Genre and Generation in the Odyssey.

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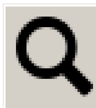

Genre and generation in the *Odyssey*

[article]

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Résumé (fre)

Genre et génération dans l'Odyssée (pp. 259-268)

La séparation entre genres poétiques différents dans la poésie grecque archaïque — en l'occurrence, entre Homère et Hésiode — vise à exprimer la discontinuité dans les relations entre hommes et dieux, sujet fondamental du mythe grec. La succession des dieux (dans l'Iliade) et la définition des êtres humains par la dikè (dans l'Odyssée) montrent la complémentarité et l'interdépendance entre la poésie d'Homère et celle d'Hésiode, chacune d'elles contribuant à produire un système cohérent et hiérarchisé de croyances au sujet du mode d'organisation du monde. Cruciaux dans l' Odyssée, qui se préoccupe de la validité et de la continuité des générations humaines, les thèmes de l'identité et de la reconnaissance apparaissent tout à la fois comme garantis par la dikè hésiodique et comme renforçant celle-ci : cette interaction entre les genres confirme que les types poétiques sont un phénomène culturel dont les frontières idéologiquement marquées aident à régler l'économie du mythe.

Texte intégral

GENRE AND GENERATION IN THE ODYSSEY

In récent years, much brilliant and invaluable work elucidating Greek myths has been done by Jean-Pierre Vernant and Marcel Détienne1, who hâve looked across texts and across historical periods in order to discern and retrieve a given myth's dispersed but essential components, which, seen in their relation to each other, yield meaning in every feature and be- come compréhensible as a totality. Having acknowledged with admiration the fruitfulness of looking for this material across the boundaries of lite- rary types, we might ask, from the standpoint of anthropology, «Can we learn anything from where those boundaries are, in fact, established? Can the boundaries themselves tell us anything?» Do they form part of the régulation of an economy of myth that they can help to identify?

We may take as a starting point a statement by Louis Gernet: «What is of particular interest in an anthropological study is the question about the barrier between human and divine reality: what séparâtes the human from the divine and, conversely, what brings them together?»2 I would like to suggest that this barrier is reflected in différent types of poetry, or more precisely that the séparation between types of poetry exists to express aspects of that fundamental séparation of which Gernet speaks. It may be appropriate for Classicists to follow suggestions implicit in the work of an

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ethnographer like Pierre Smith in «Des genres et des hommes»3, on the one hand, and a literary theorist like Tzvetan Todorov, in Les genres du discours4, on the other, that is, to treat genre itself as an institution, an aspect of society, and the distinct relations among genres and sub-genres as charged with ideological content, wherein the way that they are demar- cated makes it possible to read the classification of cultural phenomena, to see represented ways of organizing the world through distinct sphères of concern and distinct realms of reality. In this way literary studies and an- thropological -especially structuralist-symbolic- studies can be mutually illuminating if we look at the meaning of genre distinctions or genre boun- daries, when we recognize that genres can be viewed, like other cultural institutions, as existing in a relatibnship of interdependence, in which they hâve complementary functions in conveying différent aspects of a cohérent ideology or System of beliefs about the world. The crucial point about thèse distinctions or differentiations is their complementarity: they exist within, and serve to complète, a conception about the way the world is or- dered.

Given the difficulties of applying anthropolbgical methods of inquiry to mythology as rendered in ancient works of art, and of drawing an- thropologically valid conclusions without fieldwork5, it may be useful to move back a step to see what we can learn from genre as a socially deter- mined structure underlying a given work. To décode this properly would be a large project, but this paper will make a few suggestions of how such an effort might be relevant to seeing Homeric and Hesiodic poetry not just as «différent except in the ways that they are similar (or vice versa)», but as fundamentally complementary institutions comprising a cohérent world- picture.

Herodotus, at 2.53, speaks of Homer and Hesiod as being jointly res- ponsible for having systematized the gods for the Greeks: he ascribes to them the authority for producing théogonies, naming the gods, identifying their attributes and functions, in sum for having explained in a certain sensé how and why to worship the gods. What we know of Greek religious history and practice, of course, tells us that Homer and Hesiod are very far from constituting religious instruction in terms of practice. They do ex- plain relations between men and gods, but from our modem critical

standpoint it is curious that Herodotus should conjoin them as he does, in that the two traditions appear to do it in such différent ways. What I would like to consider briefly is how we can see those différences as significant and also locate the différences themselves as part of a cohérent cultural strategy within a larger intégral System of viewing the social and cosmic order.

