

Defending Helen, Recognizing Odysseus

In the climactic recognition in the *Odyssey* that reunites husband and wife finally as who they are, Penelope defends her late recognition of Odysseus via a circuitous argument defending the problematic figure of Helen, a suspicious stretch of text known in the literature as “Helen’s apology”, the gist of which goes: “Not even Helen would have been unfaithful had she known that she would end up right back in Argos and (so) it was really a god that caused her to do it” (*Od.* 22.218-24). Past analysis of the passage tends to either dismiss it for its sheer rhetoricity and on that basis question its authenticity; or defend it sympathetically without paying due attention to Penelope’s rhetorical construction of a Helen in her own image (Katz 1991). On my view, the passage parallels and counters the other crucial rhetorical construct in this scene: Odysseus’ bed. The function of both constructs is to present a figure for the radical, and hitherto unprecedented, notion of personal identity in response to the fundamental dilemma posed by the recognition. The recognition can only go through if Odysseus’ identity is accepted, and yet in accepting the stranger as Odysseus Penelope risks her own identity as the most constant of all wives, which she has maintained by persistently denying that recognition, come who may. Just what *could* Odysseus offer that proves who he is without at the same time jeopardizing who Penelope is?

The poem manages this impossible dilemma by airing the abstract notion of personal identity as a point where both parties meet halfway. On the one hand, it metaphorically satisfies Penelope’s nearly impossible demand for the radically objective proof of his identity, of which the fixed and (therefore) secret bed is the symbol. Unlike the scar that works *qua* identity/recognition token for its indiscriminating efficacy such that anyone that knows Odysseus

has it sees through his disguise (cf. *Od.* 21.190-225), the bed only works if it is known exclusively. The availability of the scar as a generically efficacious identity/recognition token weakens the intuitive interpretation that the proof of the bed is aired in response to a psychological demand along the lines of: “For each recognizer there is a particularly convincing proof suited to the particular relationship”. Rather, Penelope’s demand is of a more radical, objective kind; she wants Odysseus to prove who he *is*, in the strong sense of “is” when we mean “really is”. That the bed is the better proof of that for being only privately known, its privacy conditioning and being conditioned by its fixity, is a conceit in conformity with the central theme that underpins the *Odyssey* in particular, that what is real tends to hide.

Penelope then takes Odysseus’ radical posit of personal identity and claims for Helen what Odysseus has claimed for himself. She does so to answer the fundamental suspicion that counteracts her recognition of Odysseus: in recognizing him, is Penelope being herself, or another Helen (Murnaghan 2011)? In effect, Penelope is saying: if you can have a private, fixed nature that cries out who you are in a way that should defeat my skepticism, why can’t Helen have the same? And if she does, then Odysseus’ skepticism of Penelope for being too easy would be overcome; for the *real* Helen, the Helen not to be known by everyone who sees her going away but to be known privately, through Penelope’s particular counterfactual that entertains from what state of knowledge and mind Helen did what she did, would have stayed in exactly the same way Penelope has. The suspicious simulacrum of a Helen that accepts the stranger as her husband merges with Penelope that has the resolve to never leave.

The poem’s idiosyncratic postulation of personal identity, both as an ideologically powerful confirmation of Odysseus’ reinstatement in his household and as an overtly rhetorical overreach that exculpates Helen-cum-Penelope with a suspicion, does not primarily aim to

valorize the notion of contextless, atomistic “truth” without being aware of its very rhetoricity. Rather, it circuitously merges truth and appearance (the stranger that is secretly, but really and always Odysseus; the Helen that is secretly, but really and always Penelope) so as to vindicate that curious quality that binds and distinguishes Odysseus and Penelope as the star couple of the poem: *homophrosynê*, and in particular, the *homophrosynê* instanced in the climactic recognition as both knowing how to play the identity game (Katz 1991).

Bibliography

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