And My Heart Desired to Hear:

Odysseus as the Paradigmatic Audience in *Odyssey* 12

Odysseus’ description of his encounter with the Sirens in Book 12 of the *Odyssey* provides a tantalizing glimpse of a poetic tradition emplotted within but also in competition with the poetry of Odysseus’ own *nostos*. The similarity of the enigmatic Sirens to the Homeric Muses has been revealed and examined in recent scholarship; both are groups of supernatural females who possess divine knowledge of heroic events and relate these events to mortals through song. In this paper I will further compare the Sirens to the Muses by focusing on the relationship that each group has with their audience; the Muses with a bard or poet, and the Sirens with Odysseus, himself a bard who sings his own tales to Alcinous’ Phaiakian court. By examining the two patterns or circuits of communication that each group ostensibly establishes, open and expanding for the Muses, closed, self-perpetuating, and ultimately silent for the Sirens, I hope to show that the Sirens pose a danger to Odysseus in terms of the poetic transmission of his own tale in addition to the physical peril that they represent within the narrative. I further hope to show that Odysseus’ successful encounter with the Sirens and subsequent focalization of their tale among the Phaiakians allows him to break the circular poetic pattern that constituted the Sirens’ trap, and by appropriating their divine voice and knowledge for his own, Odysseus enjoys a poetic relationship with the Sirens similar to that of a lyric *choregus*; a singular masculine voice which both directs and controls the voice of a plural, feminine group and is simultaneously authorized by that voice. Finally, I will argue that Odysseus employs the divine authority and enchanting poetic voice which he appropriates from the Sirens in order to portray himself within his own narrative as the ideal audience for epic poetry; enraptured, heedless of anything but the tale, and desperately hungry for more. This divinely authorized version of himself, then, serves as a paradigmatic model of listening for his own audiences, the Phaiakians, and, indeed, the actual audiences of the *Odyssey*.

In order to demonstrate different patterns of communication employed by the Sirens and the Muses, I will use recent scholarship on their similarities, primarily from Pucci, and, in addition to *Odyssey* 12, examine the invocations of the Muses in the *Iliad*, Hesiod, and the Homeric Hymns. For the discussion of Odysseus’ agonistic appropriation of the Sirens’ voice and authority within the context of choral poetry, I will rely on recent scholarship by Doherty, Calame, and, most especially, Karanika, whose yet-unpublished work on this subject, generously shared with me, has been an invaluable asset.

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