In order to bring this question into focus, we might consider one divergent feature that needs to be reconciled with Herodotus' statement, namely that the Iliad and the Odyssey do not présent théogonie or cosmogonie material, except by way of allusion. It is clear that the Iliad and Odyssey, when they speak of Zeus, son of Cronos, assume and refer to the same basis of cosmic order that is spelled out in Hesiod; that is, they présuppose material that is elaborated in Hesiodic poetry, but do not themselves make that material overt. For example, in the Iliad vie find allusions to divine struggles on Olympus which, as Mabel Lang has shown, are linked together to form a kind of narrative beneath the surface level of the poem6. Thèse would not be compréhensible without an understanding of the théogonie scheme as we are presented with it in Hesiod. Moreover, the Iliad takes as its central hero the son of Thetis, who, we know from any sur- vey of her mythology, is a vehicle for divine succession. As is told elsewhere7, when Zeus was courting Thetis, intending to marry her, Themis, the guardian of order, intervened to prohibit the union because Thetis was destined to bear a son greater than his father. Themis urged the gods, therefore, to marry Thetis to a mortal, and to let her see her son die in battle. Hence Thetis' marriage to Peleus, and Achilles as the issue of an arrangement whereby he has to die, but Olympian stability is maintained. By looking at the diction and motifs associated with Thetis in the Iliad* - her connection with a divine conflict on Olympus in which Zeus is victori- ous and binds the losers9; her association there with Briareos the hundred- handed, to whom Hesiod assigns a prominent rôle in the Titanomachy10; and the référence in Iliad I to] µ 11; to her complaints about being forced to marry a mortal, and her lament about se-

eing her son die and being unable to help him12 -from a constellation of allusions of this kjnd, we are able to perceive an underlying dimension to the Iliadic situation that, again, only makes sensé in the light of the Hesiodic schéma. From Hesiod we gain knowledge about divine intergenerational conflict and its massive conséquences and implications; we learn what successive violent usurpation of the divine régime entails. Only through an ac- count like that given by Hesiodic poetry are we enabled to understand that the Iliad is offering an explanation for human mortality in the paradigm of Achilles: in order to prevent perpétuai violent overthrow, endless disor- der, and for the sake of preserving Zeus' hegemony and cosmic stability- which as the Theogony shows us has been achieved- human beings must not threaten to be stronger than their divine parents; that is, human beings must die. Embedded in the Homeric poems is the presumption of an evolved set of cosmic relations dépendent on the myth of divine succession; yet if we look for such explicit material in the Iliad and Odyssey, we find that it is excluded, adverted to only in allusions. The question then be- comes whether variant treatments of a given myth are developed in order to suit différent genres, or whether, in the first place, alternative genres develop with exclusive parameters in order to suit the content of the

myths?

We can examine another instance of differentiation and complementar- ity by looking at a problem in the Odyssey. It announces its subject as with the first word, but defers the naming of its hero until Une 21 -an absence, a hiatus, that corresponds to the narrative strategy by which it does not introduce us to the missing hero until the fifth book. The epic thus invites its audience to ask the question, «who is this poem about?» and the response is twofold. The poem is about , it is about a man and it is about man, or perhaps more pointedly , it is about a man who has «seen the cities of men and known their minds». The poem identifies its subject, then, in précise terms: man is both the viewer and the viewed; he is what he has seen. The poem proceeds to define its subject and object, man, along two axes: the vertical -who is man on the spectrum between gods at one end and beasts at the other13?- and the horizontal -who is a given man

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among men, how is he human among ail the possible ways of living as a human being, as his place on the vertical axis has established the meaning of human?

Thèmes associated with the horizontal axis, framing the vertical, are presented in the opening and closing books of the poem, with Telemachus on Ithaca, on Pylos, in Sparta, and again on Ithaca. How does one society compare to another? Pylos, Sparta, and Ithaca are ail alternative human communities juxtaposed for the sake of comparison. But the question of societal norms is put into a wider context by the central books of the Odyssey, V-XII, where the vertical range, and man's place within it -that is, the terms for what is human- are established: the extrêmes being on the one hand the divine immortality offered by , and embodied in, Calypso, and on the other hand, the pigs in the pen of Circe14. In between the extrêmes exists a range of alternatives, beings who are ail in some ways recognizably human and in some ways monstrous. The fullest account is of the Cyclops, who is the most challenging to Odysseus of ail the beings he encounters, and the most profoundly dismaying because he is «so human;» yet, he lives without social organization, without laws, and most unspeakable, he is capable of practising cannibalism without thinking that there is anything wrong with it.

