). It is at this critical juncture that a reading of class critique becomes possible; our loyalty as audience members to Odysseus becomes momentarily suspended due to the hero's increasing selfishness. Considering the context of this storytelling as described above—likely orated in the presence of a nobleman by a member of the lower class (Foley 2)—makes this contradiction a distinctly subversive act. The requirement to depict nobles as "great," "heroic," "excellent," and "grand" (Segal 115) is suddenly overturned in favor of giving voice to members of the lower class who critique Odysseus's totalitarianism on the ship.

The perversion of this narrative is all the more compounded considering that Eurylochus's protest occurs in the wake of the crew's encounter with the Cyclops: a confrontation that results in the death of six crew members due to Odysseus's selfishness and avarice (IX, 212-13). Notably, if Odysseus expresses any admission of guilt for the loss of his men, it is quickly superseded by the pride of his cunning: "I laugh to myself,/at how my name, the 'no man' maneuver, tricked him . . . I was strategizing, hatching plans,/so that my men and I could all survive" (IX, 413-21). Odysseus's honesty here demonstrates both hubris and direct evasion of blame for the endangerment of his crew in the first place. Such a profound violation of his identity as a "hero" raises the question:

why would Homer portray Odysseus poorly, if such a tale is meant to glorify him; if mythology is supposed to elevate and reinforce existing social order?

Critics such as James Hogan assert that Odysseus's flaws are necessary to the moral of the story to teach about the humility of men before the gods and the enduring humanity of the elite despite their shortcomings (66). However, to ascribe the failures of Odysseus to his crew and obfuscate blame within the story is not only to deprive Odysseus of agency but also to deprive the crew of subjecthood and negate their value. Hogan's analysis fails to account for the importance of the crew members in the story, and the explicit narrative attention that they are afforded. For example, recall Elpenor, "the young one . . . not very brave in war, nor very smart" (X, 553–54), whose insignificance results in his abandonment before and after his death, and the grief each sailor feels at the loss of their compatriot. Elpenor is, significantly, one of the few who are afforded speech when Odysseus communes with the Underworld. Elpenor shames Odysseus for having neglected his body: "Please, my lord, remember me . . . Burn me with all my arms / and heap a mound / beside the gray salt sea, so in the future / people will know of me and my misfortune" (XI, 71–79). This moment stands as another jarring moment of testimony, in which the boy's *lack* of heroic identity results in his death—a critique that is not subtle nor indirect, but acutely aware of the social injustices that divide Odysseus and his men.

Representing Odysseus as a foil for humanity also relies upon the fatal assumption—one that is easy to make when authors become misty and elusive to us over great expanses of time—that *The Odyssey* arose spontaneously rather than from a distinct social, political, and geographical reality. In this way, *The Odyssey* becomes reduced to "blind praise of a blind life, subscribed to by the same praxis that suppresses everything that lives" (Adorno and Horkheimer 110). I contend, in line with Adorno and Horkheimer's conception of Homer's appropriation of myth, that these moments stand as evidence, as testimony, to class consciousness within Homer's oration. Here, the crew is momentarily understood as an oppressed group, dominated by Odysseus, the "prototype of the bourgeoisie individual" (Adorno and Horkheimer 109). Investigating this tension shared between Odysseus and his crew is therefore illuminative of the class dynamics which Homer likely lived through himself, leading to a robust reading of *The Odyssey* that is steeped in awareness of the stratification and division of ancient society.

3. Classifying Gender: Witches, Nymphs, and Queens

Class consciousness also arises in the text through Homer's portrayal of women: a rendering that has been historically deemed unusual, if not glaringly controversial, in its empathy and compassion for women's relegated social position. It does not require much imagination to comprehend that the Mycenae world was as patriarchal as the Homeric world, but the textual evidence reveals it nonetheless. It is Alcinous who is called to council, not his wife. In other scenes, Penelope is told that "talk is the concern of men" (I, 358–59), and she is sent to her room more than once by her son (I. 356; XVII, 49). It is evident that women are relegated to an inferior position in Geek society; and yet, interestingly, in *The Odyssey*, women are also characterized by a notable degree of agency and authority. Scholar Audrey Wen identifies this in her analysis of *The Odyssey*, emphasizing how it was the women who were "in charge" (43) of Odysseus's fate; without them, he would not have been guaranteed a safe return or a return at all. The witch Circe and nymph Calypso held the power to keep Odysseus in captivity and prevent his homecoming, but they chose to free him and even offer him guidance and protection on his journey home instead. Critically, the narrator appears aware of these gendered double standards within the text. For example, Calypso is afforded a moment in the text to remark on this double standard when she is shamed by the gods for lying with Odysseus:

You cruel, jealous gods! You bear a grudge
whenever any goddess takes a man
to sleep with as a lover in her bed.
...
Demeter with the cornrows in her hair
indulged in her own desire
...
till Zeus found out, hurled flame and killed him.
So now, you male gods are upset with me
for living with a man. A man I saved! (V, 118–30)

Perhaps the boldest protest made by a woman throughout the ancient

myth, Calypso's outcry sharply decries the gendered double standards that cause her to be targeted by the gods. She correctly identifies the shaming of female sexuality in a way that also resonates throughout the text. Calypso's words reverberate in the story of Penelope, who is shamed for entertaining the suitors, and the maids, who are shamed for lying with them, even when none of these women have a choice. This protest gives value not only to her own desire but to other goddesses as well, demonstrating a basic level of discrimination that relegates her to the lowly status of a woman, despite her immortal status. Circe, another female figure who decries gendered double standards, facilitates such class consciousness-raising perhaps less directly, but not less significantly: she instructs Odysseus that in order to address the prophet, he must first make a sacrifice and "pray to all the famous dead" (X, 528). That the dead here are identified as "famous" suggests that Circe anticipates exactly who Odysseus will speak to, which, curiously, turns out to include "daughters and wives" (XI, 229). This is significant: for one bright and fleeting moment, the female characters within the story are given the platform to voice their experiences in a violently patriarchal regime while a violent patriarch is forced to listen. In Book XI, the wife of Cretheus describes her rape by the god Zeus and Antiope describes the same fate; Epicaste describes her sorrow and ultimate suicide at having been wronged by fate, which condemned her to sleep with her son and face unthinkable shame; Phaedra, Procris, and Ariadne all describe their murders and suffering under their husbands' hands. These are powerful moments of truth-telling the one moment in the text where conversation becomes not "the concern of men" (I, 358–59), but the concern of women. It is at this moment that mythology becomes subversive, elevating the stories of the debased and dehumanized over that of the elite in Homer's writing. It is pertinent to note that this literary technique is self-referential: as much as Odysseus (the elite) is temporarily captive to the stories of these women (the lower class), the audience (the elite) is captive to the stories of these women. In this way, *The Odyssey* becomes a class critique in its most devastating and potent form—a temporary coup of a privileged, bourgeois environment by and for the lower class.

However, perhaps the most observable and well-studied evidence of gendered critique in *The Odyssey* lies with Penelope and her maids. In her text, Wen makes the compelling case that Penelope is in fact *elevated* to the level of men in *The Odyssey* due to the attribution of *kleos* to her character. *Kleos*, "renown, glory, and fame," is a vital quality to attain in the Homeric world, as it allowed one to gain the respect of one's people, city, and the gods, which in

turn could grant the heroes immortality through memorialization (Wen 43). Critically, *kleos* was usually an attribute given to men, particularly for dying in battle, but in *The Odyssey*, the word *kleos* is also used to describe Penelope (Wen 43–44). Penelope earns this declaration not only by being a faithful wife but by relying upon her cunning intelligence (which is, of course, particularly poignant when contrasted with Odysseus, who sleeps with several women in their separation, but is never chastised for infidelity). Penelope is, like other women, complimented for her beauty and domestic skills, but unlike others, “she earns her memorable *kleos* by her intelligence and her devotion to her husband . . . making her stand out amongst women, and almost placing her amongst men” (Wen 44). Honoring the queen with this title is significant because it directly challenges the gendered hierarchy both within the Homeric world and in Ancient Greece, so emphatically, in fact, that it has caused some critics to speculate that Homer was a woman.²

