AN EPIC FOR THE LADIES: CONTEXTUALIZING SAMUEL BUTLER'S THEORY OF *ODYSSEY* AUTHORSHIP

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The issue of the personal voice in a literary or critical text raises a number of questions: does a written text contain more useful information if we know about the background of the writer? Is a reader better able to assess information or interpret a text if that reader knows where the text originates, what physical body or social identity or individual personality has created and shaped it? I came to the panel on personal voice at the 1996 meeting of the American Philological Association because these questions have vexed me on both a personal and professional level. I have come to understand the personal voice as a rhetorical posture that gains meaning according to its context and the motivations of its speaker or writer. In this paper, I will discuss my interpretation of Samuel Butler's *The Authoress of the Odyssey* in the context of my own graduate school experiences. I will demonstrate the varieties of the "personal" as they are opposed to the "professional" in Butler's work, specifically how the "personal" is allied with the feminine voice. I will then discuss the personal voice as a mode of discourse in the culture of professional training in graduate school and my own experience with this. In conclusion, I suggest that responsible pedagogy must engage with the issue of personal voice at all levels in order to deepen and enrich the imaginative and expressive lives of students and to aid their critical faculties as readers.

The Authoress of the Odyssey (1897) was written by Samuel Butler (1835–1902), a Victorian amateur scholar and satirist who, after enduring the harsh life of a clergyman's son, amassed a fortune in New Zealand and went on to write *Erewhon* (1872), a satire of English social and economic

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injustices. *The Authoress of the Odyssey* is Butler's foray into classical scholarship, though judged by his critics to be nothing more than a satirist's fancy in positing female authorship of the *Odyssey*. In contrast with most works of classical scholarship of his time, Butler writes both in his own, personal, voice and in a non-personal, or professional, voice, and thus challenges the ascendancy of one over the other.

Butler's claim of female authorship for the *Odyssey* is not the characteristic that makes this a radical book. In fact, his arguments in support of a woman author are entirely based on the common essentialist prejudices that Butler shared with his contemporaries. What I found radical, however, was the play of prose styles in Butler's use of personal and professional voices. As he suggests female authorship of a venerated classical work, Butler's "scholarship" essentially mocks the scholarly mainstream by utilizing the unconventional proof of personal experiences with women to make his case. By confronting his readers with such personal anecdotes, Butler challenges the esteemed objectivity that he perceived drove the scholars around him.

Butler's search for the source of the *Odyssey*, its human source of beauty, led him to approach the *Odyssey* by first searching for its author. Rather than a text, Butler sought an artist. He writes (1897.6):

> Fascinated, however, as I at once was by its amazing interest and beauty, I had an ever-present sense of a something wrong, of a something that was eluding me, and of a riddle which I could not read. The more I reflected upon the words, so luminous and so transparent, the more I felt a darkness behind them that I must pierce before I could see the heart of the writer—and this is what I wanted; for art is only interesting in so far as it reveals an artist.

This statement explains Butler's purported motivations for his study, as well as his aesthetic stance towards the work. His motivations are not so strange: searching for ur-texts and, by implication, the identities of authors of epics constituted the major work of philologists for centuries preceding Butler's unconventional solution. Butler was no philologist, however, and his study focused not on the text of the *Odyssey* but solely on the identity of its author (who, he alleges, is an unmarried woman from Trapani, Sicily), and the landscape of her surroundings.

My investigation of Butler originated in the larger context of my

dissertation, which investigates the categories of "professional" and "popular" in the field of classics at the turn of the century, particularly in Homeric studies. I have examined the different ways in which female readers, on the margins of classical studies at this time, made their presence known both within the university and without. Butler's apparent statement about gender—that a woman wrote the *Odyssey*—is, in my view, not about gender at all, but rather about being relegated to the margins of professional discourse. Indeed, Butler relates his own peripheral relationship to the larger world of letters to that of educated and literary women by making his unorthodox suggestion.