This recalls a problem that the Odyssey has long presented for Homerists. They hâve puzzled ver the fact that the Odyssey makes distinctions between right and wrong that the Iliad does not make, or as some scholars hâve put it, that the Odyssey is concerned with , in a way that the Iliad does not apparently help us to make sensé of 15. In the past this has been advanced as évidence against unity of authorship. Unlike the Iliad, in which Greeks and Trojans are not compared in terms of guilt and innocence -even Paris has his merits- in the Odyssey there are good and bad characters. There are the suitors, who are manifestly villains and whose behavior against the innocents in Ithaca amounts to criminality and clearly of fends against everyone's sensé of justice, except their own.

From our standpoint it is useful to ask the question, where does that sensé of justice, affronted by the suitors in the Odyssey, corne from? Are there proto-legal notions to be uncovered hère? How are we to understand what is,

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what norms of behaviour it requires? Much as the idea of succession linked with cosmic order is not spelled out in the Iliad but fundamentally under- lies it, similarly, I suggest, the answer to the question of Odyssean is to be found in reading the Odyssey in the light of the concept of as presented in the Works and Days.

Pierre Vidal-Naquet has pointed out that the places Odysseus visits in the course of his travels are distinguished by the absence of agriculture (and by the absence of sacrifice to the gods)16. It is emphasized in Book IX that the Cyclops has nothing to do with agriculture: it is said that the Cyc- lopes «neither plow with their hands nor plant anything,/but ail grows for them without seed planting, without cultivation,/wheat and barley and also the grapevines, which yield for them/wine of strength, and it is Zeus' rain that waters it for them»17. Now, this description has spécial meaning when we consider that it is remarkably reminiscent of Hesiod's description of life in the golden âge, under Cronos, before the séparation of men and gods18, because men and gods (as Martin West puts it in his Commen- tary19) began on the same terms. For those in the golden âge, under Cronos, «ail good things were theirs; ungrudgingly , the fertile land gave up her fruits unasked (μ)»20. But as we know from Hesiod, the âge of Cronos was the âge of cannibalism as well, as Vidal-Naquet has pointed out21 - after ail, Cronos is the god who ate his own children! But thanks to the succession struggle by which Cronos was overthrown, Zeus is estab- lished in power on Olympus. Now gods and men are radically remote from each other; men hâve to labor and till the fields. But the Works and Days tells us (276-279) that «Zeus the son of Cronos established this law for men, that it is for fishes and wild beasts and winged birds to eat each other, since is not in them; but to men he gave , which is much the best». So we are again given a picture of an evolved set of relations between men and gods - costly for men, but bénéficiai as well. Man is no longer on a par with the gods, but neither is he to be identified with the beasts, and what détermines this is .

So insofar as the Odyssey is concerned with exploring the nature of being human -its potentialities, limitations, and rough edges- it is con-

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cerned with as distinctive to that condition. It is on this basis, there- fore, that the

poem indicts the suitors, who, over and over again, are said to be eating up the substance of another man22: it is not so much that they are bad people as that, being without , they are so to speak, not people at ail- and from the travel books V-XII, we are prepared to appreciate what that means, as we remember the Cyclopes or the Laestrygones. It is striking, then, and worth noting, that the passage in the Works andDays about precluding occurs specifically in the context of an exhortation to Perses to restrain his voracity in claiming someone else's patrimony.

Hesiod opposes and in the Works andDays so as to show, as J.-P. Vernant has pointed out, that they are in a perpétuai deadlock over pride of place among men23. We may remember that three times in the course of his travels, upon arriving in unknown territory, Odysseus asks himself whether he has landed among men who are or . Significantly thèse occur when he arrives on Scheria, that most humanly refined place where the inhabitants are ; on the island of the Cyc- lops, that extrême of bestiality; and finally, when he reaches Ithaca, and does not know where he is24. It is the ambiguity of the status of on Ithaca that is to be underscored hère, in its Hesiodic sensé.

