

J. MARKS:

Nestor's Nostoi [Odyssey 3.103-312] as a model for Homeric composition

In Iliad 15, as the Trojans descend on the Greek ships, Nestor raises his hands to the sky and prays:

Father Zeus, if ever for you someone in much-grained Argos used to burn rich thigh-pieces of ox or sheep and prayed to return [nostêsai], and you yourself promised and gave your nod, these things remember, and ward off, Olympian, the pitiless day 372-5

The form of this prayer is conventional, but the logic is more complex than the usual do ut des. If Zeus allows the Greeks to perish, Nestor says, he will break his own promise that at least some of them will attain a return, nostos, from the Trojan war. Zeus hears the prayer, and thunders in response [377-8]. Since this omen in Homeric epic indicates that a prayer will be fulfilled, we may infer that Zeus accepts Nestor's premise.

The guarantee of return, then, is not simply Nestor's wishful thinking, but rather part of the Iliadic perspective on the Trojan war. Nestor is a fitting character to make this 'intertextual' gesture, since his very name, which means something like 'he who gets [his people] home' [*nês + agent suffix -tôr], cannot but call to mind the stretch of the Trojan war story that falls between the two Homeric epics. So natural is the Nestor-nostos connection that it surfaces even obliquely, and proleptically, in Nestor's prayer in Iliad 15.

The Odyssey, on the other hand, which defines itself as the ultimate nostos-narrative [e.g. 1.11-12], emphasizes Nestor's nominal identity. This being the case, a special relationship exists between Nestor and the Odyssey's Homeric narrator. Here it is argued that this relationship has implications for the Odyssey's engagement with the larger epic tradition. Specifically, Nestor's categorization of epic subject-matter reveals awareness of an at least loosely-defined set of mutually referential Trojan war epics. Further, Nestor connects his Nostoi to a divine apparatus in a manner that parallels the control that the gods are made to exercise over the main narratives of the Odyssey, Iliad, and non-Homeric Kypria. Nestor's step-by-step creation of an epic plot thus re-enacts one of the fundamental tasks faced by the composer of the Odyssey, that of relating Odysseus' story to the larger epic tradition, and does so in a way that parallels the composition of a full-scale epic.