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THE ILIAD AND THE ODYSSEY**

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The Lesser Shall Serve the Greater:
Sarpedon and Menelaus in Narratives of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*

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In Book 16 of the *Iliad*, Zeus allows Sarpedon to die in battle even though Sarpedon is his son. In Book 4 of the *Odyssey*, however, Menelaus learns that he will escape death because he is Zeus' son-in-law. This seems puzzling; why should Menelaus receive a privilege denied to Sarpedon? Why must Zeus' son die while his son-in-law gets to live forever? Searching for a theological justification to this problem would be a futile exercise.¹ As Albert Henrichs writes, "The Greeks are notoriously inconsistent, especially when it comes to articulating differences and affinities between gods and mortals."² The Homeric epics offer us a window into the human—and even the divine—condition, but they do not present us with a coherent theological system.

Instead of drawing a systematic theology out of the poems, I will explain this discrepancy by analyzing the narrative purposes that the deaths of Sarpedon and Menelaus serve within the poems. The *Iliad* links the deaths of Hector and Sarpedon using textual and structural parallels; before each hero's death, Zeus considers sparing him, but relents when a goddess voices opposition. This connection glorifies Hector by comparing his death with the death of Zeus' son. In the *Odyssey*, Menelaus mentions Elysium—where he will enjoy immortality—side-by-side with Ogygia—where Odysseus has been offered immortality. This juxtaposition serves to contrast the two places; Elysium is the fulfillment of Menelaus' destiny, while Ogygia is a distraction from Odysseus' destined homecoming. In each case, the fate of a lesser character—Sarpedon or Menelaus—gives us insights about the destiny of a central character—Hector or Odysseus.

Homer connects the death of Sarpedon with that of Hector by having Zeus waver over whether to spare each man. Zeus laments Sarpedon's fate; "woe is me (ὄ μοι ἐγών), for that it is fated that Sarpedon, dearest of men to me (φίλτατον ἀνδρῶν), be slain by Patroclus, son of Menoetius!" (*Il.* 16.433-4).³ Using a parallel structure, Zeus expresses the same sentiment toward Hector; "alas (ὦ πόποι), look you now, in sooth a well-loved man (φίλον ἄνδρα) do mine eyes behold pursued around the wall" (*Il.* 22.168-9). Each speech opens with an interjection expressing grief, and then relates the man's relation as dear (φίλος) to Zeus. In both speeches, Zeus proceeds to contemplate whether he should save the Trojan fighter or allow him to die at the hands of his Greek attacker.⁴ The textual connection continues with the response Zeus receives. In both cases, a goddess averse to the Trojans—Hera in the case of Sarpedon, Athena in the case of Hector—persuades Zeus not to intervene and save his favorite.⁵ Both goddesses pose the same rhetorical question using the same words; "a man that is mortal (θνητόν), doomed long since by fate, art thou minded to deliver again from dolorous death?" (*Il.* 16.441-2, 22.179-80). Both goddesses then offer exactly the same rebuke; "do as thou wilt; but be sure that we other gods do not commend (ἐπαινέομεν) you" (*Il.* 16.443, 22.181). Both times this persuades Zeus to acquiesce to the death of his favorite.

Admittedly, verbatim repetition is frequent in Homer as a byproduct of the poems' oral composition. Such formulaic language frequently lacks any deeper meaning; it was simply easier on the bard's memory to reuse a line or part of a line in multiple contexts. However, the

structural parallels of these two scenes are too great for us to construe the verbal parallels as accidents of oral composition. The structural parallels might indicate that these two episodes are variations on a type scene that was more frequent in non-extant epic poetry. But even if we concede such an unprovable speculation, it is significant that Homer chooses to employ this type scene only in the deaths of these two characters.

By textually and structurally linking Sarpedon's death with Hector's, Homer exalts Hector by comparing him to a god's son. Sarpedon is a unique figure in the Trojan War; other than Aeneas, he is the only son of a god fighting on the Trojan side, and he is the only son of Zeus fighting on either side.⁶ By making Zeus waver over the death of Hector in the same way that he hesitates over the death of his own son, Homer emphasizes how extraordinary Hector is. By having the gods argue over Hector's death in the same way that they wrangle over Sarpedon's, Homer portrays Hector as equally important to the gods as their own children. Homer narrates the conflict over Sarpedon's body (*Il.* 16.563-644), which is eventually whisked away for burial (*Il.* 16.666-83), but he devotes even more attention to the defilement of Hector's body (*Il.* 22.367-404) and its eventual return to Priam for burial (*Il.* 24.552-620). Moreover, Sarpedon's death is the first in a chain of three *aristeiai* that ends with Hector's death.⁷ In each of these *aristeiai*, the narrative slows down to show one great hero reaching his zenith by killing another great hero. First, Patroclus attains his *aristeia* when he kills Sarpedon. Second, Hector reaches his *aristeia* when he slays Patroclus. Finally, Achilles slaughters Hector, which precipitates his *aristeia*. This ultimately magnifies Hector by placing his death at the culmination of a chain that began with the slaughter of a son of Zeus.