If the suitors, like Polyphemos, behave as the absence of implies, they threaten to invert ail the procédures by which men recognize each other as beings of the same species, and treat each other with respect as men. This means that of Ithaca no identity is secure. In shorthand, it means that Telemachos does not know who he is; so that when Athena says, «You certainly look like Odysseus! Are you his son?» he replies, «I don't know; no one ever knows his own father»25. As for Laertes, he is less like a valued elder of the family than a superannuated retainer or dis- carded beast of burden. In Book II, the first assembly since Odysseus' de- parture is called. Mentor regrets the current state of affairs which, he says, has corne about because no one remembers the just king-the - who was like a father26. When the disguised Odysseus later compares Pénélope to a king who rules with 27, the passage is, as Gre-

gory Nagy has pointed out, particularly close in diction and purport to the Hesiodic description in the Works and Days of orderly right relations in the community where is upheld28. But at Odysseus' praise evoking such a community Pénélope demurs - rightly, because in a Hesiodic sensé cannot be said to exist on Ithaca. As Pénélope replies, only Odysseus can make this happen, because only his return will restore ; only his return will put ail the pièces in place and restore the catégories that exists to govern. In the Works and Days, Hesiod says that under women bear children who resemble their fathers29: so that it is the return of Odysseus that will allow Telemachos to know what he looks like, and will allow Laertes to be a father again - a father who recognizes his son.

Hère I want to emphasize the importance of understanding récognition on Ithaca as a function of which, as Hesiod shows us, allows us to identify members of our own

species in gênerai, and to know how we are related to them in particular- and to treat them appropriately. «It is for fishes and wild beasts and winged birds to eat each other, since is not in them; but to men [Zeus] gave , which is much the best» (WD. , 276-279). If enables human beings to observe the distinction between their kind and other kinds, it makes those fundamental defining features explicit, in the first place, through the family. This is the entity that allows you to identify others as members of your own species, because in order to do that you must first know what you look like yourself . (We remember hère that Pénélope rejects the beggar Odysseus' characterization of her as a king upholding in telling terms: she responds by saying that in the présent conditions on Ithaca she no longer looks the way she used to -she has become unrecognizable- but that were Odysseus to return, she would look like herself again). Thus allows human beings, by recognizing species and family, to détermine a distinction -with which the Odyssey is concerned throughout- between licit and illicit appetites, both for what one consumes and for sexual relations. Fishes, wild beasts, and birds do not make those distinctions, either within species or within family; they avoid neither nor incest.

Given conditions on Ithaca, in the absence of Hesiodic re- semblance between the générations of a family may indeed cease to be reli- able, as in the case of the faithful Dolios and his treacherous offspring Melanthios and Melantho- so that we see a son who partakes of the wrong

food (with the suitors) , and a daughter who sleeps on the wrong bed (also with the suitors). To put it another way, in such conditions how to avoid the threat realized in the Telegony, where Telegonos, Odysseus' son by Circe, kills his father without knowing who he is, and then proceeds to marry Pénélope?

In this sensé, the extended meeting scène between Odysseus and Laertes in Book XXIV is anything but gratuitous, despite objections to it by a number of scholars, famously, for example, Denys Page. For this scène asserts the cohérence and continuity of générations guaranteed by and reinforcing ; the token of their relationship, the orchard of Odysseus and Laertes, bears fruit unfailingly, as in the Hesiodic community where prevails, and women bear children who look like their fathers.

Thèse illustrations of some ways in which Homeric and Hesiodic poetry exhibit a complementary distribution of subject matter within a relationship of interdependence could of course be reciprocally matched by illustrations from Hesiod vis à vis Homer: the Hesiodic poems assume heroic events and situations -at Troy and at Thebes- but do not elaborate or re- create them. The level at which we need to see Homeric and Hesiodic poetry as participating jointly in the systematization of the gods for the Greeks, as Herodotus claims, must precisely identify the differentiation between the two traditions -their very distinctions- as a crucial part of the System. The séparation between them

reinforces and institutionalizes the proposition inhérent in the mythological totality : namely that the order of things is organized, based on a prior évolution, according to a séparation between human and divine, a breach that is complète, and must continu- ally be recapitulated, as with the institution of sacrifice. But if we can see both a symbolic and an effective function for genre boundaries in this way, we can understand as well why Homeric poetry and Hesiodic poetry occa- sionally, if only tangentially, extend into each other's territories: to incor- porate another genre, as the Odyssey has been shown to do with «instruction poetry»30 is not just to be more sophisticated as poetry, but to be more encompassing as a représentation of social and cosmic order; in this sensé Homeric epic seeks to preempt other genres, to be the «genre of genres». But this must be done with great tact and subtlety: otherwise, as with the strategy of the succession myth, the attempt to devour the alternatives may be indigestible and self-defeating, not only for the poem but for the audience. The anthropologist Mary Douglas in her essay on «Deciphering a

Meal» quotes Allan Tate saying, «Formai versification is the primary structure of poetic order, the assurance to the reader and to the poet him- self that the poet is in control of the disorder both outside him and within his own mind»31. Perhaps the same can be said of the function of genre, if for poet we substitute society32.

