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THE TEARS OF ODYSSEUS: BRANDSTAETTER'S REVISITING OF THE ANCIENT HOMERIC TRADITION

Quaeris Ulixes ubi erraverit potius quam efficias ne nos semper erremus?
Seneca, *Epistulae morales* 88, 7.

ABSTRACT. Wesołowska Elżbieta, The Tears of Odysseus: Brandstaetter's Revisiting of the Ancient Homeric Tradition (*Łzy Odyszeusza. Brandstaetter w nurcie antycznej tradycji Homerowej*).

The paper focuses on the connections between Homeric poems, mainly *Odyssey* and the Polish drama *Odysseus Crying* by the Polish playwright Roman Brandstaetter, especially in the light of the motif of weeping and crying.

Keywords: Odysseus; tears; lamentation; weeping; heroism; homecoming.

“The philosopher: such is the name the twelfth-century Byzantine bishop Eustathius time and again gives Odysseus. The man of many turns, the most versatile of all Greek heroes both in Homeric epic and in his later incarnations, by the twelfth century could also boast of a long journey across philosophy, and one that was bound to continue, down through the ages, even to the modern world.”¹ With this in mind, this paper attempts to explore one aspect of Odysseus' complex identity, namely the trope of the hero's weeping, which plays many narrative roles both in terms of plot development and complexity of character construction. Since this problem seems to be too complicated and rather inexhaustible, only one literary text has been chosen for comparative analysis – that is, *Crying Odysseus*, composed by the Polish playwright Roman Brandstaetter in the mid-twentieth century.² I will provide a general outline of the hero's features portrayed during the long tradition between Homer and our modern times, focusing on Homer's depiction of the hero.³ This is to propose

¹ Montiglio 2011, 2.

² Brandstaetter wrote two more tragedies inspired by mythology: *Medea*, *The Death on the Artemis Shore*.

³ For further information about the reception of Odysseus' tale in modern times, vide: Graziosi, Greenwood 2007.

that Odysseus is not as much a literary archetype or a philosophical symbol, as a mythical hero with his singular experience and emotions. We assume that this way of depicting the Homeric hero is less risky, considering his bitter utterance in Book XI of *Odyssey* (v. 170 and 217–220) when the king of Ithaca during the conversation with his mother refers to his solitary wandering as “burdened with troubles” and now, unable embrace his dear mother’s ghost, he wonders “if royal Penelope makes him groan and grieve the more.”⁴ Furthermore, the prooemium of the poem (v. 1–10) makes evident his wish to return home. Such utterances may contradict with his general image as a traveller *per se*. However, the fact that he is presented as both curious and nostalgic makes his image ambiguous and provocative.

In Homer’s two epic poems the tropes of weeping and tears play an important role as the markers of different spontaneous emotions.⁵ The causes of tears may vary, including sudden anger, sorrow, despair, as well as overwhelming yearning.⁶ Besides those feelings, Homer’s characters cry because of disappointment, desire for vengeance, and even joy. Thorsten Foegen demonstrated that the importance of weeping in Homer is proved not only by its frequency, but above all by the considerable variety of expressions related to tears in *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.⁷ There is also no particular distinction between feminine sobs and male weeping, which results in the comparison between Odysseus’ tears and feminine sobbing during the Phaeacians’ feast.⁸ Besides, it is worth noting that in antiquity weeping was not reserved only for women,⁹ thus tears did not diminish the masculinity of

⁴On the Island of Calypso his desire to return home is even stronger than her offer of mortality (V 219 – 220), also Circe cannot persuade him to stay with her, because “nothing is sweeter than a man’s own land” (IX 29–33).

⁵The most impressive example is, in my opinion, the fragment (Hom. *Il.* I 348–357), in which Achilles weeps angrily in the presence of his mother, when the noble hero was belittled by Agmemnon. Such a scene has been much discussed by the scholars and critics, and unsurprisingly so. How to combine a moment of evident weakness with the portrait of the best Greek warrior in Troy, who is always self-confident and proud or even arrogant and cruel? It should be remembered that his anger (menis) is recurrent throughout the *Iliad*. Thetis responds lamenting for his son v. 414–418):

“Alas my child, why did I conceive you, bringing miseries to birth? If only you had remained sitting beside the ships without tears and without troubles: for your portion of life is short, it is not abundant. But now instead you are to be both swift-fated and also wretched beyond all men; indeed it was for an evil portion that I gave birth to you in the house” (Transl. by Clarke 2006, 74).

