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The Case for the Defense

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THE CASE FOR THE DEFENSE

Scott Richardson

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I can imagine Eustathius, sitting at the prosecutor's table after a self-confident but wooden performance, nervously tapping a legal pad with his stylus and avoiding the jury's eyes as John Vlahos brings in witness after witness to tear down the state's allegation that Homer means what he says, that it does not dawn on Penelope that the mysterious stranger is indeed her long-lost husband until the hero proves it after the slaughter of the suitors. Certain of the poet's integrity and insistent that there is nothing more in the *Odyssey* than meets the eye, our distinguished adversary has assumed his case to be obvious, hardly worth presenting, but now he looks on as his assumption about the narrator is thoroughly and, to his chagrin, persuasively undermined. The *Odyssey's* Homer is no Achilles, not the straight shooter Eustathius rests his commentary on. Rather, the narrator of this epic takes on the attributes of his wily, devious hero, who has a penchant for disguises, false leads, coded messages, underhandedness, and indirection. The defense has created

an alternative theory of the situation, one that not only takes into account several key pieces of evidence unnoticed or passed over by the legendary commentator but also creates a more plausible explanation for what actually does happen and is said than the traditional wisdom can account for. Eustathius is accusing the poet of blatancy, straightforwardness, and a serious want of imagination, serious Odyssean sins. Vlahos is rehabilitating this narrator by demonstrating the subtlety of his dialogue, the intricacy of the clues, and the cleverness of his marital drama.

Perhaps we should not lay the blame so heavily on Eustathius's shoulders and accept our own responsibility for failure to recognize that the narrator of the *Odyssey* is not upfront or ingenuous. We are given a glimpse of his nature even in the opening when he leads us to believe he is taking us to meet Odysseus but swerves instead to Olympus and then Ithaca, and throughout he gives us dialogue in which only the simple-minded characters actually say what they really mean and take words at face value whereas the clever characters work out the message underlying the words spoken by those conveying meaning by indirection. If it took until the twentieth century before a handful of readers started to suspect communication below the surface and characters' knowledge not made explicit to the audience, it is because most of us come to a narrative with Eustathius's blind faith in the veracity and full-disclosure posture of the narrator, our friend, our trusty guide through the story, especially an ancient narrative composed long before anyone had had the chance to develop the capacity for playing with narrative in an ostentatious manner. Even now most of us have a hard time believing that Homer has the sophistication to say one thing and mean another. We can trace the narrative tricks and self-consciousness of Nabokov, Faulkner, and Calvino back to Diderot and Sterne and even to Cervantes, but an ancient epic will surely have the integrity and trustworthiness of a Victorian novel. The pre-Quixote Eustathius did not even have our advantage, so perhaps we can cut him some slack.

Once Harsh's seminal 1950 article, however, alerted readers that we might be dealing with a different kind of narrator from what we had always believed, there is no going back to our state of innocence. Even if we do not buy into everything Vlahos presents as proof positive, we must surely acknowledge that reliance on a plainspoken, candid, direct narrator is naïve, a misunderstanding of his ethos and idiom. Vlahos has surely not proven to everyone's satisfaction that Penelope first recognized her husband well before book 23, but his case is founded on a premise that is demonstrably correct: that we cannot assume that the recognition first arises in book 23 only because the narrator does not explicitly tell us otherwise.

Vlahos's case is built on two related types of evidence. The first type consists of words or actions that are puzzling or nonsensical if we accept the surface-level meaning. The analysis of line 19.45 is one of these proofs, the discussion of the verb "erethizo," which must mean "provoke," and "k' eti," which implies a previous provocation. Should we place so much weight on one line, on a verb, particle, and adverb, to determine that Odysseus's communication to Penelope via Eumaeus in book 17 was the provocation he refers to and that she understood it as such? If that were the whole case, I would not be eager to grant the conclusion fully. The attempts to explain the verb away and the general agreement to ignore "*k' eti*" are not very convincing, so I am inclined to take Vlahos's point. Still, a few words in a text whose transmission from oral performance to printed book cannot be relied on as perfectly accurate seem a slender support for an argument with such great ramifications. But if they are Homer's words, Vlahos's explanation does away with otherwise inexplicable problems.

More convincing to me are bigger puzzles such as Penelope's decision to stage the bow-contest at the end of the book 19 interview, the exact moment at which she should, after all she has heard and seen, be most eager to put off the marriage decision for another few days at least. Penelope's urge to present herself downstairs in book 18 is another puzzle explained coherently by Vlahos's contention. Why would she want to talk to the suitors now? And how do we account for the discrepancy between what she says she plans to say and what she actually does say? The first could be attributable to the caprice of a beleaguered woman. The second could be a slip, a minor inaccuracy that no one sitting in Homer's audience would even notice. How many of these slips or unnoticeable discrepancies are we going to allow? The hypothesis of early recognition solves the puzzle. We might interpret the nature of the communication between wife and husband differently from Vlahos. We might not reach all the same conclusions about what she thinks she is doing and what he knows about what she is doing. There is plenty of room for a plurality of interpretations. But the basic assertion that there is something going on here between wife and husband, some communication not meant for others to share, goes a long way toward ridding us of a number of pesky problems.

The second type of evidence consists of interpretations of scenarios which, while not necessarily puzzling in themselves, admit of a much more sensible and plausible interpretation once we accept the premise of early recognition. The second-person verb in 23.175 does not need to be interpreted as "what sort of person you were if you were indeed the one you claim to be." The beggar's insouciance in refusing the queen's request for an interview cannot in itself prove that he is engaging in a clandestine form of

communication and that her appearance in the hall in book 18 signifies her understanding of the implied message. Still, if we, on the strength of the accumulation of all the evidence Vlahos presents, accept the notion that there is more going on than the narrator explicitly tells, his refusal of a royal command makes good sense as part of Odysseus's ploy to initiate a coded communication with his wife. Likewise, Penelope's alleged dream gains greater significance as part of this indirect conversation than as a mere report of a dream, even if we do not all accept her barb about missing the geese as a teasing riposte to Odysseus's crack about all the Cretan women swooning over her husband, an interpretation I like but not one necessary to a general acceptance of the case. The entire interview in book 19, which can be read straight, becomes a far more interesting conversation if we listen to it with Vlahos's ears—and not only more interesting but also truer to the ethos of the entire epic, in which the out-in-the-open and the blatant are eschewed by the characters we like and what they say rarely means only what the words literally convey.

In the end, the prosecution of the *Odyssey's* narrator for candor, plain speaking, and clumsy literalness falls under the weight of Vlahos's thorough presentation of an alternative scenario that fits the text far more convincingly. Nevertheless, I do not share Vlahos's certainty at each point. I do share his quarrel with those who assert that, if Homer does not say it outright, we cannot even consider it. The creator of this Odysseus and this Penelope is no naïve narrator. I do, however, relish the ambiguities, the uncertainties, the possibilities that are suggested, hinted at, subtly urged, but ultimately never unequivocally established. The delight in following the coded communication between the couple and in watching each move in their game lies precisely in not knowing fully or with certainty exactly what is going on. I stand on the outside of their *homophrosyne* and enjoy the undercurrent of their interaction largely because I cannot with confidence assert that I understand it completely.