

The Eternal Phaeacians: New Evidence for an Old Problem

In *Odyssey* 7, as Odysseus stands at the threshold of the Phaeacian palace, the Homeric narrator describes in detail its rich features. As the narrator turns to the enslaved women within then the gardens of Alkinoos (7.103–31) something so strange happens that Martin West (2014) has suggested it is “irrefutable evidence” of the intervention of a single, hypothetical *Odyssey* poet “Q.” What happens? The Homeric narrator abruptly shifts to the present tense, which is highly unusual except in cases when something eternal is being described. West’s assertion is more than a revival of an old Analyst position but is framed within a larger debate about the role of textuality and orality in Homer’s composition (cf. Ready 2019; Currie 2016), and its denial of other explanations demands new treatment of the passage to advance a more nuanced position on Homeric referentiality. This paper presents new evidence concerning the poetic role and indeterminate fate of the Phaeacians to suggest that this subtle grammatical shift is not only consistent with the poem’s stance on the Phaeacians but also part of a larger discourse on immortality, impermanence, and memory in the *Odyssey*.

Despite this passage’s long-standing controversy, more recent arguments have suggested plausible reasons for the present tense, ranging from thematic relationships with other scenes (Xian 2018), a need to shift narratological perspective due to Odysseus’ limited vantage (Rijksbaron 2018), or the “heavenly aura” of Scheria (Nagy 2017). This last view is convincing given the much-discussed quasi-divine nature of the Phaeacians, but the Phaeacians are still not immortal, although they enjoy divine support for their nearness to the gods. As Arft (2022) has recently argued, the Phaeacians’ mortality is key to understanding the consequences of their assisting Odysseus, which may result in annihilation, loss of status, or being blockaded from the

world (cf. Bierl 2019). While this seemingly indeterminate and unresolved fate presents its own interpretative problems, I propose that the use of the present tense in describing the Phaeacians gendered infrastructure (enslaved women who produce textiles, a sign of poetic production) and Alkinoos' eternal gardens proleptically signals to the audience the everlasting fate of the Phaeacians: they do in fact survive and remain near to the gods despite their isolation.

This argument for the eternal status of the Phaeacians complements Arft's (2022) recent assertion that they are given a kind of immortality in epic, but it also invites fresh consideration of Laertes' own garden (*Odyssey* 24) and its role in the epic's emphasis on memory as a means of survival. Although critics have placed these contrasting gardens—one permanent, one dying and regrowing—in context of the larger contrast between Scheria and Ithaca (e.g. Vidal-Naquet 1996), less attention has been given to the themes of cultivation and memory inherent in the gardens themselves. Whereas Alkinoos' garden is explicitly portrayed as eternal, Laertes' only becomes “eternal” in the memories of he and his son, and it is the memory of that garden that fuels the epic's final recognition scene, which, like other recognitions in the epic, plays a significant role in the creation of ideal memories of Odysseus to be reperformed, thus memorialized in epic. In this case, then, the already tangible connection between these gardens is made even stronger through the discourse of immortality. On this basis, we see the purpose of the contrast: where the Phaeacians enjoy permanence because of their nearness to the gods, Ithaca enjoys no such advantage and must seek permanence elsewhere, in memory and reperformance of epic.

Overall, this reinterpretation of Alkinoos' garden helps solve a textual problem and resolves other interpretive problems while advocating for the *Odyssey's* integrity on poetic and

thematic grounds. What first appears as a problem of textuality and transmission becomes an important extension of a complex poetic system already at work in the epic.

References

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