[Note:
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Notes

1.
1. Among their writings, see, for example (to cite only complète volumes): Jean- Pierre Vernant, Mythe et pensée chez les Grecs, Paris, 1971 , 3rd éd. , Mythe et société en Grèce ancienne, Paris, 1974; Marcel Détienne, Les maîtres de vérité dans la Grèce ancienne, Paris, 1967; Les jardins d'Adonis: la mythologie des aromates en Grèce, Paris, 1972; Dionysos mis à mort, Paris, 1977; and the jointly authored Détienne and Vernant, Les ruses de l'intelligence: la métis des grecs, Paris, 1974.

2. L. Gernet, The Anthropology ofAncient Greece, trans. J. Hamilton and B. Nagy, Baltimore, 1981, p. 3.

2.
3. Poétique, 19, 1974, pp. 294-312.

4. Les genres du discours, Paris, 1978, esp. pp. 44-60.

5. See the discussion in W. Burkert, «Jason, Hypsipyle, and New Fire at Lemnos: A study in Myth and Ritual», CQ, 20, 1970, pp. 1-16.

3.
6. M.L. Lang, «Réverbération and Mythology in the Iliad», pp. 140-164 in Ap- proaches to Homer, edd. C. A. Rubino and C.W. Shelmerdine, Austin, 1983.

7. Pindar, Isthmian, 8, w. 28-50.

8. See, for example, L.M. Slatkin, «The Wrath of Thetis», TAPhA, 116, 1986.

9. Iliad, I,w. 396-406.

10. Theogony, v. 617 ff.

11. Iliad, I, v. 404.

4.
12. Iliad, XVIII, vv. 429-443.

13. For séminal discussions and applications of the gods-men-beasts model in the structural analysis of Greek myth and religion, see P. Vidal-Naquet, «Valeurs religieuses et mythiques de la terre et du sacrifice dans l'Odyssée», Annales ESC, 25, 1970, pp. 1278-97 [=Le chasseur noir, Paris 1981, pp. 39-68] ; Détienne, «Entre bêtes et dieux», Nouvelle revue de psychanalyse, 6, 1972, pp. 231-246, repr. as Ch. 3 in Dionysos mis à

5.
mort, pp. 135-60; and Vernant, «Le mythe prométhéen chez Hésiode», in Mythe et société en Grèce ancienne, pp. 177-94.

14. See Vidal-Naquet, op. cit., p. 1281.

15. See, for example, K. Reinhardt, Tradition und Geist, Gottingen, 1960, p. 5 ff ; U. von Wilamowitz-Moellendorf, Homerische Untersuchungen , Berlin, 1884; W. Jaeger, «Solons Eunomie», Sitzungsber. derPreuss. Akad. der Wissensch., 1926, pp. 69-85.

6.
16. Vidal-Naquet, op. cit., pp. 1282-83.

17. IX, 108-111, trans. Lattimore.

18. This point is made by Vidal-Naquet, op. cit. , p. 1284.

19. M.L. West éd., Hesiod Works and Days, Oxford, 1978, repr. 1980, p. 49.

20. WD, 116-118.

21. Vidal-Naquet, op. cit., p. 1280, citing Theogony, 459-67.

7.
22. I, 160; II, 123; XI, 116; XIII, 396 = XIII, 428 = XV, 32, etc.

23. Vernant, «Le mythe hésiodique des races: Essai d'analyse structurale», RHR, 1960, 21-54, reprinted as Ch. I of Mythe et pensée.

24. VI, 120 = IX, 175 - XIII, 201.

25. I, 206-209; 214-216.

26. 11,230-234.

27. XIX, 107-114.

8.
28. G. Nagy, «Hesiod», in Ancient Writers: Greece and Rome, éd. T.J. Luce, New York, 1982, vol. I, pp. 43-73.

29. WD, 235.

9.
30. See the coin incing argument of Richard Martin, «Hesiod, Odysseus, and the Instruction of Princes», TAPhA, 114, 1984, pp. 29-48.

10.
31. M. Douglas, Implicit Meanings, London, 1975, p. 273.

32. An early version of this paper was delivered at a symposium in honor of George E. Dimock, jr. at Smith Collège in November 1985. My ongoing thinking about the subject owes much to stimulating discussions with M.D. Carroll, A.E. Johnson, N. Loraux, and L. Muellner, and to valuable suggestions from P.E. Easterling, P.-Y. Jacopin, and S.L. Schein.

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