

Deliberate Polyinterpretability and the *Odyssey* (2.146-156)

Looming over one of only two assemblies in the *Odyssey*, the omen in Book II forebodes the destruction of the suitors and also marks the beginning of Telemachus' search for his father. The scene centers upon the flight of twin eagles, their interaction above the assembly of suitors, and afterwards, an interpretation by the μάντις (seer) Halitherses. But despite the precision of his prophecy and the description of the eagles as foreboding ὄλεθρον (destruction), the exact means by which Halitherses arrives at his interpretation is unclear. This problem has troubled scholars from the Byzantine commentator Eustathius to academics in the modern era, including Heubeck, West, and Hainsworth (1988), while precipitating a host of solutions. I here offer a fundamentally different way of interpreting the omen, one that emphasizes its inherent ambiguity.

In examining this issue I employ the methodology pioneered by De Jong (1987) and Richardson (1990), which emphasizes the relationship between narrator and narratee, or listener, to explain intertextual phenomena. Past studies by Duckworth (1933), and more recently, by Struck (2003) and Ready (2014) build an image of the narrator as a self-aware actor, and subsequently, also inform my analysis of the omen. This begins with the omen's introduction, particularly, Telemachus' prayer to Zeus and the reuse of lines from Book I, along with the narrator's emphatic use of pronouns and adverbs - termed "projected indexicality" by Bakker (2009). This drama preceding the omen focuses the attention of the narratee toward specifics within the scene, particularly, the dual verb δρυψαμένω (to scratch) and the nouns παρειὰς (cheeks) and δειρὰς (necks). Interpretations of the omen usually fall into one of two camps, either focusing upon the verb or the nouns, and such interpretations are influenced by later omens, particularly, Penelope's dream in Book XVIII. Those focusing on δρυψαμένω, such as

Trampedach (2015), point to its range of possible meanings, from reciprocal action between the eagles, to a reflexive sign of grief, as seen in (*Il.*2.700), to a transitive verb denoting a strike against the suitors. However, those focusing on the nouns *παρειὰς* and *δειρὰς*, particularly Eustathius and the Greek *scholia*, emphasize the catachrestic, that is, seemingly inappropriate application of these terms to the eagles, and rationalize the nouns as belonging to the assembly of suitors.

While these insights into the omen produce a wide range of interpretations, they overlook an important possibility, namely, the idea of “deliberate polyinterpretability.” Posited first by Pfeijffer (1994) in his interpretation of the poetry of Pindar, this concept explains that ambiguity is often intentional, serving as a means through which the narrator can elicit involvement from the narratee. Given the performative nature of Homeric epic, I argue that the catachrestic usage of *παρειὰς* and *δειρὰς*, and the ambiguous force of *δρυψαμένω* are a means for the narrator to imbue an inherently predictable framework with uncertainty. Their presence produces an array of interpretations that are subsequently undermined by the conflicting imagery both within the scene and in other parts of the Homeric epics. The result is that the narrator draws the narratee into the events of the story, and shifts the role of the narratee from a passive recipient of the narrative to an active participant in its interpretation. I contend that, through consideration of deliberate polyinterpretability and its function in the Homeric epics, evidence for the narrator as an innovative and engaging force emerges. Furthermore, this concept can be usefully applied to other scenes of omen, such as that of the snake and sparrows in Book II of the *Iliad*, to demonstrate the overarching ambiguity of the Homeric epics (see, e.g., Morrison 1992).

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