⁶Foegen 2009, 21 sqq.

⁷Foegen 2009, *passim*. For an interesting study of tears in the narration, see Ready 2011, 156.

⁸Some scholars are not sure about the reason of his crying here.

⁹In both Homeric poems “With regard to content, therefore, no difference between masculinity and femininity can be determined”, see Foegen 2009, 21. Nevertheless the scholars conclude that some semantic combinations are reserved mainly for women, and some others for men.

the hero.¹⁰ In fact, in the world of Homer men are more likely weep.¹¹ It is a natural consequence of the masculine character of the represented world in both epic poems.¹² Characters usually cry in solitude, but sometimes also in groups. At this point I need to digress to mention that in the ancient tragedy the act of weeping itself sometimes served to elevate or even ennoble the female protagonist,¹³ e.g. in Sophocles' *The Women of Trachis* as well as in Seneca's *Agamemnon*, in which the heroine refuses to join the chorus in weeping because she feels that her suffering is so exceptional that nobody else suffers like she does.¹⁴ In most cases tears bring relief¹⁵ (the therapeutic role of tears has also been explored in modern psychology), but sometimes they also cause a sudden influx of strength for completing a heroic act. Odysseus is a literary character with many faces: a wanderer, crafty player, liar,¹⁶ but also a responsible man with a sensitive heart.¹⁷ I will try to analyse briefly how the weeping of Odysseus is presented in both Greek arch-epics. That Odysseus weeps only in *Odyssey* should not surprise anyone. However, in *Iliad* he reduces Thersites to tears due to harsh treatment. There is no place here to search deeply for the reasons of this phenomenon. Therefore, perhaps I will only mention that Odysseus in the second Homeric epic is a psychologically complex character: in the *Odyssey* the character's inner world approximates the structure of the extradiegetic narrative. Following from this is the trope of the weeping of Odysseus. Although crying is not a common theme, five significant events are enough to demonstrate the character's multidimensionality.¹⁸ Odysseus not only plots the revenge (trying to find his feet in the world abandoned 20 years earlier), but also gives vent to his emotions in very different situations. He is moved to tears by the sight of

¹⁰ However we should recall here the moment in which Achilles compares Patroclus to a weeping girl that can be meant as a delicate reprimand (Hom. *Il.* XVI 7–11). I would like to thank the anonymous referee for this remark.

¹¹ Weeping is not only reserved for Odysseus. E.g. in Book IV Menelaus' hypothesis (v. 110) that Telemachus is weeping over his father becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy; Telemachus now sheds tears. Using the periphrastic denomination 'father' for Odysseus in 113 and 114, the narrator underscores the emotional tone of this passage, cf. De Jong 2004, 96.

¹² Only twelve female characters are present in both poems.

¹³ Due 2006.

¹⁴ Also in *Women of Trachis* there is a scene in which Iole does not want to join the other captives in her lament. It could be argued that the essential emotions characteristic of tragedy, according to Aristotle, are pity and fear, the rousing of which produces a kind of purification (*katharsis*), and there are links between the captive woman's lament and both of these emotions as Due (2006, 165) suggested.

¹⁵ The tears can serve a therapeutic role, as a relief from suffering, e.g. in *Agamemnon* the Watchman cannot stop his tears on hearing the wonderful message of the return of his lord from the war.

¹⁶ Every side of his personality needs exploring.

¹⁷ Montiglio (2009, *passim*) explores these topics in interesting and accessible ways.

¹⁸ For a detailed list, see Foegen 2009.

his faithful dog. He also furtively sobs upon hearing the story about himself at Phaeacians' court. Before that he sobs when feeling homesick during the stay on the island of Calypso. Upon hearing his wife cry out of longing in response to the story about her husband, which was recounted by the inspired Cretan, he furtively joins her in crying. But this raises some practical issues. Since Odysseus stays *incognito* in his beloved homeland of Ithaca for three days, weeping in public may lead to him being unmasked as well as bring about the homecoming hero's downfall instead of the triumphant revenge on the suitors.¹⁹ In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus, already back in Ithaca, weeps with his son (openly) and in the presence of his wife (secretly). In this way he either participates or not in non-verbal communication between them. Consequently, the reader knows more about his emotions than a person next to him. Like Oedipus, Odysseus is one of the most frequently imitated and rewritten characters of ancient literature, depicted both as a hero and anti-hero. There is nothing unusual about that, since he is a complex character, as virtuous as he is flawed, one that is tossed into the wandering river of life. Odysseus' tears appear in the title role of a very short drama by Roman Brandstaetter (a Polish-Jewish writer whose works were strongly religious and who died in 1987). His *Odys płaczący* (*Weeping Odysseus*) written in 1958 is based on the hero's failed return home, when he is unrecognized by his wife. The drama may be interpreted in many different ways: as a voice in the discussion about the situation of the wanderer coming back from war, or as a reflection on loneliness and the paradox of home that does not wait anymore. The interpretation can go further to show the war as a deep gap between the past and present, which cannot be removed at all.