At many points throughout his book, Butler employs the personal voice to make his argument. A comparison with a more conventional work of classical scholarship is instructive. Butler's rhetoric is very different from that of his more acclaimed contemporary, Oxford scholar R. C. Jebb. The two are roughly contemporaneous, and the reception of their writings contrasted sharply: Jebb's book on Homer was well received and widely purchased. Butler's was neither. Jebb pointedly ignores Butler's writings on the *Odyssey*, a fact that does not escape Butler's notice. Jebb states in *Homer: An Introduction to the Iliad and the Odyssey* (1894), in a style that is characteristic of the entire book: "[Homer] is the greatest epic poet of the world, and the only representative of the earliest artistic form which the Greek mind gave to its work" (1894.iv). This unequivocal pronouncement reveals little, in part, because its voice is muffled—there is neither a person behind the statement nor a person behind the *Odyssey* itself; the *Odyssey* is rather a text that emanates from a bloodless, spiritless mind, enthroned and untouchable. Comparing the rhetoric of these contemporaries, Jebb and Butler, reveals the voices implicit in them both. For Jebb, it is the non-voice, or academic/absent voice, that is most apparent and most characteristic, while Butler's voice vacillates between the personal and the non-personal/impersonal.

Samuel Butler contends that the *Odyssey* was written by a young, unmarried woman from Sicily in about 1050 B.C.E. He bases the bulk of his case on essentialist arguments about gender; that is, he describes a particular set of features that he views as inherent in all women. For the most part, Butler supports this essentialism with his own life experience, which he frequently marshals as evidence. In devising his argument for female authorship, Butler takes up two aspects of the female: the nature of women in general, as proven by his own experience, and the nature of female writers as they can be differentiated from, and compared to, male writers. It is in the

documentation of his experiences with women that we hear what we can consider Butler's personal voice. The phrase, "I have heard . . .," continually recurs and often jolts the narrative directly into the present, into Butler's life as he represents it. For example, in discussing a Homeric context for women's and men's differing views of the same situation, Butler writes: "So when the Duke of York was being married I heard women over and over again say they hoped the Princess May would be very happy with him, but I never heard one say that she hoped the Duke would be very happy with the Princess May. Men said they hoped the pair would be very happy, without naming one more than the other" (1897.108). Butler uses this report of personal experience in the first person in order to assert the lack of difference between his world and the world of the Homeric epics, especially in terms of normalized, gendered behavior. At another point, Butler states (1897.121):

> The writer does not make Minerva say that daughters were rarely as good women as their mothers were. I had a very dear kind old aunt who when I was a boy used to talk to me in just this way. "Unstable as water," she would say, "thou shalt not excel." I almost heard her saying it . . . when I was translating the passage above given [*Od.* 2.270–80]. My uncles did not talk to me at all in the same way.

Butler's represents his knowledge of the ways of women—ancient as well as contemporary—as deriving exclusively from the women around him.

A biographical reading of Butler's work enlightens us a little about his rhetoric. Butler came from an upper-class, clergyman's family, against which he rebelled with a stint in New Zealand, by studying painting, and by pursuing a generally leisurely life of letters (Henderson 1954, Holt 1989). He never married and spent most of his life with his companion, Henry Festing Jones. Thus when he reports about his knowledge of women, he speaks from a place grounded in late Victorian homosociality. In describing the essential difference between the worlds of women and men, he quotes a *Times* (February 4, 1897) article in his introduction: "The sex difference is the profoundest and most far-reaching that exists among human beings . . . Women may or may not be the equals of men in intelligence; . . . but women in the mass will act after the manner of women, which is not and never can be the manner of men" (1897.11). When Butler talks about the way women

are, he combines what he has experienced himself with very conventional notions of gender derived from his Victorian milieu. He is particularly concerned with the rift that gender difference makes in societies, both close at hand and in the distant past.

In addition to this highly personal voice, Butler also uses a mode of discourse that more closely resembles that of the professional classicist: offering either unsubstantiated, "objective" judgment or meticulously documented evidence to prove a point. He engages with the work of Bentley, Jebb, and Gladstone, and often refers to his unfruitful encounters with scholars who do not take seriously his claims for female authorship. Butler carefully supports his statements about the authoress, citing passage after passage as evidence for the womanly attributes of the book. A few examples suffice:

> Calypso's jealousy of Penelope (v. 203, &c.) is too prettily done for a man. A man would be sure to overdo it (1897.145).

> When Ulysses and Penelope are in bed (xxiii.300–343) and are telling their stories to one another, Penelope tells hers first. I believe a male writer would have made Ulysses' story come first and Penelope's second (1897.157).

> The other chief characteristics of the "Odyssey" which incline me to ascribe it to a woman are a kind of art for art's sake love of a small lie, and a determination to have things both ways whenever it suits her purpose (1897.119).

