

Ἄοιδος ἀνήρ, Aegisthus and Clytemnestra (the *Odyssey* 3.263-272)

We are told that Agamemnon leaving for Troy entrusted his wife, quite surprisingly, to a minstrel, ἀοιδός ἀνήρ, and Aegisthus was unable to seduce her until he took the minstrel to a desert island and left him as prey for the birds.

The ancient commentators had no knowledge of any tradition related to this ἀοιδός ἀνήρ. They offer some guesses and fictional stories, very poor ones, none of which provides us with any help.

The most coherent attempt known to me to interpret the passage was undertaken by Denys Page.¹

He pointed out that there is no trace of this story anywhere in Greek literature. It could not be represented “in the so-called Epic Cycle, whether *Νοστοί* or *Ἀτρειδῶν κάθοδος* or any other such poem”, for we see that ancient scholars had nothing to rely upon in their attempts at interpreting the passage.²

Recognition of this fact leads to a choice: either the story of the ἀοιδός ἀνήρ is a Homeric invention or it goes back to an epic tradition older than the *Odyssey*.

Page rejects the first possibility for two reasons: “if the Queen must have a custodian, the minstrel is among the least likely candidates for the post”; besides, “it is surely plain that the present passage is merely a summary of a tale already familiar; it is the synopsis of a quite elaborate story”.³

Then what was in the *Odyssey's* source? According to Page, “the role of the minstrel-guardian of the Queen, so strange to Homer, would seem natural in a society in which minstrel and prophet or priest might be the same person”. Hence Page comes to the conclusion “that the source of these lines in the *Odyssey* was to be found in the distant past, and that the

¹ Denys Page, “The Mystery of the Minstrel at the Court of Agamemnon”, in *Studi classici in onore di Quintino Cataudella* (Catania 1972) I: 127-131 (hereafter quoted as Page).

² Page, 129.

³ Page, 128.

minstrel-guardian of the Queen in this passage perpetuates the memory of a fact about society in a period long before Homer".⁴

Thus, Page first makes the poet a person who does not know what he is talking about (for his interpretation implies that the author of the *Odyssey* does not realize that a minstrel-guardian of the Queen is something strange), and then he postulates a purely imagined reality (for what is the evidence for the society he refers to? besides, I wonder whether it is reasonable to entrust one's wife to such a charismatic person, a prophet, a poet, and priest at the same time?).

Now we must say that the passage looks strange not only because it introduces a surprising picture. No name is given, neither that of the minstrel, nor of his father, and the island also remains unidentified. That is not Homer's way of making allusions to well-known stories.

I believe, therefore, that the nameless ἄοιδος ἄνθρωπος, who left no trace elsewhere in Greek literature, is a Homeric invention. To be sure, a minstrel as a custodian of the Queen might surprise the poet's audience. What is surprising is not, however, *eo ipso* incredible. If so, the audience would accept such a minstrel even if he were a newcomer: "This follows from the authority of the singer, who by way of the muses knows the truth. The poet's words vouch for tradition; there is no way to tradition except through him".⁵ The only further detail, the death of the minstrel on a desert island, fits well into the story. The crime was hidden and it was conducted in quite a pragmatic way from the point of religious beliefs as well: no bloodshed took place. The motif as such was at hand: Philoctetes was left on a desert island.⁶

What, then, was the reason for introducing the ἄοιδος ἄνθρωπος and his story. One part of the reason is quite clear. The poet suggests a conclusion similar to that drawn by Athenaeus: the minstrel tribe "took the place of the philosophers of our time. Agamemnon, for example, leaves a minstrel behind to guard and counsel Clytemnestra. ... Hence Aegisthus could not corrupt the lady until he had murdered the bard on a desert island" (1.14 b, C.B. Gulick's translation; cf. Strab. 1.2.3). In the words of a modern

⁴ Page, 131.

⁵ Øivind Andersen, "Agamemnon's Singer" (*Od.* 3.262-372), *Symbolae Osloenses* 67 (1992) 5-27, esp. 25 (hereafter quoted as Andersen).

⁶ Even if this island was regularly identified as Lemnos, it was thought to be inhabited, see for instance Soph. *Philoct.* 2; 221; 265 sqq.

scholar, our passage is “propaganda for H.’s own profession”.⁷ Indeed, this kind of tendency is easily discernible in the text of the *Odyssey*. Ἄοιδός, we are told, sings to both mortals and gods (22. 346-347), he takes his inspiration from the gods (17. 518-519; cf. 1. 348) etc., etc. In particular, Phemius is shown as one of the more reliable people around Odysseus’ household.

But why introduce praise of the minstrel tribe yet again in a context which does not seem appropriate? We cannot avoid this question by accepting Stephen P. Scully’s suggestion that we consider the function of our minstrel as generic.⁸ The case is still unique and Øivind Andersen was right to reply that “a role as guardian must be constructed for the singer from our passage alone”.⁹ Andersen himself asserts that the presence of our ἀοιδός ἀνὴρ has a symbolic meaning. “The elimination of the singer is a symbol of the *non*-singing about “Mycenae” by the poet”, “the removal of the singer to the desert island means that the action at Mycenae and in Aigisthos’ house (*Od.* 24.22) is not worthy of or not fit for song”.¹⁰ However, what we learn about the action in Mycenae comes from the song. Besides, Andersen should have shown that the symbolism of the kind he assumes is immanent in the poetic system of the *Odyssey*; this he did not do. The figure of a minstrel-guardian still calls for explanation.