Indeed, such compassion for the status of women permeates the text; it is even extended to the maids within the story, who, being both servants and women, endured dual social burdens that made them particularly unloved by ancient Greek society. Contrary to this tradition, Homer renders the maids as dutiful and loving aides: the girls are always “on each side of” Penelope (I, 335), comforting her, and they are often characterized as “loyal” (I, 427). There is a degree of intimacy between the maids and Odysseus throughout the story as they carefully bathe him, prepare him for battle, and feed him—“intimate” because the maids specifically describe their work as out of “love” (I, 131). This characterization of the maids is carefully cultivated throughout the text, rendering Odysseus’s decision to permit the hanging of the maids nearly incomprehensible. He is encouraged by his son, Telemachus, who declares: “I refuse to grant these girls / a clean death since they poured down shame on me / and Mother, when they lay beside the suitors” (XXII, 463–66), identifying their death as a necessary outcome of the violation of their gendered position (in which they must remain pure, sexless, and largely invisible), rather than any

² “Samuel Butler famously suggested in the nineteenth century that the *Odyssey* must have been written by a woman because it has so many interesting and sympathetically portrayed female characters. . . . Few modern scholars would agree: we have, sadly, no evidence for women participating in archaic Greek epic tradition as composers or rhapsodes. Moreover, Butler’s claim relied on the dubious assumption that only a woman would want to write about female characters” (Wilson 35).

significant betrayal to his household. It is at this moment when Odysseus's revenge becomes unraveled, his heroics perhaps better understood as terrorism, when he instructs his son to "Hack at them with long swords, / eradicate all life from them" and make them "forget the things / the suitors made them do with them in secret" (XXII, 443-45). As Dr. Katherine Peters writes, this is the moment that "ruins" the epic by "collapsing the narrative arc of success" (2). We are left to contemplate the wreckage left by Odysseus: the women dangling from the line like "doves or thrushes . . . crash[ed] into a net" in "agony," and watch their feet "twitching for a while, but not too long" (XXII, 467-74), and to question the role of Odysseus as a valorous hero. Neither is the horror at this moment subtle—Homer openly "comforts the listeners . . . by establishing the fact that it did not last long, an instant—according to the *Odyssey*—and it was over" (Adorno and Horkheimer 141). It is at this moment there is physical breakage between Homer's narrative perspective and Odysseus's. For, by including this excessive act of violence, Homer disproves the heroism of Odysseus and questions—as close to directly as a poet could without risking his life or livelihood—the righteousness of Odysseus's authority as king.

4. The Man and the Myth: Conclusions

A close reading of *The Odyssey* reveals a degree of class consciousness that directly calls in and critiques the class dynamics within Ancient Greece. Throughout the story, Odysseus's crew is regarded with compassion and sympathy, while being subjected to misery by their captain; women are considered cunning and independent, despite that they are abused and shamed by male figures in the story; servants are characterized as loving and loyal, but they are murdered by their masters. Such contradictions starkly contrast the purpose of Western mythology to clarify and reinforce existing social norms. Instead, they bespeak the troubles of the laboring lower classes, revealing the fallibility of the heroes we revere and the precariousness of their perch. Such a contrast begs the ultimate question: why?

I have examined how Homer's voice ultimately subverts traditional storytelling to demonstrate a level of class consciousness, to place "heroism" as enacted by elites in the hands of the lower classes to be reinterpreted and understood in

all of its falsehood and impracticality. In this way, the composite character of Homer is not a mythmaker but a destroyer of myths, uplifting the voiceless in an otherwise oppressive mode of storytelling. An abundance of scholarship exists to disprove that Homeric poems testify to the destruction caused by class stratification. One cannot help but counter with the question: how else was the lower class meant to tell their stories for future generations, if not coded in the languages of the elite? How else to make a living and survive, than to bury your understanding of the social world in myth and fiction? To understand the imprints of oppression in our canon of classical works is a literary responsibility to read between the lines to determine observations of injustice. This is a practice that must become fundamental to the discipline if we hope to reconstruct our understanding of mythologies for a more equitable, truthful future.

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