To Wish the Impossible Wish: Homeric Counterfactuals in Character Speech

Contrary-to-fact conditions in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* have received considerable scholarly attention over the last three decades as the *locus* of a metapoetic effort by the narrator either to challenge the boundaries of the epic tradition (e.g. Morrison 1992) or to draw attention to a pivotal plot point (Louden 1993). More recently, Flatt 2017 has argued that the type of counterfactual that recurs in contexts of lamentation ("their mourning would have gone on and on for some time, had not *x* intervened") reflects the audience's conflicting desires for both the indefinite continuation of the story and the resolution of the narrative tension. If these scholars are correct, the Homeric narrator uses counterfactuals to signal moments of narrative or metanarrative importance to his audience, temporarily removing them from the here and now of the plot. What, then, should we make of it when Homeric characters employ counterfactuals of their own? Morrison and Louden largely sidestep this issue: how do counterfactuals that occur in direct speech relate to those that occur in narrative?

To a certain extent, characters use counterfactuals in the same way the narrator does, thus becoming secondary narrators in their own right (for this terminology, as well as that of focalization below, see de Jong 2001 and Richardson 1990). Louden implicitly acknowledges this by including counterfactuals used by characters in his count of "pivotal" counterfactuals, drawing no distinction between direct speech and narrative. And while the most obvious example of character-as-narrator is Odysseus, other characters may also step into the spotlight and make use of pivotal counterfactuals to dramatize their own stories, as for example Menelaus at *Od.* 4.363-4 ("καί νύ κεν ἤια πάντα κατέφθιτο καὶ μένε᾽ ἀνδρῶν, / εἰ μή τίς με θεῶν ὀλοφύρατο καί μ᾽ ἐλέησε"). Yet there are many counterfactuals used by Homeric characters that do not resemble

pivotal counterfactuals in either form or implicature. What sort of role do these other expressions play? Are they equally central to the narrative?

This paper argues that one major category of counterfactuals that occur in direct speech consists of those in which a character expresses a wish that things were other than they in fact are. For example, Achilles cries out in frustration as he battles the river Scamander at *Il.* 21.279-80: "ὥς μ᾽ ὄφελ᾽ Ἕκτωρ κτεῖναι ὃς ἐνθάδε γ᾽ ἔτραφ᾽ ἄριστος· / τώ κ᾽ ἀγαθὸς μὲν ἔπεφν᾽, ἀγαθὸν δέ κεν ἐξενάριξε." Here the wish is clear, since it is actually expressed in lieu of the protasis of the condition (making this what Lang 1989 calls a "pseudoconditional"). In other cases, however, the wish is less obvious, as at *Od.* 24.284-5, where Laertes, speaking to the disguised Odysseus, tells the seeming traveler that he would have been greeted with proper hospitality if Odysseus had received him: "εἰ γάρ μιν ζωόν γ᾽ ἐκίχεις Ἰθάκης ἐνὶ δήμῳ, / τώ κέν σ᾽ εὖ δώροισιν ἀμειψάμενος ἀπέπεμψε." Only when one notes that the apodoses of both conditions are formally similar, introduced by the particle τώ, does it become clear that Laertes as well as Achilles is expressing not only a counterfactual condition but also an impossible—or so he thinks—wish: that his son were still alive. This categorization of counterfactuals through discourse particles improves upon that of Lang 1989, who does not call upon formal features in her categorization of counterfactuals at all. Moreover, as has been shown by much recent scholarship (for a brief selection see Bakker & Wakker 2009), discourse particles are essential in determining the import and implicature of a speech act.

When these counterfactuals of wish are viewed as a group, it becomes clear that, like pivotal counterfactuals, they tend to occur at high points or turning points in the plot. This is true of both conditions cited above: shortly after Achilles' cry, he is saved by divine intervention, and almost immediately following Laertes' speech, Odysseus reveals himself. Unlike pivotal

counterfactuals, however, these counterfactuals of wish are focalized through particular characters, thus immersing the audience more deeply in, rather than temporarily removing them from, the plot of the epic. This focalization allows the poet to signal a high point in the narrative while also offering an immediate characterization of the speaker, thus making the wish counterfactual a valuable tool.

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