

Ears, Artifice, and Hephaestus' Automatons in *Iliad* 18

In *Iliad* 18, during her mission to procure armor for her son, Thetis interrupts Hephaestus before he can affix “ears” (*ouata*, 378) to a set of twenty self-moving tripods. The “ears” are generally understood to be handles, a usage attested for other vessels in Homer and Hesiod. I argue, however, that in the context of this passage, the *ouata* should be understood not only figuratively, as handles, but literally, as artificial ears with which the marvelous tripods would be able to receive verbal commands. This interpretation finds support in the Homeric usage of *ous* and in ancient receptions of the passage. Further, I argue that the image of mechanical ears complements the broader thematic and metapoetic issues evoked by the description of Hephaestus' artisanship in *Iliad* 18.

Although the tripods' *ouata* can be understood metaphorically, as “ear-like” handles, the devices' marvelous quality destabilizes the very distinction between the literal and metaphorical meanings. Just as the tripods, ordinarily inanimate, have been given the power to move, so their “cunningly wrought” (*daidalea*, 379) ear-handles might possess powers of perception. Audiences would be disposed to understand *ouata* as functional “ears” by other descriptions of Olympian automatons that can speak and hear: Hephaestus' automatic bellows (also twenty in number; *Il.* 18.469) obey verbal commands, and his synthetic servants have voices and minds (18.419; Faraone 1987). It may be supposed that the tripods would enter the gatherings of the gods and return to Hephaestus' home (376-7) in response to his voice.

The possibility that the *ouata* are mechanical ears is further supported by the fact that, on a lexical level, the derived meaning “handle” is uncommon in Homer. With one exception (*Il.* 11.633), the twenty-eight instances of *ous* in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* refer only to human or animal

ears. In this capacity, the word is used in expressions that mean “to hear” (*Il.* 10.535, 12.442, 15.129, etc.) as well as in the famous scene in which Odysseus seals his companions’ ears to prevent them from hearing the Sirens (*Od.* 12.177). The reception of the passage in antiquity supports this account. Aristotle (*Pol.* 1253b) cites Hephaestus’ tripods to imagine machines that could hear their owners’ commands; a fragment by the comic playwright Crates arguably evokes Hephaestus’ automatons and refers to animated household implements obeying human speech (Devecka 2013).

Finally, I consider the significance of the tripods’ artificial ears in the context of oral and aural poetics. The scene in Hephaestus’ workshop, and the construction of the Shield in particular, is widely read as a *mise en abyme* for the complex process of poetic composition, performance, and reception (Francis 2009). These readings tend to emphasize the side of composition, in which Hephaestus figures the Homeric singer as a creator of life-like representations (Elsner 2002; Heiden 2008). The detail of the ears, however, directs our attention to the side of auditory reception. With his tripods, Hephaestus creates a kind of synthetic audience absolutely obedient to his voice. These artificial listeners would resemble other audiences in Homer, especially in the *Odyssey*, who become captivated by enchanted voices (including the Siren song; Biles 2003; Peponi 2012). The synthetic listeners stand in contrast, then, to the kinds of audiences implied by the description of the Shield, who should be at once immersed in the representation and free to contemplate its artifactuality (Becker 1995). In effect, the detail of the tripods’ ears subtly prompts audiences, in anticipation of the Shield ekphrasis, to consider the fraught relationship between auditory perception, aesthetic distance, and the enthralling power of the voice.

Bibliography

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