

You've Got the Wrong Guy: Alkinoos and the “Wondrous Deeds” of Odysseus

Homeric scholarship remains ambivalent about Alkinoos, reading him either as an ideal or aloof host who offers salvation or danger to Odysseus. Alkinoos’ “noetic” abilities—his keen perception, or *noēsis*, of Odysseus’ heroic identity in *Odyssey* 8—can be interpreted variously as well. Many view this trait as positive or even integral for Odysseus’ self-revelation (Nagy 1990, Race 2014) while others suggest Odysseus controls the king’s perceptions (Roisman and Ahl 1996) or note Alkinoos’ failure in perceiving Odysseus as a threat to his people.

This paper analyzes Alkinoos’ desire to hear *θέσκελα ἔργα* (“wondrous deeds”) from Odysseus in light of new phraseological evidence to suggest that these opposing views are essentially both correct. That is, while Alkinoos does astutely perceive Odysseus as a Trojan War hero, his perception is necessarily exclusive and limiting, thus serving as a foil for the *Odyssey*’s larger construction of a return hero. This conclusion is reached through brief examination of the traditional resonance of *θέσκελα ἔργα*, a resonance that remains unapplied to the *Odyssey*’s own distinct use of the phrase. Ultimately, *θέσκελα ἔργα* serves as an index for competing characterizations of Odysseus, thus further elucidating how we understand the *Odyssey* within the larger tradition of Greek epic song.

θέσκελα ἔργα appears five times in archaic Greek poetry, perhaps most notably in the Hesiodic *Catalogue of Women* (fr. 204.96) where Zeus plans to enact “wondrous deeds” that will end the age of heroes. This instance is thematically tied to the famous *Dios Boulē*, the “plan of Zeus” at *Iliad* 1.5 and *Cypria* fr. 1.7 to enact a great war, i.e. the Trojan War. Moreover, at *Iliad* 3.130, Helen is invited by Iris to witness *θέσκελα ἔργα* as she weaves struggles of war. While the inter-traditional relationships among these instances are well considered (Ormand 2014, Clay 2005, Edmunds 2016, González 2010) few, if any, have examined the *Odyssey*’s two instances of

θέσκελα ἔργα in light of this traditional resonance, and the intratextual arrangement of these two instances is compelling as well.

Alkinoos' request to hear the θέσκελα ἔργα (*Od.* 11.374) comes at a particularly charged moment: Odysseus has just abruptly terminated his narration of the *Apologue* with a catalogue of heroines that asserts his dire need for return and is constructed generically to be received by Arete, the Phaeacian queen (Arft 2107). Alkinoos, more interested in heroic poetry (Sammons 2010), prompts Odysseus to resume his tale, pressing specifically to hear θέσκελα ἔργα, now understood as a sign for the broader Trojan War tradition. Odysseus subtly evades this request by immediately changing the subject to heroes “after” the war (μετόπισθεν, 11.380-84), then, in symmetry with the prior catalogue of heroines, he initiates his “catalogue of heroes” in response. While this catalogue appeals to Alkinoos at face value, its view of *kleos* derived from war is bleak, and Odysseus closes it, marked by ring composition, with his own version of θέσκελα ἔργα (11.610). In recounting Herakles, the last hero witnessed among the dead, Odysseus reports θέσκελα ἔργα crafted on his baldric that are both terrible and ought never be made again (11.613). If Alkinoos was expecting to hear something like Helen's θέσκελα ἔργα, he instead receives something more like the Hesiodic vision—deeds that signal the end of a heroic age—masterfully placed at the end of a catalogue that interrogates the efficacy of the war glory. Thus, Odysseus' response repudiates the king's expectations and re-codes the sign itself.

In sum, this paper's consideration of Greek epic's θέσκελα ἔργα from both extra- and intratextual frameworks not only unifies contradictory views of Alkinoos but contributes to a robust conversation in Homeric studies about the *Odyssey*'s relationship to Trojan War and even Cyclic tradition. Alkinoos' correct but limited *noēsis* signals the *Odyssey*'s own negotiation with

tradition and the challenge faced by poet and audience alike in rendering a widely known war hero into a hero of return.

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