Foreword

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The Swineherd and the Bow: Class Discourse in the "Odyssey" by William G. Thalmann explores the historical context of Homeric poetry by treating as evidence not only what the *Odyssey* says but also how it says it through its traditional mythology and poetics. The author traces the communicative power of myth, as variously encoded by archaic Greek poetry in its myriad local varieties but harnessed to political purposes, in order to reconstruct a Homeric world. This world of Homer, he argues, is a cultural construct—not the real world that some classicists and historians assume it to be. Thalmann's book guards against the pitfalls of treating as reality the mythological and poetic representations of reality. At the same time it highlights these representations—or even refractions—as historical realities in their own right.

Homer's world as conveyed by the *Odyssey* is not some passive playback of life in, say, the eighth century before our era. It is an active rethinking of the social processes that led to the formation of the polis or city-state around that time and thereafter. Opinions may differ about whether this kind of rethinking involved some single creative act or rather an ongoing re-creative process, one that paralleled the historical continuum of oral poetic traditions in which each performance entailed varying degrees of re-composition in the very act of performance. Either way, the re-thinking that went into re-presenting reality in the *Odyssey* is the fundamental empirical given for *The Swineherd and the Bow*.

The historical realities of performance traditions in archaic Greece have a direct bearing on a vital question about the reception of Homer in the ancient world: is this poetry of and for and even by the elites of society? Thalmann's conscientious search for an answer calls for a thoroughgoing reexamination of

the social history of aristocracy and slavery in the ancient world. His book makes clear that aristocrats and slaves cannot be separated in any historical study of the cultural and political agenda of the *Odyssey*. The self-identity of aristocrats depended on slaves as their “other,” and the book presents its reading of slaves as an attempt to resist the *Odyssey*’s focus on aristocrats and the poem’s—and modern scholars’—tendency to take slaves in the narrative for granted.

In this regard, what Homeric poetry leaves unsaid about slaves is as vital as whatever it keeps saying over and over again about aristocrats—vital to ancient aristocrats as a necessary repression, and vital for modern readers to recognize as revealing, by absence, the contours of an ideology. It is remarkable, for example, that the words *doulos* and *doulē*, designating, respectively, a male or a female slave, in the bureaucratic language of the “Linear B” administrative archives of the late second millennium before our era (spelled *do-e-ro* and *do-e-ra*), hardly ever occur in our received texts of the *Odyssey* or the *Iliad*. In fact, the masculine form is nowhere attested in the Homeric poems, while the feminine counterpart is so sporadic that scholars of the Homeric textual tradition in the Hellenistic age athetized (that is, marked as spurious, not of Homeric authorship) those rare verses in which this problematic word surfaced. The scarcity of these words is a symptom of the poem’s reluctance to name slavery bluntly and its propensity to mystify class relations.

In the same way, as Thalmann argues in his analysis of the contest of the bow in Book 21, the poem presents an idealizing and enchanted picture of relations among the elite through Odysseus’s victorious homecoming. It succeeds only partially, however, leaving us with a sense of the violence that this agonistic way of life always forebodes.

The explanatory power of the historical perspective that Thalmann applies to the poetics of the *Odyssey* extends from the overall narrative framework to the individual passages that he analyzes, most prominently the contest of the bow in Book 21. The poetics that emerge from *The Swineherd and the Bow* not only reveal the cultural and political agenda of the *Odyssey*. More than that, they are the agenda.

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