For Butler, women—and particularly the authoress—have a very visceral attachment to their physical surroundings and the objects that make up their worlds. The authoress's imagination, he claims, devised various situations from her real life experiences. To prove female authorship, Butler assumes that the writer must disclose his or her sex simply by virtue of the subjects he or she chooses (1897.105):

> What, let me ask, is the most unerring test of female authorship? Surely a preponderance of female interest, and a fuller knowledge of those things which a woman generally has to deal with . . . People always write by

> preference of what they know best, and they know best what they most are, and have most to do with. This extends to ways of thought and to character, even more than to action.

Butler's case rests upon the reader's acceptance of his assertion that women are simply different from men. They write differently because they have a very different relationship with what they perceive. The close relationship Butler posits between experience and art is exactly what he explores in his own argument. He uses his experiences with women to prove his case, aligning himself with the authoress herself, and with all women who write, because, as he has shown, women write *from experience*. In this way, he demonstrates the close relationship experience bears to writing, but he characterizes the tendency to write from experience as a feminine trait.

By letting us hear both his voices, the personal and professional, Butler raises the question of which voice we are to consider more authoritative. We are challenged with a hierarchy that exists outside the text and that we, as academic readers coming to the text, are expected to bring with us to the text: the non-personal voice is authoritative and the personal is not.

Even though Butler constantly makes reference to the scholarly community that rejects him, this very engagement implies that his work somehow belongs in the realm of scholarship. But, with his suggestion of female authorship, he then debases the study of the *Odyssey* in the view of his contemporaries by introducing the category of gender. Since Butler writes about a subject he shouldn't (gender/women) in a place, or genre, he shouldn't (the "scholarly" book), it is no wonder the criticisms hurled at him by his contemporaries are, almost to a letter, negative.

Butler reacted cantankerously towards his critics and knew what he was doing when he wrote *The Authoress* (1907.67): "If I cannot, and I know I cannot, get the literary and scientific big-wigs to give me a shilling, I can, and I know I can, heave bricks into the middle of them." Here he characterizes the majority of responses to his book when it first appeared. If they responded at all, critics reacted with a smirking negativity, often commenting on Butler's shoddy scholarship and his affinity for "Teutonic" style criticism. Contemporary British reviews in such periodicals as *Academy*, *Athenaeum,* and *Longman's* label the work "A Freak," and find the thesis preposterous. Often they are lured into a misogynistic refutation of the theory, with very little engagement with Butler's theoretical project (i.e., claiming single authorship by a woman), with his dating of the poem, or

with his geographical speculations about the *Odyssey*. The only classical journal that took notice of Butler's book is *Classical Weekly,* where the British scholar F. M. Cornford calls it a satire on the female sex (a common comment on the work). German critics took more serious notice, for example, the *Wochenschrift für Klassische Philologie* (August 18, 1900). All contend that although the hypothesis is creative, it does not bear inquiry. All chide Butler for his lack of scholarly citations, conjecturing that he is unaware of work in the field. Such considerations cause the reviewers to count his book as insignificant to scholarship.

Reviewers in the U.S. were less interested in the impact of Butler's work on scholarship. A critic writing in the *New York Sun* (February 5, 1898.5) claims that Butler will "have the ladies with him," implying not only that women were likely to read the book, but also that their interpretive stance would have more to do with his inherently pro-woman position than with any thoughts about his argument. Just as Butler imagines a woman to be more adept at writing about women's matters, this reviewer imagines that women, as a class, might be more open to accepting such a claim. Similarly, *The New York Times Saturday Review of Books and Arts* suggests a correlation between the acceptance of Butler's claims and the leisure space inhabited primarily by dilettantes: "The brilliant logic of [Butler's] reasoning can hardly be surpassed in a whist club" (March 12, 1898.166).

I regard the reactions of contemporary critics of Butler's book to be, in some regards, a completion of Butler's task in writing the book in the first place. Butler is aware that he is making a claim that will marginalize him further within the scholarly community. But does he care? In his last sentences he writes (1897.270):

> . . . when I began this work I was oppressed with a sense of the hopelessness of getting Homeric scholars to take it seriously and consider it, I am even more oppressed and dismayed when I turn over its pages and see how certain they are to displease many whom I would far rather conciliate than offend. What can it matter to me where the "Odyssey" was written, or whether it was written by a man or a woman? From the bottom of my heart I can say truly that I do not care about the way in which these points are decided, but I do care, and very greatly, about knowing which way they are decided by sensible people who have considered what I have urged in this book.

There is no separating the case Butler makes and the way in which he makes it. Far from arriving at a conclusion, Butler keeps his case open—open, I think, to analysis that considers his argument both seriously and humorously.