Let us pay attention to the composition of the Agamemnon story in the third book of the *Odyssey*. This is a part of the conversation between Telemachus and Nestor. Nestor, who was lucky to return home from Troy quickly and safely, tells Telemachus what he has heard about the returning heroes. Among other things he makes a remark (193 ff.) that “of the son of Atreus you have yourself heard (Ἀτρεΐδην δὲ καὶ αὐτοὶ ἀκούετε), far off though you are, how he came, and how Aegisthus devised for him a woeful doom; yet verily he paid the reckoning therefor in terrible wise, so good a thing is it that a son be left behind a man at his death, since that son took vengeance on his father’s slayer” (A.T. Murray’s translation).

This is really the summary of well-known story. But later (243 ff.) Telemachus asks Nestor, while referring to his extraordinary competence,

⁷ The *Odyssey* of Homer, ed. by W.B. Stanford (London etc. ²1967) 1: 259. Andersen 17 shares this view.

⁸ Stephen P. Scully, “The Bard as the Custodian of Homeric Society: *Odyssey*. 3.263-272”, *QUCC* 8 (1981) 67-83.

⁹ Andersen 13.

¹⁰ Andersen 5; 14.

to tell him truly (σὺ δ' ἀληθὲς ἐνίσπες, 247): how the son of Atreus was slain, where was Menelaus, and what death Aegisthus planned for the king.

Nestor readily answers, but what we learn from his true account is only that Menelaus was absent (which we already knew) as well as the story of the minstrel-guardian of the Queen. Thus this story appears in the context of *polemics*, since it is emphatically introduced as something based on *true* knowledge by Nestor.

Since our passage pertains to polemics, we may try to reconstruct what was denied from what is asserted. If the *Odyssey* provides us with a reason to praise those who are skilful in playing the lyre, then the denied tradition contained, probably, a reason to assume another attitude toward this kind of people. In the third book of the *Iliad* (54 ff.), Hector has an occasion to rebuke Paris for cowardice. Well, he says to him, if you meet Menelaus -

οὐκ ἂν τοι χραίσμη κίθαρις τά τε δῶρ' Ἀφροδίτης.

The seducer Paris was skilful in playing the lyre. What about the seducer Aegisthus? We see him holding a lyre on the Boston Oresteia Krater by the Dokimassia Painter and elsewhere.¹¹

Thus, I propose that there was an old tradition, older than the *Odyssey*, according to which Aegisthus managed to seduce Clytemnestra because (or among other things because) he was skilful in singing and playing music, i.e. he possessed a skill that was typical for αἰοιδός.¹² This

¹¹ See Emily Vermeule, "The Boston Oresteia Krater", *AJA* 70 (1966) 1-22 and plates; Mark I. Davies, "Thoughts on the *Oresteia* before Aischylos", *BCH* 93 (1969) 240 ff. indicated some plausible echoes of such a perception of Aegisthus in Greek literature. The parallel between Paris and Aegisthus was suggested by John G. Griffith, "Aegisthus Citharista", *AJA* 71 (1967) 176-177.

¹² This idea (but not its application) was anticipated by Scully: "it may also be argued that the *thelgesken epessin* in 3, 264 suggests that in an early version Aegisthus was the singer man" (*Op. cit.* 69, n. 3). Actually, it is not necessary to make Aegisthus a singer man in the proper sense. It is enough to assume that he was thought to be skilful in performance. Jane McIntosh Snyder, "Aegisthos and the Barbitos", *AJA* 80 (1976) 189-190 argues that Aegisthus on the Boston Oresteia Krater is represented holding a barbitos, not exactly a lyra. The former is the instrument "closely associated with personal lyric poetry and with symposia". It means that "we see Aegisthos, like any convivial man, relaxing and entertaining himself," which

version annoyed the author of the *Odyssey*, so he introduced the minstrel-guardian of the Queen as a rival story. Yet the earlier version has survived as well and found its representation in Attic vase-painting.*

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Hyperboreus

Агамемнон, отправляясь под Трою, вверил жену попечению некоего аэда, и Эгисф не смог склонить Клитемнестру к измене прежде, чем избавился от аэда, оставив его умирать на пустынном острове (*Od.* 3.263-272). Вопреки высказывавшимся суждениям, нет причин считать, что история о безымянном аэде, погибшем на безымянном острове, является намеком на сюжет, известный гомеровской аудитории из других эпических сказаний, или что картина аэда-стража царицы является отголоском каких-то исторических реалий. Перед нами гомеровское нововведение, сделанное с прозрачной целью – подчеркнуть значение и благородство аэдов. Такая тенденция вообще характерна для “Одиссеи”. Специфическим мотивом для проведения ее в данном контексте послужила, вероятно, традиция, согласно которой Эгисфу потому, в частности, удалось соблазнить Клитемнестру, что он владел искусством улаждать игрой на лире – т.е. искусством, которое наиболее очевидным образом характеризует ремесло аэдов.

“emphasizes the fact that Orestes has taken the unwary Aegisthos by surprise”. Be it as it may, related data (see the previous note) suggest that there was a tradition behind the representation of Aegisthus holding an instrument and, therefore, one should not reduce the interpretation of the scene to a particular iconographical purpose.

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