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Doves, Slave Women, and Personhood in Homer’s *Odyssey*

The Odyssey is a story about homecoming. Odysseus, the focus of the epic, is returning from a war that has spanned ten years, two generations, and thousands of lives to a household in disarray. This return, known to the Greeks as nostos, is always taken invariably by sea and is tied inextricably to Ancient Greek formulations of honor and notably kleos, or glory. At the end of the stories of the greatest Greek heroes – Nestor or Diomedes, for example – they return home as another, final accomplishment, winning glory by arriving safely and avoiding narrowly the hazards that would have them lose their glory at sea. It is the final trial of the Greek hero, and often the most harrowing.

And yet, Odysseus’s homecoming is not the only one in the poem. In fact, it is a near-universal theme among the characters in the Odyssey that they are far from home; who gets to complete their own homecomings, who doesn’t, and how others react in light of this indicate wider Achaean beliefs about a social order in which some people, primarily slaves and women, simply have a lesser claim to personhood.

The most shocking example of a group that doesn’t get their nostos are the slave girls who had “[laid] beside the suitors” (Hom. Od. 22.464), made especially striking by the girls’ dubious consent in that very action. It is key to note that they have also a homecoming that they wish to achieve, having been presumably appropriated from their homes and taken to another land given the nature of slavery at the time. Their treatment is especially illuminating, as they lie at the intersection of multiple lines of subjugation, the most important of which are their gender and status as slaves, for which they are treated as subhuman.

They are never granted such a return to their homelands as Odysseus is granted particularly because of their polar opposite positions on the social ladder, indicating a deeply stratified society. They are compared to birds in their hanging: “as doves or thrushes spread their wings to fly” (Hom. Od. 22.468), invoking several responses that illustrate their position in Ithacan society. First, note that the comparison elides any individuality for the slave girls; the comparison is made against animals that move in flocks, indistinguishable from each other. This erasure mirrors the social position of slaves in Ancient Greek society, in the sense that they are not considered fully human individuals, but rather faceless and, almost universally, nameless. Further, the choice here of doves and thrushes is significant. Both species are migratory, making long journeys about the continent to avoid cold weather which ties in with the conception of flocks, as they migrate in large groups. This means that often the birds would be seen oft as merely part of a larger whole, just as lower status slaves are seen as merely objects part of a household. And, at the end of a migration, doves and thrushes participate in a nostos of their own – one which is denied from the women, who “crash into a net, a bitter bedtime” (Hom. Od. 22.470) dying enslaved in a place far from home. This bitter bedtime is particularly important, as it represents the premature end of the birds’ migration and the inability for the slave women to complete their own journey home. They simply are not worthy of the glory and reward afforded by a homecoming because of their status as slave girls, non-individuals in the society that they inhabit.

This dynamic characterized by the difference in status between the slave women and Odysseus, who, in this scene, is completing his own nostos, is made especially clear in the text through their interaction, when the women, “sobbing desperately / … came, weeping, clutching at each other,” (Hom. Od. 22.446) back into the house in order to clean the household and remove the dead bodies of the suitors, a task in which Odysseus “instructed them and forced them to continue” (Hom. Od. 22.451). There are two fundamental dimensions along which the power relationship between Odysseus and the slave girls runs that illustrate the specific social stratification of Ithacan society. The first is their status as slaves. One of the first things that Odysseus does, now that he has reclaimed his household, is to exert his power over slaves. Moreover, the immediate assumption of power made by Odysseus here emphasizes how deeply slavery was embedded into Achaean society, indicated by the idea that slaves are less people than a part of the household as his control over the slaves is regained exactly with the reclamation of his house; the slaves are mere property regained with the rest of his belongings. The second axis along which Odysseus holds power here is their gender: the slave women are not killed with the suitors, instead being saved for last as they, as women, are assumed as having no ability to resist Odysseus in violence. The work that they do here is also markedly gendered, as their death is delayed to have them clean the house, an area dedicated largely to women in ancient times. And yet, they are not the ones to actually put the house in order, finishing the task in its most significant form: this is done instead by the “men who created order in the house” (Hom. Od 22.457). Women here are incapable of taking meaningful action, reduced to the labor they do, which ultimately gets subsumed by the men’s role as heads of the house.

The lack of female agency is also directly shown in Telemachus’s reasoning for killing them, marking a social system in which women are less human than men are. Consider his reasoning, which is that the slave girls “poured down shame on me / and Mother, when they lay beside the suitors” (Hom. Od. 22.263-4). The defining trait of the slave women that Telemachus fixates on is that they have slept with other rival men. This definition of the women relative only to the opposite gender indicates that the women are not so much people in and of themselves, but rather objects that must be disposed of because they have been tainted by other men. The particular concept of defilement or dirtiness is also echoed directly by Telemachus as well, as he refuses “to grant these girls / a clean death” (Hom. Od. 22.262-3), fitting an unclean method of execution to entities which he considered unclean as well. The ultimate sin that the slave girls committed, leading ultimately to their deaths, is one that is reinforced by their status as slaves less than truly human, but fully compounded upon by the systemic objectification of their gender in Ancient Greek society.

Odysseus’s success in putting his house in order, reaching finally the peak of his triumph over the suitors, comes with the arc of the slave women’s lives reaching its own nadir. His nostos comes explicitly at the cost of the slaves’ nostos. This sort of opposite result between Odysseus and the slave women mirrors the opposite standing that they have in the world that they inhabit: that is why Odysseus gets a happy ending and the slave women do not. Even their differences are apparent in the animals used to characterize them; both are described by birds in the Odyssey, but Odysseus is the noble, powerful eagle whereas the slaves are meek flock birds. That difference between the hawk and the dove is the difference between Odysseus’s place in Greek society and the slave women’s places. In Homer’s work, slaves are less human than masters, and women are less human than men. That is the role they play in the epics: they are blended into the background as objects, anonymized such that they are no longer meaningful as individuals, existing as shades without agency.

Work Cited

Homer, and Emily R. Wilson. *The Odyssey*. W.W. Norton & Company, 2018.