The Typology of Omens in Homer

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Typology of Omens in Homer Abstract

Divinely-sent phenomena, variously referred to as omens, portents, or signs, appear frequently in Homer, with apparently many different uses behind them. They have both practical and rhetorical uses; capable of being used as both mnemonic devices as well as having rhetorical purposes. One of the objects of this paper is to outline their use both practically and rhetorically, as well as to examine the patterns to which they conform in the epics of Homer.

It is apparent that omens are particularly useful as memory aids, largely due to their position in the texts, but also due to their divine origin. Events with divine causes are usually easier to remember and would have likely aided the bard as he retold the tale. Additionally omens are a vital part of plot development, since the appearance of an omen often provides cause for many subsequent events. Additionally, omens are important to the characters. One of the aspects of a good story is the elevation of its characters; many of the characters in Homer have a special relationship with the gods, and omens are one way by which Homer expresses that relationship. The gods send the sort of omens not often seen in the everyday life of a typical audience member, which indicates the special level of interest the gods have in the lives of Homeric characters.

The other purpose of this paper is to explore the patterns behind Homer's usage of omens. Every time there is a highly conspicuous omen that elicits an interpretation from an avowed prophet, the pattern seems to be this: omen, interpretation, reaction. For example, in Book 2 of the Odyssey, Zeus sends the sign of the two eagles and the subsequent events follow a typological pattern. The sign occurs, followed by an interpretation, and then the reaction. In this

instance, the sign is conspicuous and elicits the interpretation of the seer Halitherses, who offers the correct interpretation; the suitors react by dismissing it offhand. There is another example of this that occurs in Book 12 of the Iliad, with Hector and Polydamas. Zeus sends a sign: an eagle clutching a serpent. The serpent bites the eagle, and the eagle then drops the serpent. Polydamas then offers his interpretation of the sign: Zeus is warning Hector not to take the Greek ships. Hector reacts angrily and subsequently ignores the warning to his detriment. The reaction of dismissing and/or ignoring the sign is typical of Homeric usage of signs; the usual result of ignoring a sign is averse. This seems to suit Homer's rhetorical purposes, while it also indicates to us how an ancient audience might have understood omens. This paper undertakes to analyze multiple instances of this typology throughout both the Iliad and the Odyssey, examining the particular words that are used and their various contexts. The ultimate purpose of this paper is to highlight the multi-faceted use of omens by a master story-teller, to explain how omens are used rhetorically and practically, while also exploring what they might have meant to an ancient audience.

The Typology of Omens in Homer

The object of this paper is to explore several aspects of omens as they appear in the Homeric cycle and to give a brief overview of their use. For the purposes of this paper, an omen can be defined as any sort of natural phenomenon sent by the gods to mortals in whom they are specifically interested, usually as a warning. Some scholars draw a distinction between oracles and omens, which has proven useful considering the constraints of this paper. Scholar Richard Stoneman defines an oracle as an answer to a question, whereas an omen is more like a "hidden

message." [1] This is an important distinction, which will have much to do with following examples from Homer. This paper will specifically examine the instances of what we might call "covert" omens that appear in both the Iliad and the Odyssey. In both, there are instances where Zeus sends his eagle as a sign to the characters, and said eagle usually makes a dramatic appearance. The manifestation is shortly followed by an interpretation, and the reaction to the interpretation is usually adverse. This paper will examine the events, the particular words that are used and their surrounding context.

Another important thing to note about omens, as defined above, is their multi-faceted usage in Homer. They are useful as mnemonic devices, while they are also rhetorical and very important to the unfolding of the plot. Eric Havelock in his book *The Greek Concept of Justice* dwells not only on the "psychology of memorization" for which omens were so important, but also identifies them as "suitable vehicles for the didactic purposes required of the narrative" (58). There will not be sufficient space to discuss all of these possibilities, but it is nevertheless worth noting. Perhaps the most practical use of the portentous is its use as a memory aid. As such, its usage is varied and very economical. Eric Havelock in his book *The Greek Concept of Justice* dwells on the "psychology of memorization" at length. Havelock describes the importance of an extraordinary type of character or event, "The oral enclave of preserved speech…utilizes heroes and gods as part of the apparatus of memorization" (50). It is much easier to remember certain events when they have a divine or extraordinary agent, and such are "suitable vehicles from the didactic purposes required of the narrative" (58). Coming from a god or a hero the content of their dialogue or even their actions is more likely to be memorable than those of an "ordinary

[1] Stoneman, Richard. *The Ancient Oracles: Making the Gods Speak* pp. 15

mortal." Havelock calls it the "mythic understanding" of events, serving as a type of shorthand which increases the amount of information the narrator and audience can retain.

