The Odyssey The Role Of Prophecy Essay, Research Paper

When one ponders the Greek mythology and literature, powerful images invariably come to mind. One relives the heroes struggles against innumerable odds, their battles against magical monsters, and the gods periodic intervention in mortal affairs. Yet, a common and often essential portion of a heroic epic is the hero s consultation with an oracle or divinity. This prophecy is usually critical to the plot line, and also to the well being of the main characters. Could Priam have survived in the Achaean camp if not at the gods instruction (200-201)? Could the Argos have run the gauntlet of the Prowling Rocks if not for the gods advice of using a sacrificial bird (349).

Moreover, prophecy can be negative as well as positive. Achilles was prophesied to die gloriously in battle if he chose his life s way as a warrior. Oedipus was exiled and condemned by his own words, after he slew his sire and wed his mother. This type of prophesy can blind even the gods themselves; Chronos was fated to be defeated and his throne stolen by his son. Demeter loses Persephone periodically every year because her daughter ate Hades pomegranates. Prophecy plays an important role in the whole of Greek folklore. Something this ever-present bears further examination.

In The Odyssey, prophecy in its myriad forms affects nearly every aspect of the epic. Prophecies are seen in the forms of omens, signs, strict prediction of the future, divine condemnation, and divine instruction. Though conceptually these forms are hard to distinguish, they are clearly separate in the Odyssey. Moreover, prophecies can be interpreted not only on the “plot device” level, but also on the level of characterization. Whether a character accepts or denies the gods prophecies tells the reader something about the character himself.

Omens are brief prophecies intimately connected to the action at hand, which must be interpreted in terms of that action. Halitherses comments on the eagle attack after Telemakhos condemns the suitors (463-464); he correctly interests it to mean that if the suitors keep feeding off Odysseus s possessions they will be destroyed. Yet the suitors ignore the omen, inviting their eventual destruction. This haughty treatment of a divine omen is a justification for their deaths. When Penelope says if Odysseus had returned he would, with his son, surely slay the suitors, Telemakhos let loose a great sneeze (429). This omen reinforces the previous one, and simultaneously prepares the reader for the carnage to follow. However, not all omens are effective. In the case of Telemakhos we see many bird omens signaling for him to do something about the suitors. Whether it was his immaturity to interpret the bird omens or blind arrogance Telemakhos does not act on them. In fact, it s not until Athena comes to him that he thinks to take action against the suitors in his house.

Signs are similar to omens, but differ in one crucial aspect; the prophesee is looking for a specific omen in order to decide whether he should or should not take some action. There is only one good example of a sign in the Odyssey; on page 460, Odysseus asks Zeus for two divine signs to decide if it is time to slay the suitors. Zeus answers with a thunderclap from a cloudless sky and allows Odysseus to overhear a maid s prayer for vengeance. Because of these signs, Odysseus begins his plan to slay the suitors. Later on, with a thunderclap Zeus actually signals for the precise time to strike. Signs are helpful devices; they allow not only a rationalization for when an event occurs but also shows the approval of the gods on such an action.

Not only are signs and omens plentiful in the Odyssey, but also the type one usually associates with prophesying, strict prediction of the future, abounds as well. Penelope states that she will marry the man who can string Odysseus s bow and perform his famous feat (469). Since Odysseus is the only one to do so, the prophecy is fulfilled. This “prophesy” is just a statement of the future; it contains no judgmental quality whatsoever. Theoklymenos s prophesies to Penelope that Odysseus is at hand on the island and plotting vengeance on the suitors (417) This, of course, is already true, so the prophecy is technically true as well. However, it makes no judgement on the rightness or wrongness of either Odysseus s or the suitors position.

Teiresias shade s speech to Odysseus (333) is a strictly objective foretelling, but nevertheless crucial to the plot and character development. He states that Odysseus will land on Thrinakia; that if his shopmates eat Helios s cattle they will be destroyed; that Odysseus will make the suitors pay in blood; and that if he makes reparations to Lord Poseidon he will be granted a gentle sea-borne death. Though Teiresias

S prophecy is devoid of the bias which signs and omens possess, it contains enough to characterize not only him but also Odysseus. Teiresias is level headed and just, “forever / charged with reason even among the dead” (329). Odysseus is characterized by his reply to Teiresias: ” my life runs on then as the gods have spun it” (334). Odysseus does not try to escape his destiny or change the prophecy to suit his personal desire; he merely accepts it and thereby accepts the will of the gods.

Although there are myriad examples of divinities avenging themselves on mortals for wrongdoings, there is only one good example of divine condemnation contained directly within a prophecy. Aigisthos is warned by the gods not to kill Agamemnot (341), but he ignores the advice and is eventually slain by Orestes, Agamemnon s son. By his very act of not heeding to the prophecy, he invites the gods revenge; the gods avenge themselves by allowing the prophecy to be fulfilled. In this case, the gods condemn Aigisthos through the prophecy because he did not listen to it in the first place!

Easily the most often seen type of prophesy is that of divine instruction. A sample follows: Hermes gives Odysseus advice and help on how to overcome Circe s trials (323-324); Circe also later tells Odysseus the route he is destined to take home, and the trials he will face (349-350); through Calypso, Zeus prophesies that Odysseus will return to the “civilized world” on Skheria after twenty days at sea (364). A general relation between a character s traits and his heeding of prophecies can be seen when the prophecies are divine instruction. If the character follows the gods advice he will prosper. But the advice is offered not because a man is prosperous but because he is worthy. Therefore, if a man is worthy, he will repeatedly receive advice, and vice versa. How is a man worthy? By being brave, honorable, true, and following the gods advice!

This relation is strictly a generalization, but can be applied to the other types of prophecies as well. The generalization helps us characterize the prophesees by their heeding of the prophecy. On the negative side, Aigisthos was slain because he didn t heed the gods warning; this makes him unworthy, which means he wasn t brave, honorable, etc. The suitors repeatedly ignored the omens of the gods and Halitheses s prophecy; therefore they were unworthy and deserved to die, etc. On the positive side, because Odysseus is worthy he is brave, honorable, true, and follows the gods advice. Also, because he is worthy the gods offer him advice. It is circular sequential logic, but it holds in the book. Odysseus blinds Polyphemus, offends his father, and Poseidon extends Odysseus s voyage home. But because Odysseus is worthy and just made an error, the gods guide him back to reconciliation with the earth-shaker. How? Bad luck leads Odysseus to Aiaia. There Hermes helps him face Circe. Because of this, Circe leads Odyseus to the underworld and Teiresias. Teiresias instructs Odysseus on how to appease Lord Poseidon; Circe tells Odysseus how to get home.

Moreover, though it is difficult to see, prophecies also help characterize the prophesier, in the Odyssey, mainly the gods. That the gods have the power to see the prophesier, in the Odyssey, mainly the gods. That the gods have the power to see the future sets them apart from mortals; that they use this information wisely indicates that they are responsible beings. That a worthy man like Odysseus continually follows their advice means that the gods are trustworthy; that they can fulfill their prophecies even without the prophesee s cooperation shows that they are powerful, responsible, trustworthy and aloof. This description is not exact, but within the superstructure of the Odyssey it is approximately correct.

All the different forms of prophecy, omens, signs, strict prediction, divine condemnation and instruction, collectively shape character development: many of the key actions in Homer would not have occurred if the characters failed to demonstrate faith in prophecies and omens. Though its use as a plot device is more easily seen, its use for characterization in the Odyssey is far more important. In previous works, prophecy was used strictly as a plot rationalization, but in the Odyssey it has a critical role, affecting both the plot and characters.

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