

## A Better and Stouter Hero: Ecphrastic Resonances in Od. 6.224-37

In this paper, I note the presence of diction normally associated with ecphrasis in the description of Odysseus' bath at *Odyssey* 6.224-37. As so often with ecphrasis, metapoetics is an essential subtext, in this case with emphasis on narrative craft at a seminal moment in the arc of the hero's restoration.

Marvel is the quintessential response to preternatural craftsmanship, a phenomenon encapsulated concisely in the formula θαῦμα ιδέσθαι (see Frontisi-Ducroux, 62-3, 73-5; Prier 81-97). Such response is, of course, not exclusive to ecphrasis, but when accompanied by diction associated with the material arts, there is a strong *prima facie* case for exploring the passage through lenses associated with ecphrasis.

The description of Odysseus is striking in this regard, for it displays both markers. Nausikaa's concluding response, θηῖτο, bears connotations of both sight and wonder, and the same verb is used to mark Odysseus' response at the end of the hall ecphrasis in book 7. In addition, the passage contains significant focus on artisanship. Athena herself is the craftsman who "made" Odysseus (θῆκεν, 229) and "caused" his curly locks to grow (ῥῆκε, 231). The brief simile that follows marks her as a "knowing" artisan (ἴδρις), the kind that would be a mentee of Athena and Hephaestus in the mortal realm (233). The emphasis is on the ability of craft to create illusion (εἰσιδέειν, 230) and the specific artistic action is that of inlaying gold with silver (περιχέυεται, 232; κατέχευε, 235). Ecphrastic objects are commonly variegated in nature and the craftsman of the simile is, suggestively, learned at τέχνη παντοίη (234).

Though not common, such use of ecphrasis markers in personal description is not wholly unprecedented. In the *Hymn to Apollo*, the chorus of Delian maidens is introduced as a μέγα

θαῦμα... ιδέσθαι (h. Hom. 3.156). The characteristic formula also marks the description of the primal “woman” in Hesiod’s *Theogony* (575).

Stanford passed over such imagery. Hainsworth (308) usefully noted that “crafts are not a common source for Homeric comparisons,” but does not develop the hint of ecphrasis in this observation. Irene de Jong, however, comes closer to anticipating my own arguments. She reads the section as a “beautification scene”, a fixed type that appears before important performances throughout the *Odyssey* (163-4), an idea that complements Huntzinger’s observations regarding the range of subjects that may evoke θαῦμα (8-9).

I suggest two reasons for this brief ecphrastic resonance. First, this is a defining moment; Nausikaa’s response will either enable or forestall the hero’s return. From a performative standpoint, it is an outstanding moment to draw attention to the art of craftsmanship. Such a reading fits easily within the spectrum of poesy and craft comparisons compiled by West (35-40).

Equally important, Odysseus’ constructed nature fits several competing tensions in the episode. There is a suggestive parallel to the hyacinth description. The narcissus that once lured Persephone also belongs to the nexus of θαύματα ιδέσθαι (h. Hom. 2.10, 427). There, as here, potential threat and sexual curiosity are held in tension. Similarly, divine craft can produce fearful θαύματα. Odysseus later introduces Polyphemus as if he were a potential opportunity for ecphrasis (καὶ γὰρ θαῦμ’ ἐτέτυκτο πελώριον, 9.190). Such uncertainty well suits an Odysseus who, but a few verses earlier, was likened to a rapacious lion. At the same time, ecphrasis frequently explores the power of words to animate and make vivid, themes that befit the quasi-resurrection of the hero that begins in book 6. Moreover, like Athena in this moment, Homer tends to beautify Odysseus, eliding and covering over parts of the poetic tradition, that we too

may behold—or rather, hear the κλέος of—a “better and stouter” hero (μείζονά τ' εἰσιδέειν καὶ πάσσονα, 230).

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