Nevertheless, I will consider briefly the extent to which the titular weeping of the Polish Odysseus is deeply rooted in the ancient tradition in which this extraordinary character is immersed. The Chorus is dubious about the identity of the stranger. In Homer the homecoming warrior is unrecognised, e.g. at Phaeacians' court or near his old dying dog Argos. That is why in Homeric epic the homecoming hero hides his feelings twice. If his agitation was exposed, it would not matter from the narrator's perspective, as it is only the reader's supposition. On the other hand, in Brandstaetter's drama the reactions to the weeping of Odysseus are completely different. Surprised, Penelope asks Odysseus whether he is crying, which he vehemently denies.²⁰ This is his first failure. The one who in Homeric epic tries to outmanoeuvre the goddess Athena herself is given no credence here even though he tries to change the observed fact. However, the way in which he does it is curious, as elaborated on further.

¹⁹Of course, such difficult circumstances suppress lamentation, although the ancient author might be aware of the model of such lament used by Achilles himself in the *Iliad*, see Connolly 2003, 310.

²⁰Can this scene be treated as an echo of the famous Biblical episode with Peter on the yard when he also vehemently denies his familiarity with Jesus?

The titular weeping in the Polish microdrama has a crucial role in the play just because of the brevity of the literary work. In Homer's *Odyssey* Odysseus weeps furtively or tries to suppress his tears four times in total.²¹ In contrast, in Brandstaetter's *Weeping Odysseus* the tears are attributed to two people: the father and the son. Therefore, the Polish drama focuses on the intense emotions of Odysseus, but also his son Telemachus, who is longing in solitude for his father. The young man weeps behind the scenes – as in his mother's story about his prophetic dream of his father crying upon leaving;

Chciałam go zbudzić. Miał jednak taki wyraz twarzy, jakby chciał trwać w swoim śnie. Potem mi opowiadał, że Odys w jego śnie gorzko płakał. Płacząc, szedł powoli ociężale, i ani razu nie obejrzał się za siebie, tylko ruch jego pleców wskazywał, że płacze. Odys... Odys płaczący...

[I was about to wake him. But his face looked as if he wished to sleep undisturbed. He told me later that in his dream he saw Odysseus crying profusely. He advanced slowly and sluggishly forward without looking back once. One could only tell he was crying seeing his back all shaking. Odysseus... weeping Odysseus.]²²

Behind the scenes music playing quietly is also heard. This music paints a special non-verbal picture of the state of the boy's soul and his dispirited waiting. After a moment Penelope informs us that the music of the flute expresses mournful sobs. Yet, when Odysseus-vagrant arrives on the scene, Telemachus' flute subsides into silence as if listening to the words of this newcomer regardless of his spectacular appearance. Odysseus' son listens intently to the melody of words spoken by the stranger – perhaps Telemachus attempts to detect a tenor of truth. The son's dream about his crying father is reflected in the vagrant's account of Odysseus and his voice. According to the wanderer, the voice of Odysseus has the softness of feminine tears. This marks the distinction between feminine and male tears – unfamiliar to Homer. As mentioned earlier, although Odysseus tries to hide his emotions, Penelope notices the tears. The newcomer parries the question in a very peculiar way: by speaking about the sweet taste of a teardrop on the face – as sweet as Telemachus' music. And yet, tears are salty...

Only a parent would extol the virtues of his or her child to the point of contradicting what is possible. So why does Odysseus remain unrecognised? The reason is that the Chorus and Penelope cannot imagine that their Odysseus could hide his identity instead of rushing to fight the suitors. However, the titular weeping plays a crucial role here. Indeed, Penelope's husband has never cried before. "Never before, therefore never at all" reasons Penelope, exhausted by

²¹ Hom. *Od.* VI 456 and 487, XV 123 and XVIII 76 sqq.

