

Homer on the Tragic Paradox

The question of why Homer's audiences, both real and fictional, enjoy representations of pain and suffering has been widely debated in the field of Classical aesthetics, with scholars such as Peponi and Halliwell arguing that representations of pain are aesthetically transformed into pleasure via representations in works of visual art or song (a position Liebert calls "aesthetic transmutation"), and Liebert arguing that people enjoy pain itself, whether in real life or in representations. However, these arguments have not adequately addressed the issue of why Penelope, who often claims to enjoy her real life pain, does not enjoy Phemius' artistic representation of the same stimulus that causes her real life pain. If Peponi and Halliwell were right, she should enjoy Phemius' song, but not her real life pain, while if Liebert were right, she should enjoy both. My paper addresses this issue by arguing that Penelope enjoys not pain itself, but the discharge of pain, and Phemius' song provides the one but not the other by reminding her of her loss without triggering the weeping that characterizes Odysseus' response to Demodocus' songs. This argument adds to a growing literature on the "tragic paradox" in Classical literature.

Penelope and other Homeric characters often claim to "take pleasure" (*terpesthai*) in or "take their fill" (*korennusthai*) of their pain, but these claims are complicated by the fact that the pain is often metonymically represented as weeping or accompanied by words for weeping. Weeping is not an emotion, but an act – a discharge of negative emotion. I suggest that mourners do not enjoy pain itself, but only its relief, and that they have an appetite for this relief only when already "filled" with emotion, but do not desire the emotion itself even for the sake of pleasure in its relief.

Although words like *terpesthai* and *korennusthai* indicate that Penelope has an “appetite” for tears in real life (as Liebert suggests), she paradoxically requests that Phemius stop his song about Odysseus’ failure to return home from the war – the very cause of her real life suffering. This indicates that, in contrast to Liebert, she does not have an appetite for the pain produced by the song, and, in contrast to Peponi, Halliwell, and others, the pain of the song is not preferable to real life suffering or transformed into “pleasure.” Instead, Phemius’ song fails to produce tragic pleasure because it does not induce Penelope to weep, and instead merely reminds her of her suffering.

Penelope’s failure to take pleasure in Phemius’ song stands in contrast to representations of other characters who do achieve tragic pleasure, especially Odysseus in response to Demodocus’ songs. Demodocus’ songs satisfy Odysseus’ “appetite” for tears, as can be seen by Odysseus’ praise of Demodocus’ performance and his requesting another song on a similar topic, despite his weeping at the first song. I argue that the principal difference between Penelope’s and Odysseus’ responses to the different songs is that Demodocus’ songs induce Odysseus to weep, but Phemius’ song fails to elicit the same response from Penelope.

One problematic implication of this line of reasoning is that the Homeric poets might be understood to endorse the notion that representations of tragedy can be pleasing only when they elicit tears, and this seems to fly in the face of ordinary experience. As a solution to this problem, I suggest instead that they understand tragic pleasure as a kind of discharge of emotion, similar to, but different from weeping, and show the characters who achieve tragic pleasure weeping merely as an effective way to represent such a discharge.

In conclusion, this project, by closely analyzing representations of Penelope’s and Odysseus’ responses to songs which depict the causes of their suffering, sheds new light on the

neglected but crucial issue of why Penelope's response to Phemius' song does not correspond to either of the prominent theories of the tragic paradox. In their depiction of these and other audiences' responses to songs, the Homeric poets present a view of the tragic paradox in which, in opposition to the "aesthetic transmutation" theorists, the aesthetic pleasure is continuous with real life pleasure in weeping, but, in opposition to Liebert, the pleasure is not in pain itself, but in its discharge.

Bibliography

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