

Danger and Deferral: The Concealed Threat of Odysseus to the Phaeacians

The Phaeacian episode of the *Odyssey* clarifies Odysseus as a hero of homecoming and hospitality, despite his fame as city destroyer and wandering hero. However helpful the Phaeacians may be in Odysseus' *nostos*, they become apparent victims of Poseidon's wrath as foretold in Nausithous' prophecy, wherein their island is to be covered by a great mountain (*Od.* 8.569 *et alia*; μέγα δ' ἤμιν ὄρος πόλει ἀμφικαλύψειν) as a result of their painless conveyance of strangers (*Od.* 8.566, πομποὶ ἀπήμονές). The verb ἀμφικαλύπτω is heavily associated with recurrences of this prophecy but remains unconnected to the related and unexplored contexts of Odysseus' arrival to Scheria and Demodocus' introduction of Odysseus by way of the Trojan horse. I argue that a phraseological confluence of destructive images alerts the traditionally astute audience that Odysseus, not Poseidon, presents the greater danger to Scheria. Moreover, this destructive expectation is characteristically suspended and deferred by the poet in the unresolved conclusion of the Phaeacian episode, leaving the audience to question Odysseus' heroic identity, a revelation that is developed and delayed up to the poem's *telos*.

The verb ἀμφικαλύπτω, for its implication in the destruction of the Phaeacians, lies at the intersection of two complex interpretive issues: Homeric theodicy and manuscript variation. In terms of theodicy, critics, both ancient and modern, have debated the appropriateness of the seemingly honorable Phaeacians' annihilation (Friedrich 1989, Allan 2006), and a significant manuscript variant attributed to Aristophanes of Byzantium at *Od.* 13.158 even suggests an alternate *negation* of the destruction (Friedrich 1989, Nagy 2002, Marks 2008). I propose that the *Iliad*'s parallel of the Achaean wall strengthens the audience's expectation of Poseidon's full punitive wrath (Scodel 1982, Allan 2006), but also that the *Odyssey* poet is consistent in leaving the episode open-ended, (Doherty 1995, Peradotto 1990, Buchan 2004) thus subverting

expectation and even lending the powers of poetic preservation or destruction to Odysseus or the poet (Ford 1992).

In this light, a poetics of suspense combined with Odysseus as destructive hero elucidates the problems of theodicy and memorialization raised by the prophecy. In thematic and etymological terms, Odysseus is conceived as one who causes pain (Cook 1999), and mentions of his name are strategically avoided by members of his household for its “talismanic” power (Higbie 1995, Austin, 1972). Further, the poet is phraseologically precise in connecting Odysseus directly to the Phaeacians’ destruction. Upon his arrival to Scheria he is likened to a firebrand and conceals himself in leaves (*καλύψατο*, *Od.* 5.491), eyes covered by Athena (*ἀμφικαλύψας*, *Od.* 5.493)—a covert, latent image of destructive potential. Moreover, prior to Alcinous’ request for Odysseus’ name, a dangerous act in itself, Odysseus prompts Demodocus to sing about “Odysseus,” resulting in his metonymic alignment with Troy’s destruction—a city destroyed “whenever it conceals” the horse (*ἀμφικαλύψη*, *Od.* 8.511). These accumulated allusions to destruction *via* concealment then converge when Odysseus’ reveals his name to the Phaeacians (*Od.* 9.19).

The poet develops a feigned certainty of the Phaeacians’s destruction at Odysseus’ hands, but later defers, leaving Poseidon to suddenly disappear after lithifying the Phaeacians’ ship (*Od.* 13.164) and closing the episode mid-line (13.187). This poetic suspension raises questions for the audience but also implies that either Odysseus or the poet are left to memorialize or forget the Phaeacians. The resolution, I contend, occurs not in the explicit memorialization of the Phaeacians after the fact; rather, once the poem’s *telos* is established and Zeus’ justice prevails, the poet has already conferred *kleos* on the Phaeacians by means of their mythically suspended

place in the epic. If Odysseus was certain to destroy them, the poet disallows this possibility in their retroactive rehabilitation.

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