For Homer, omens would have been a rhetorical point of contact with a typical ancient audience. Not only does he bend them for his own purposes to aid his memory, but he also uses common knowledge with his audience members to make his rhetoric all the more effective. For example, there is a fairly obvious parallel that takes place between the household of Odysseus and that of Agamemnon. Odysseus and Agamemnon are meant to parallel, and the two wives Penelope and Clytemnestra are also meant to parallel, the two sons, Telemachus and Orestes and the antagonists Aegisthus and the suitors as a collective whole. Without going into too much detail, Homer uses omens to reinforce this parallel, which adds layers of depth to his narrative as a whole and piques the interest of his audience, while the situations are strikingly similar, Homer uses role reversal and turns the tables. Instead of the master of the house being murdered (as Agamemnon was), Odysseus returns and punishes the antagonist himself, rather than leaving it to his son to take vengeance (as Orestes did). The reason Homer uses is omens is to complete the parallel: in Book 1 of The Odyssey, Zeus mentions the fact that Aegisthus (who is meant to parallel the suitors) was given due warning, yet still continued down his bad path. Likewise, the suitors of Penelope also receive due warning yet choose to ignore it. Zeus sent Hermes to warn Aegisthus, while the suitors receive the sign of the eagle. Unlike Aegisthus, the suitors do not have the benefit of meeting a god in person, nevertheless, they were important enough to merit Zeus' regard such that he sent them an omen at all. This is how Homer sets up what Havelock calls the "moral polarization" of the characters. The suitors, like Aegisthus, are the natural antagonists and Homer's use of omens only reinforces that fact in the minds of his audience. This is one illustration of the Homeric use of omens.

Another technique behind his use of omens is his use of them as foreshadowing devices. The plot of The Odyssey in particular has two foci: the eventual homecoming of Odysseus and the revenge coming to the suitors. Part of his rhetorical purpose behind the omens is to keep these two foci more closely related, as it would be somewhat easy for the two threads of the story to become disparate and disconnected. They eventually come together in the end, when Odysseus both returns and takes his vengeance, but the wanderings of Odysseus and the antics of the suitors on Ithaca could very easily become disconnected stories if not kept closely tied together by some sort of device. Omens fulfill that purpose because they point to both the eventual homecoming, the νόστος of Odysseus, as well as to the destruction coming to the suitors. The prophecy of Athena in Book 1 is an example of this, as well as the prophecy of Halitherses (highlighted later), who both predict that Odysseus is eventually going to return home and exact vengeance. For the sake of brevity, only a few examples have been mentioned. [2]

Looking at yet another aspect of omens, the first example is taken from Book 12 of the Iliad, the interaction between Hector and his friend Polydamas. Hector and his forces are about to make an attack on the Achaian ships when an eagle sign appears. The eagle flies overhead, holding a large serpent in its talons; after being bitten by the serpent, the eagle drops it in the middle of the Trojan forces. Polydamas, although not strictly a professional seer, offers a cautious interpretation and says that it is certainly an ill-omen. Hector reacts with skepticism and says:

> Πουλυδάμα, σὺ μὲν οὐκ ἔτ᾽ ἐμοὶ φίλα ταῦτ᾽ ἀγορεύεις:
> οἶσθα καὶ ἄλλον μῦθον ἀμείνονα τοῦδε νοῆσαι.

[2] Penelope's Dream in Book 19 (lines 535-550) is a good illustration of this, in addition to the prophecy offered up by Odysseus whilst disguised as a beggar. The prophecies of Theoclymenus are also illustrative with regards to this, especially as the two foci of the plot are coming together.

εἰ δ᾽ ἐτεὸν δὴ τοῦτον ἀπὸ σπουδῆς ἀγορεύεις,
ἐξ ἄρα δή τοι ἔπειτα θεοὶ φρένας ὤλεσαν αὐτοί,
235ὃς κέλεαι Ζηνὸς μὲν ἐριγδούποιο λαθέσθαι
βουλέων, ἅς τέ μοι αὐτὸς ὑπέσχετο καὶ κατένευσε:
τύνη δ᾽ οἰωνοῖσι τανυπτερύγεσσι κελεύεις
πείθεσθαι, τῶν οὔ τι μετατρέπομ᾽ οὐδ᾽ ἀλεγίζω
εἴτ᾽ ἐπὶ δεξί᾽ ἴωσι πρὸς ἠῶ τ᾽ ἠέλιόν τε,
240εἴτ᾽ ἐπ᾽ ἀριστερὰ τοί γε ποτὶ ζόφον ἠερόεντα.
ἡμεῖς δὲ μεγάλοιο Διὸς πειθώμεθα βουλῇ,
ὃς πᾶσι θνητοῖσι καὶ ἀθανάτοισιν ἀνάσσει. (Il. 231-243)

Hector then goes on to imply that Polydamas is merely being a coward, forging on with his original plan. He believes that Zeus himself had entrusted him with an oracle (as defined above, spoken word rather than hidden clue), which is largely what leads him to ignore Polydamas' sensible advice. He believes that he will eventually defeat the Achaians, and though it seems like he meets immediate success, the eventual result is adverse.