²² The Polish translation according to Brandstaetter 1986. This and the following quotations from Brandstaetter are translated by P. Wojtas.

the surges of futile hope whilst awaiting her husband.²³ She tries to rationally assess the situation which is beyond her. Penelope ceased believing in Odysseus' homecoming when Telemachus told her his dream about his crying father. She did not believe the prophetic dream. Such dreams should be taken as a sign or an omen. Maybe this particular dream comes true (literally) and Odysseus leaves home, because in this house waiting became a sort of hermetic ritual: one that could be jeopardised by his corporeal presence. The role of the Chorus is also important here. At the beginning the Chorus speaks on behalf of the suitors, advocating the need to change the current situation. How long can the queen mourn over her missing husband? At the end of the play the Chorus²⁴ suddenly experiences a painful revelation: he is the one they have been waiting for. But the recognition comes way too late: Odysseus is long gone. It is not possible to catch up with him and make him come back. Maybe his wife should delegate the servants to make him return home, but in the dramatic reality it is all too late. You cannot bring back a missed chance. Everyone failed: the wife who inwardly withered away; the husband who became used to lies and manipulations during his journey back home. Similarly, in Homeric epic Odysseus does not reveal himself to Penelope at first. But the Polish Penelope should have recognized her husband on hearing from an unknown vagabond about her husband as a man "with the voice full of soft feminine tears". However, the fear is all the greater when the vagrant tries to persuade Penelope to let him meet Telemachus. The main reason of her refusal are the following words: "Chcę mu powiedzieć, że Odys rzeczywiście płacze na jawie... Płacze!... Płacze!" ["I wish to tell him that Odysseus is crying indeed. Crying! He is crying!"].

Did the Polish Penelope read *Odyssey*? – we may ask perversely.²⁵ If he has never lied before, why does she not believe him? If he has learnt to lie since his departure, this vagrant could be Odysseus indeed! However, confessing the apparent truth under the threat of a sword lowers the credibility of such a statement, so the hero remains unrecognised. And now I will mention the last problem. Crying (in his son's dream rather than in "scenic" reality) Odysseus is not only chased out of his own house, but also driven away from his own son. Why does Telemachus' mother refuse to let them meet together? It is difficult to say. Considering how unmanly, soft and romantic Telemachus is, does she not want them to meet because she is afraid that Telemachus' soul will be poisoned by passivity and pacifism? Maybe she is also afraid of the possible

²³ About the sea as "a place of no return," vide Lindenlauf 2003.

²⁴ It is worth mentioning that the Polish Chorus is not a group of captives whose lamentation shows its social status, as Gould (1996, 224) writes: "[the members of the chorus] express, not the values of the *polis*, but far more often the experience of the excluded, the oppressed, and the vulnerable." In Brandstaetter Chorus seems to fulfil a function of the *alter ego* of Penelope.

²⁵ Some scholars in the past interrogated, if ironically, the "underconsciousness" of the literary characters in Senecan tragedies.

alliance of her husband and son against herself? At this moment she is ready to kill the newcomer – a disgraceful act which could cast light on all the ancient mythology concerning the issues of the burden of blame and the faint light of love. To conclude, I will share my thoughts on Wyspiański's *Powrót Odysa* (*Return of Odysseus*) (1907), as this play must have influenced Brandstaetter, be it indirectly. Wyspiański's Odysseus is so burned out that he does not cry. He is unable to evoke any kind of emotions or give vent to tears. Although he hesitates to stay at home he is determined to leave it:

Umyśliłem li z dala przyjrzeć się – popatrzeć;
 Jak dziad wędrowny – o jałmużnę prosić,
 By mi dali tej strawy samej – co tu warzą,
 I bym odszedł, przeklęty – dalej.

[I intended only to look at it from afar, just to see it, and like a wandering old man beg for alms, so that they might give me some of the very food that they're cooking here. And then I would have left, gone on, a man accursed.]²⁶

He is haunted by a guilt from the past. Although this may have something to do with the cruel deeds he committed during the Trojan War, the reader is not familiar with the roots of this guilt. The only tears he mentions are the result of the effort of seeing in the darkness: “Czy to oczy me kłamią, czy też zasłzy łzami?” (Act III). [“Do my eyes deceive me, or are they filled with tears?”].