Whereas the *Iliad* links the death of Sarpedon to the death of Hector, the *Odyssey* juxtaposes the immortality promised to Menelaus with the immortality offered to Odysseus.⁸ Menelaus himself reveals that Odysseus is in Ogygia when he recounts what Proteus, the Old Man of the Sea, told him; "him I saw on an island, shedding big tears, in the halls of the nymph Calypso, who keeps him there perforce (ἀνάγκη), and he cannot come to his native land (πατρίδα γαῖαν)" (*Od.* 4.556-8).⁹ Immediately following this brief description of Odysseus, Proteus reveals Menelaus' own fate to him:

"But for thyself, Menelaus, fostered of Zeus, it is not ordained (θέσφατόν) that thou shouldst die (θανέειν) and meet thy fate in horse-pasturing Argos, but to the Elysian plain (Ἠλύσιον πεδῖον) and the bounds of the earth (πείρατα γαίης) will the immortals convey (πέμψουσιν) thee, where dwells fair-haired Rhadamanthus, and where life (βιοτή) is easiest for men. No snow is there, nor heavy storm, nor ever rain, but ever does Ocean send up blasts of the shrill-blowing West Wind that they may give cooling to men; for thou hast Helen to wife, and art in their eyes the son-in-law (γαμβρός) of Zeus" (*Od.* 4.561-9).

Elysium, as described here, has much in common with Ogygia as described in the following book (*Od.* 5.55-75).¹⁰ Both Elysium and Ogygia are places of immense natural (or even supernatural) beauty. Elysium always has fair weather, while Ogygia has a "luxuriant wood (ὑλητηλεθόωσα)," "four springs in a row (κρήναι ἐξείης πίσυρες)" and "soft meadows (λειμῶνες μαλακοί)." According to Homer, Ogygia is the type of place that even a god would wonder at (*Od.* 5.73-5). Likewise, both Elysium and Ogygia are remote islands. Most importantly, Elysium and Ogygia are both associated with immortality: Menelaus will be

whisked away to Elysium because the gods ordain that he should not die, while Calypso offered to make Odysseus “immortal and ageless all his days (ἀθάνατον καὶ ἀγήραον ἡματα πάντα)” on Ogygia (*Od.* 5.136).

Although Homer describes Ogygia and Elysium in similar terms, this is not (as William Anderson argues) to homologize Odysseus’ experience on Ogygia and Menelaus’ afterlife in Elysium.¹¹ Rather, it is to contrast the two. Calypso’s offer of immortality is a distraction from Odysseus’ divinely ordained *telos*,¹² but Proteus’ promise of immortality is Menelaus’ divinely ordained reward.¹³ As Zeus tells Hermes when sending him to free Odysseus from Ogygia, it is Odysseus’ “fate (μοῖρ’ ἐστὶ) to see his friends, and reach his high-roofed house and his native land” (*Od.* 5.41). In keeping him on her island, Calypso—whose name means “concealer” or “she who buries”¹⁴—is keeping Odysseus from his destiny; she is preventing him from making his fated *nostos*¹⁵ and from serving as agent of divine justice against the suitors.¹⁶

For Menelaus, on the other hand, immortality is not a distraction from his destiny; it *is* his destiny.¹⁷ As we saw above, Menelaus’ reward of immortality is θέσφατόν—divinely ordained.¹⁸ Not only do the gods decree Menelaus’ journey to Elysium; they themselves will make it happen by sending him there. Elysium is Menelaus’ ultimate destination rather than an obstacle on his way to it. The fact that Elysium is Menelaus’ *telos* draws our attention to the fact that Ogygia is *not* Odysseus’ *telos*.

I have argued that Sarpedon dies in order to give greater significance to the death of Hector. Furthermore, Menelaus, who is promised immortality in fulfillment of destiny, contrasts with Odysseus, who is offered immortality to distract from his destiny. The comparisons I have drawn are ultimately important because they show us how Homer uses minor characters to shed light on major characters. Why, at last, does Zeus’ son die in battle while his son-in-law lives forever in bliss? Because through the death of Sarpedon we understand Hector, and through the immortality of Menelaus we understand Odysseus.

Notes

1. Janko writes of the scene where Zeus considers sparing Sarpedon, and notes that “the purpose is dramatic, not theological,” a statement that applies to the whole episode. See Richard Janko, *The Iliad: A Commentary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 375.

2. Albert Henrichs, e-mail message to author, October 6, 2014.

3. This and all subsequent quotations of the Iliad in English are taken from Butler’s translation.

4. “And in twofold wise is my heart divided in counsel as I ponder in my thought whether I shall snatch him up while yet he liveth and set him afar from the tearful war in the rich land of Lycia, or whether I shall slay him now beneath the hands of the son of Menoetius” (Il. 16.435-40). “Nay then, come, ye gods, bethink you and take counsel whether we shall save him from death, or now at length shall slay him, good man though he be, by the hand of Achilles, son of Peleus” (Il. 22.174-6).

5. Richard Janko, *The Iliad: A Commentary*, 376.

6. *Ibid.*, 370, 376.

7. *Aristeia* defined in this context as the point when a hero reaches the pinnacle of his prowess and draws the focus to himself.

8. I am indebted to Anderson for realizing this connection. See William S. Anderson, “Calypso and Elysium,” *The Classical Journal* 54 (1958): 6-7

9. This and all subsequent English quotations of the Odyssey are taken from Murray’s translation.

10. This is in fact the first description of Elysium in Greek literature. See Anderson, “Calypso and Elysium,” 1.

11. Anderson, 7-8.

12. I interpret *telos* here as the ultimate end of the hero’s journey.

13. This is not to say that Menelaus earned this reward through any ethical or heroic behavior. Rather, this honor is due purely to his special relationship with Zeus as Helen’s husband. As we see in Book 11, the other great heroes of the Trojan War experience a shadowy afterlife in Hades. Only in later Greek thought does Elysium become a reward for the virtuous and heroic. See Alfred Huebeck, Stephanie West, and J. B. Hainsworth’s *A Commentary on Homer’s Odyssey*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 227.

14. Anderson, 7.
15. *Nostos* defined here as the hero's homecoming.
16. For Odysseus as agent of divine vengeance, see Od. 22.35-41.
17. And this is immortality in the strict sense of the word. It is not merely that he will have a happy afterlife, but that he will not die at all.
18. From θεός and φημί.

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