Samuel Butler intrigues me because he reminds me that ventriloquizing can have both humorous and significant results. Ventriloquizing, or using one's voice to "speak as" something/someone else, functions as a mode of discourse that people in their final years of graduate school learn in both passive and active ways. We learn to hone styles of writing and research that are accepted in the wider field; we also learn to speak in a way that communicates with and perhaps impresses people within the hierarchy in which we have chosen to involve ourselves, ostensibly with the purpose of rising in this hierarchy. Sometimes without realizing it, we learn how to listen, gossip, stand, defer, drink; how to act at parties, conferences, in the department mailroom, and, of course, how not to act in all of these situations. Carol Berkenkotter and Thomas Huckin write about systems of communication that take place between academics in their book, *Genre Knowledge in Disciplinary Communication: Cognition/Culture/Power* (1995). They call these ways of acting and communicating "genres." Thinking of them in this way makes it easier to understand how rhetoric is employed to gain power within discrete fields, and interestingly, the way the personal voice can operate rhetorically. The most familiar places where a graduate student learns to develop her personal voice are in those genres that serve as gatekeeping devices: in applications for graduate school and certain grant applications, in establishing relationships with new colleagues, and in job applications and interviews. These are genres that are highly and covertly regulated within the profession because the standards are often unspoken or vague.

Mastering these genres allows one to communicate effectively with others in the field. But what if the language of these genres is in stark contrast with personal experience? It is here that I would suggest we use a mock-personal voice, we ventriloquize in a way that complies with the rules of the genres we are attempting to use. If the situation requires that I obfuscate my working class childhood for example, or, contrarily, explain the odds I overcame to get to where I am, so be it. Both scenarios attract the rhetoric of the personal voice. This is why, as someone just beginning her potential career, I am suspicious of the claims of authenticity the personal voice can make, yet, at the same time, understand its potential meaning and power in both my own life and the lives of my students. Personal experience

is conventionally not brought to the table as a critical faculty to be nurtured by students of the classics, who spend much of their time doing careful linguistic work. Effective communication of personal experiences, however, and especially personal experiences with literature, can be an empowering critical mode for both scholars and students, if used wisely and responsibly.

In closing, I want to explain briefly how I think that teaching *The Authoress* might be useful for putting the issue of personal voice at the center of student thinking about classical literature and the scholarship that surrounds it. Of the many nineteenth-century works of *Odyssey* interpretation, Butler's book is by far the funniest and most accessible because he draws so heavily on his own experiences to make his arguments. This overt example can allow students to examine other works of criticism with an enhanced sensitivity to the social and political contexts of their authors. The "personal" is demonstrated in a text not simply by "I" statements, but by assumptions embedded in critical claims.

The Authoress of the Odyssey describes the complex social factors that, when combined, create the context that allows a work of scholarship or literature to exist. A more recent reading of the *Odyssey*, although aware of the ways that social context can flavor the claims of the critic, nonetheless does not itself claim any particular voice or stance. In Alfred Heubeck's introduction to the *Odyssey* commentary co-authored by himself, Stephanie West, and J. B. Hainsworth, he writes: "Any statement about the nature and value, the subject matter, and the importance of the Homeric epic is influenced by the point of view of the interpreter, which is in turn conditioned by his nationality and his cultural environment" (1988.3). Yet this text itself lacks a discussion of any of the factors that might place it within a specific cultural context. The reader is invited to search for the embedded assumptions and implicit claims that this commentary might offer, but is never given overt clues by the authors.

Requiring of ourselves and of our students responsibility for speaking with a personal voice should be at the forefront of our pedagogy and our writing; we cannot simply advocate, as Heubeck has, and not deliver. Using obvious examples such as *The Authoress of the Odyssey* to introduce students to the use of the personal voice in critical writing can introduce methods of critical interpretation. Students may ask of a work: Who wrote this? What cultural influences can I see in this interpretation of an ancient text? What does that tell me about the ancient text, and what does it tell me about the author of the critical work? It seems that the problem we face is not voicing/ventriloquizing the "personal" but rather actively creating a culture

of study in which the personal voice is used responsibly and effectively. Thus, whereas I want to be able to teach my students how to explore with their minds beyond what they "are," I also want to challenge them to express and explore that essence comfortably, to realize the meaning of *polutropon*, the word used to describe Odysseus in the first lines of the *Odyssey*: turning many ways, of many devices, much wandering, ingenious.

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