

Homeric Unreliable Narration

In earlier works on Homer, scholars by and large found unreliable narration to be relegated to the “lying” or “Cretan” tales which Odysseus tells in Books 13-19 of the *Odyssey*. Over the last twenty-five years, however, Homerists have identified a variety of supposed examples of unreliable narration in the two archaic Greek epics. Morrison (1992), Bowie (1993), Pratt (1993), Richardson (2006), and Rinon (2007) all have argued that unreliable narration exists in many sections of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.

This paper will examine these scholars’ arguments and suggest that, although they make many valuable observations on Homeric storytelling, their claims specifically about unreliable narration are unfounded. Morrison’s and Richardson’s theses argue that Homer employs many techniques to repeatedly create “misdirections” and give his listeners (and now readers) false expectations; I will argue that since, according to this thesis, misdirections are a frequent occurrence in Homer, attentive listeners/readers would adjust their expectations so as not to be misled. I will show that Pratt’s contention that an archaic Greek audience’s “openness to variation and innovation suggests an audience that is far from fundamentalist in its approach to narrative” (1993: 29) misunderstands the nature of “fundamentalism”; and, furthermore, that her claim that “truth” in poetry can be detrimental, citing Penelope’s request for Phemius not to sing of the Trojan War (*Od.* 1.337-43), fails to adequately distinguish between audiences who are in some way connected to “painful truths” and those that are not. I will show that Bowie’s observation that “nobody can check Odysseus’ story” (1993:19) does not serve to undercut the stories’ reliability, drawing on Richard Swinburne’s (1979) concept of the Principle of Testimony. Rinon’s claim that the *Kyklopeia* evinces “colonial focalization,” that this story in *Odyssey* 9 is skewed by the values of a colonialist and is thus called into question, requires an

anachronistic evaluation of colonialism that would have been completely foreign to 8th- or 7th-century Greeks.

After challenging scholars' specific models of unreliable narration in Homer, I will use narratologists' insights to examine the prospects for future detection of unreliable narration in Homer and show that they are somewhat bleak. Although many of the phenomena narratologists use to detect unreliable narration can be found in Homer, different explanations of the phenomena apply to Homer than to narratologists' typical purview: modern literary prose. I will show that the phenomena described by Altes' (2008) 'sincerity' are found in Homer but are better explained as being a natural outgrowth of formulaic composition. I will contend that Olson's (2003) label 'fallible narrator' would apply to Telemachus and is nearly self-applied by Odysseus in *Od.* 9, but that these characters do not serve as narrators at these points and thus cannot be unreliable narrators. Riggan (1981) claims that unreliable narrators fall into one of four categories, and that Odysseus falls under the heading 'picaro'. I will show that Riggan's description could not accurately apply to Odysseus as presented in the *Odyssey* even though it would to his appearances in Greek tragedy. Finally, I will use Ong's (1982) insights on contradictions in oral poetry to argue that the presence of contradictions in Homer, perhaps the most useful method of detecting unreliable narration in literary prose, is better explained as the result of the inevitable contradictions of oral storytelling.

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