The second example selected is found in Book 2 of The Odyssey; this is the assembly scene where the young prince of Ithaca Telemachus is holding court with his mother's suitors, whom the audience members have already identified as the antagonists. This particular scene is somewhat like a trial scene in its very nature, with both parties making their defenses, followed by a divine pronouncement. Telemachus and the suitors have been sparring back and forth somewhat futilely for some time. Only after Telemachus calls out to Zeus (Od. 2.144) does the omen of the two eagles appear. The eagles are conspicuous to all (especially to the audience members) as a type of omen. Its appearance is followed shortly by the interpretation of Halitherses, who predicts doom and destruction for the suitors. The suitors, however, react by

dismissing it offhand. In this example and in that from the Iliad, the reaction is usually some expression of skepticism and then an accusation some type leveled against the interpreter. In response to Halitherses interpretation, the suitor Eurymachus responds with:

> "ὦ γέρον, εἰ δ᾽ ἄγε νῦν μαντεύεο σοῖσι τέκεσσιν
> οἴκαδ᾽ ἰών, μή πού τι κακὸν πάσχωσιν ὀπίσσω:
> 180ταῦτα δ᾽ ἐγὼ σέο πολλὸν ἀμείνων μαντεύεσθαι.
> ὄρνιθες δέ τε πολλοὶ ὑπ᾽ αὐγὰς ἠελίοιο
> φοιτῶσ᾽, οὐδέ τε πάντες ἐναίσιμοι: αὐτὰρ Ὀδυσσεὺς
> ὤλετο τῆλ᾽, ὡς καὶ σὺ καταφθίσθαι σὺν ἐκείνῳ
> ὤφελες. οὐκ ἂν τόσσα θεοπροπέων ἀγόρευες,
> 185οὐδέ κε Τηλέμαχον κεχολωμένον ὧδ᾽ ἀνιείης,
> σῷ οἴκῳ δῶρον ποτιδέγμενος, αἴ κε πόρῃσιν." (Od. 2. 181-186). [3]

Eurymachus insults the old man Halitherses by accusing him of greed; he implies that he only interpreted the omen thus because he was hoping that Telemachus would reward him for being on the same side. As in the first example, the suitors believe they have reason to remain where they are and that they can safely ignore such an omen. Likewise, Eurymachus levels a charge against Halitherses in a similar fashion to Hector charging Polydamas with cowardice. The patterns are roughly identical. Perhaps this is simply for ease of narration, but it may also have, as Havelock suggested, "didactic purposes." Ultimately, the skepticism in either case is punished in some way, though perhaps not immediately. Unfortunately, little more can be said due to constraints of time.

[3] Michael Attyah Flower discusses this more fully in his book *The Seer in Ancient Greece*, in Chapter Five. He also goes on to discuss this pattern in later Greek literature as well.

In the example from the Iliad, the word τέρας is used three times from lines 195-230. In the example from the Odyssey, the word is not used at all. The word employed to describe the occurrence in The Odyssey is ὄρνιθας which is translated "bird-sign." It is difficult to say whether there is any inference to be made about this. The word τέρας is used in the phrase that identifies the occurrence as a "portent of Zeus of the aegis." Polydamas uses the same word when he asserts that his own interpretation cannot be that far off from a seer who understands "portents." Later on, the word is used to describe the Trojans, trusting in Διὸς τέρας αἰγιόχοιο. However in Book 2 of The Odyssey, the word "τέρας" is not used even once. The word is used in a few other places, when referring to separate instances, but not with this particular case. It is simply referred to as an ὄρνιθας or a "bird-sign." It is possible that Homer uses ὄρνιθας because there is nothing involved beyond eagles, whereas in The Iliad, it was the eagle and the serpent. In The Odyssey, the eagles swoop down over the assembly, attack each other and fly away again. The nature of each appearance is slightly different. Also, the identities of the parties involved differ slightly between the two. As Flower notes, "Hector is not morally the equivalent of Eurymachus…." Nor is Polydamas the equivalent of Halitherses, who is described as being,

ὁ γὰρ οἷος ὁμηλικίην ἐκέκαστο
ὄρνιθας γνῶναι καὶ ἐναίσιμα μυθήσασθαι (Od. 2.156-57).

However, while the situations are not in all ways completely parallel, the pattern remains the same.

Unfortunately, the limits of this paper prevent the deepest sort of discussion. However, there is still much that can be said on the topic. There are undoubtedly other instances of this sort of omen all throughout Homer which would be well-worth exploring but this paper only examines the most obvious examples and barely brushes on the other aspects of Homeric omens.

It is fairly apparent that Homer had a very specific way of employing omens, which involved the pattern described above. The most conspicuous of omens, somewhat ironically, are treated with skepticism by those receiving the interpretation. In these cases, the skeptics are already convinced that they ought to continue on their present path and not alter their actions based on such an omen. Homer perhaps had a greater moral lesson to proclaim though his use of omens, using them to inform his audience that it is never wise to ignore an omen.

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