

NOTES AND DISCUSSIONS

ODYSSEY 21. 411: THE SWALLOW'S CALL

When Odysseus has strung the bow, he plucks the string, and the "singing of the bow" is compared to the voice of a swallow (*Od.* 21. 411):

ἡ δ' ὑπὸ καλὸν ἄεισε, χελιδόνι εἰκέλη αὐδὴν.

Eustathius (1914. 29–43 Weigel) long ago suggested the point of the likeness was the quality of the sound: the high-pitched tone emitted by a bowstring in good condition and well strung is like the high pitch of the swallow's call.¹ While Eustathius provides an adequate explanation in terms of the sound, it will be argued here that the simile of the swallow's call has a thematic connotation particularly relevant in the context of the bow-scene.²

The regular migratory habits of the swallow with respect to place and time were well known in Greek antiquity. The phenomenon was widely mentioned or alluded to: for example, in a minor Homeric poem quoted in an ancient life of Homer (Ps.-Hdt. *Vit. Hom.* 476), by Aeschylus (frag. 53 Nauck), Democritus (frag. 14 Diels), Herodotus (2. 22), and Aristotle (*HA* 600a).³ Moreover, what was particularly noted within its migratory cycle was its reappearance at spring-time. Its vernal return was commonly described throughout Greek literature: for example, by Hesiod (*Op.* 568–69), Stesichorus (38 Edmonds), Simonides (74 Edmonds), Aristophanes (*Eq.* 419, *Pax* 800, *Av.* 1417), *Anacreontea* 25 Edmonds, and Babrius (131 Perry).⁴ It is noteworthy that the swallow's characteristic call, not merely its appearance, was often taken as the signal of its return. So, in the passages cited above, ὀρθογόη (Hesiod), κελαδῆ (Stesichorus, Aristophanes), φωνῇ (Aristophanes), and ἀκούσας μικρὰ τιττουβιζούσης (Babrius) all underline the fact that the swallow's annual return was perceived by the ear as much as by the eye.⁵ In addition to the literary testimony, there is evidence of a

1. Cf. K. F. Ameis and C. Henze, *Homers "Odyssee"*, vol. 2², ed. P. Cauer (Leipzig and Berlin, 1911), p. 97; W. B. Stanford, *The "Odyssey" of Homer*, vol. 2 (London, 1962), p. 369. Stanford also quotes Cotterill's translation, "... full sweetly it sang, like the voice of the swallow": the Greeks, however, did not usually consider the swallow's voice "sweet"; Anacreon (43 Edmonds) is an exception. That is precisely Eustathius' point. Indeed, the swallow's twittering was used derogatively to describe barbarian speech (*LSJ*, s.v. χελιδ-).

2. Recent criticism has studied and amplified the idea of the thematic relationship of the similes to the narratives, characters, and general themes of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*: see C. Moulton, *Similes in the Homeric Poems*, *Hypomnemata* 49 (Göttingen, 1977); W. C. Scott, *The Nature of the Homeric Simile*, *Mnemosyne Suppl.* 28 (Leyden, 1974), esp. chaps. 2, 3, and 4; T. B. L. Webster, *From Mycenae to Homer* (London, 1958), pp. 223–39. For a critical review of earlier scholarship on the similes, see Scott's introductory chapter.

3. For additional references, see D. W. Thompson, *A Glossary of Greek Birds* (Oxford, 1895), pp. 187–88.

4. See Thompson, *Glossary*, pp. 187–88, for citations from other authors such as Theophrastus, Oppian, Artemidorus, and Nonnus.

5. Cf. Opp. *Hal.* 727–31; Nonnus *Dion.* 2. 132–35. So J. M. Edmonds, *Lyra Graeca*, vol. 2 (London, 1924), p. 325, takes Simonides' invocation (74 ἀγγελε κλυτά) to refer to the swallow's call.

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popular ritual concerned with the swallow's return and its song. Athenaeus (8. 360C) has preserved an account of the singing of the swallow-song at Rhodes.⁶ The swallow's return was also depicted in art: a well-known Attic red-figure vase of the *Leagros Kalos* group (Leningrad 615) shows a swallow and bears the inscription:

Ἴδου, χελιδών. Νῆ τὸν
Ἡρακλέα. Αὐτῆι. Ἔαρ ἦδη.⁷

Finally, the extent to which the return of the swallow impressed itself upon the Greek consciousness may be illustrated by the fact that the event was proverbial:

μία γὰρ χελιδὼν ἔαρ οὐ ποιεῖ. . . .⁸

Given the ancient evidence, the swallow and its call might well be called a quintessential metaphor for the idea of returning.⁹ For the *Odyssey* as a whole, and especially the climactic moment at 21. 411, no more appropriate birdcall exists.¹⁰ Through the simile of the swallow's call, the singing bowstring heralds the hero's return.

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6. Thompson, *Glossary*, p. 189, suggests, as other fragments of swallow-songs, Sappho (122 Edmonds), Ar. Av. 419, and the line of the minor Homeric poem cited above in the text; on the last-mentioned, see also H. G. Evelyn-White, *Hesiod, The Homeric Hymns and Homeric* (London, 1914), p. 475, n. 1. Thompson also offers evidence for swallow-songs in nineteenth-century Greece.

7. For the most recent treatment of this vase, see M. Robertson, "Jumpers," *The Burlington Magazine* 119 (1977): 82, with n. 18 and fig. 21; thanks are due here to J. McCredie, Director of the Institute of Fine Arts of New York University, and M. Moore of Hunter College, C.U.N.Y., for their assistance.

8. Arist. *EN* 1098a18. According to the scholiast, Cratinus used the proverb in his *Maids of Delos*; see J. M. Edmonds, *Fragments of Attic Comedy*, vol. 1 (Leyden, 1957), p. 33. The joke in Ar. Av. 1417 depends upon a knowledge of the proverb, as does the point of Babrius' fable (131 Perry) about the gambling boy and his cloak.

9. Although the swallow's return is not mentioned in the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*, it is difficult to believe that what was proverbial and a *koinos topos* from Hesiod to late antiquity was unknown to Homer and his audience. As *Il.* 3. 3–5 shows, bird migrations did not go unnoticed by Homer and even supplied material for a simile. Finally, the swallow predates Homer in the Aegean world, and there is some evidence that its migratory pattern was well known in Minoan times. Swallows were, of course, greatly favored by the Minoans, as Minoan art demonstrates. This, and an analogy with contemporary practice in Syria and Italy, led Sir Arthur Evans to conclude that the suspension pots for birds found at Knossos were for swallows (*Palace of Minos at Knossos*, vol. 2 [New York, 1964], pp. 306–7). Evans' conclusion is reasonable, for whether it be in the Bronze Age or in contemporary southern California at San Juan Capistrano, people have always expected the swallow's return.

10. Scott, *Oral Nature*, p. 49, and Moulton, *Similes*, p. 52, note that this second simile within five lines calls attention to the climax. Moulton (pp. 135–39) also argues that bird imagery in general is related to Odysseus' homecoming and the gods' approval of it, and that the swallow simile is to be connected with Athena's later transformation into a swallow (*Od.* 22. 240). N. Austin, *Archery at the Dark of the Moon* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1975), pp. 246–50, adduces, *inter alia*, the swallow simile and Athena's transformation in support of his theory that the peripety of the *Odyssey* takes place in the spring.

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