This is an Odysseus of the approaching First World War and its syndrome of burned-out, half-dead individuals. However, Brandstaetter's Odysseus is different – although also composed in Polish. Both are paralysed by the inability to act. The former takes his revenge on the servants, while the latter is unable or unwilling to return (he makes an effort to convince his wife of his identity). He resigns and leaves amidst the tears of the flute and Penelope without tears. The desperate waiting turns this Penelope into a stone. Like Niobe?²⁷ Like a statue that cannot even cry? The audience can only hear a “soporific melody of the flute, full of unsuppressed weeping”. Unlike in Ovid, the tune is less pathetic, but more acute.

In Brandstaetter's drama weeping occurs three times (in the dream, the flute, and a teardrop on the face). It proves the excellent intuition of the Polish author, but it also is the evidence of the universality of the scene of reunion. The reunion that is asymmetrical and full of inhibitions – participants feel at a loss for words (especially important words) and hide their feelings behind paraverbal symptoms as well as (concealed) signs of sobbing and weeping. Exceptionally

²⁶ Wyspiański, Clarke 1966.

²⁷ It is worth mentioning that in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* VI Niobe, after the death of her all twelve children, was turned into a stone but was still capable of feeling, with tears on her face.

nonheroic – because devoid of determination – Telemachus shows his yearning for the absentee only in tearful music. As if he resented the one who deprived him of the father figure: one necessary in shaping one's personality.

The Polish drama has two meanings: Odysseus is depicted here as a man who is similar to those who visited Penelope and tried to convince her about his identity. In doing so he embodies everybody, or nobody, as he referred to himself in Polyphemus's cave several years previously. The second sense is biblical, as in the famous words from St. John Gospel: "He came to his own and his own people did not accept him". Is Odysseus a Jesus figure? Such a hypothesis seems to be very risky. But the biographical aspect of the author's personal life recalled here is unmistakable. Nevertheless, it should be pointed out that in his short and ascetic play *Brandstaetter*, ignoring the crime-and-punishment story, managed to do justice to the extremely complex situation after the war. On top of this, he attempts to convey the universal meaning exhausted in a very subtle way from antiquity and from the tale which also "moves on a deeper and more universal level, on which the miseries and exaltations of heroic experience become a device for exploring the universal realities of man's struggle for self-validation under the immortal and carefree gods."²⁸ And the tears as a deeply human impulse give the static figures in the Polish drama a human touch. The lonely Penelope is not only waiting for her absent husband, but also wants to "find in herself the cry long gone"²⁹ as she keeps looking back to the past. In both Polish tragedies the main hero undertakes "homecoming without home,"³⁰ with a varying role of his wife, who is faithful in Antiquity, but *hic et nunc* she is in deep despair or totally exhausted. If we are recalling here the rich and interesting character of Andromache, depicted both in the *Iliad* and in Euripides' *Trojan Women*, we can observe that Hector's despairing wife recounts "the grief, sadness, and anger that belong to women and women alone."³¹ Brandstaetter's Penelope is not able to cry yet. We dare say that her picture is even more impressive than its ancient counterpart. She is almost dead like Niobe, but still deeply in pain. After all, women are used to suffering during and after the wartime everywhere and always.

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²⁸ Clarke 2006, 90.

²⁹ In *Odyssey* there are several scenes depicting Penelope's weeping or lamenting.

³⁰ Davies 2007.

³¹ Muich 2010, 110.

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ŁZY ODYSSEUSZA. BRANDSTAETTER W NURCIE ANTYCZNEJ TRADYCJI HOMEROWEJ

Streszczenie

Celem artykułu jest ukazanie związków pomiędzy polskim dramatem *Odys płaczący* Romana Brandstaettera i *Odysseją* w aspekcie płaczu i łez. W eposie Homera bohaterowie nie wstydzą się łez, ponieważ płacz nie jest uważany za coś hańbiącego czy niemęskiego. W polskim dramacie bohater płacze w taki sposób, że odbiorca nie może tego zobaczyć. Odyseusz jest ukazany jako sytuujący się pomiędzy anonimowym bohaterem z jaskini Polifema i – może nawet – archetypem Chrystusa. Z kolei polska Penelopa to postać na wpół umarła i niezdolna do jakichkolwiek uczuć, bo całkowicie zanurzona w totalny stan oczekiwania. W ten sposób różni się dość znacznie od swego pierwowzoru; Penelopa u Homera bowiem jest zdolna do uczuć, które manifestuje także łzami.