

THE MUSES IN HOMER: FROM NARRATIVE DEVICES TO SYMBOLS OF A CHANGING WORLD

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Introduction.

For as long as we have been humans, we have always searched for a way to communicate with the past, for we are a mnemonic species who builds upon remembering to preserve the old and create the new. In Ancient Greece, the ultimate act of remembrance, that is, the connection to a mythical past, was entrusted upon the daughters of Memory (Μνημοσύνη) herself, the Muses (Μοῦσαι, sing. Μοῦσα). They brought the past to the present with their voices and usually through song, transmitting them to the mortal bardic folks and supervising all this knowledge, “so that all the notable actions ever done remained in place under their gaze”¹. They are thus presented as atemporal and all-seeing, especially in the Homeric epics.

Through this essay I would like to discuss the double usage of the Muses in the Homeric poems, both as narrative devices and as mythical beings with a deep connection in Greek culture; for Muses acted as bridges not only between past and present or divine and mortal, but also between the Homeric poems themselves.

The Muses as Narrative Devices: The Invocation of the Muse(s).

As divine beings, the Muses were eyewitnesses of the heroic distant pasts and, as thus, can be used in epic poetry as a primary source in the telling of the deeds of heroes and Gods, as, for Ancient Greeks, the surest and clearest knowledge was the one experienced first-hand². Starting with Homer but present all throughout Greek and later on Roman epic, the invocation of the Muses was created to relay that knowledge onto a specific tale in song form. Typically, that invocation would appear at the start of the poem in a formulaic pattern that addresses the Muse or Muses and asks them for help in the narration of the events. This way, the goddesses take on the burden of infinite knowledge of the past, convey this information to the poet, and make way for full credibility and truthfulness regarding the bard’s tale³.

The relationship between the narrator, both within and outside the Homeric poems, and the Muses, has been subject of a great number of scholarly debates. There appears to be a certain dependency between the poet and the Muses, as can be shown in

¹ Ford, 1992, pp.199-200.

² Ford, 1992, p. 61.

³ Ford, 1992, p. 77.

multiple examples⁴ throughout Greek literature in which the poet refers to himself as a servant (πρόπολος) or a devotee (θεράπων) of these deities⁵. In this vision, the poet is nothing but a herald of the goddesses, a mere “musical instrument”, so to speak⁶.

Other authors postulate a less fatalist approach, considering this dependency between the poet and the Muses as situational and only for acquiring information in specific points throughout the narration, be it in especially difficult passages like listings or important scenes, or in a formulaic and ritualistic sense at certain moments. Among these more “utilitarian” views of the dichotomy poet-Muses, there have been various approaches trying to explain the necessity for these invocation of the Muse(s) in epic poetry and more specifically in the Homeric poems:

- 1) Invocations marked difficult or memory-heavy sections that required the consulting of physical written notes. Given the oral origins of Homeric epic, this theory is highly dubious.
- 2) Invocations are nothing but a literary *topos*. Since the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are the first poems to contain invocations of the Muses, it is very unlikely that a *topos* had already been formed.
- 3) Invocations are a pragmatic element addressed to the audience used to enhance the social understanding of the singer, putting themselves in direct relationship with divinity.
- 4) Invocations served to alert the audience of specific parts and to capture their attention.
- 5) Invocations are seen in a religious manner as an expression of the poet’s subjective experience with a supernatural being, rather than a simple narrative device⁷.

Narratively, there does seem to be a “utilitarian” aspect of the Muses as concrete elements that enhance the story – not necessarily being their only facet or purpose. This literary usage of the goddesses must be interpreted as a traditional element in the *aoidos*’ repertoire, serving as part of a larger stock of formulaic composition⁸, for we must not forget Homeric poems are essentially oral in nature and the orality permeates through every area of the epics.

I will now proceed to analyze every instance of an invocation of or an allusion to the Muses in the Homeric poems to reflect upon the information given beforehand and to clarify not only the double nature that I believe these goddesses have in the poems, but also to go over the different conception of the Muse(s) in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* and how the goddesses can be seen as a “case study” of sorts that reflects the change not only in the narrator but possibly in the context of which both poems were written.

The Muses in the *Iliad*: A protection against *hybris*.

⁴ Cf. HH32.20; Hes.*Th.*10; Bacchyl.*Dith.*5, 12, 193; and others.

⁵ Otto, 2005, p. 33.

⁶ De Jong, 1987, p. 46.

⁷ Franek, 2018, pp.7-9.

⁸ Minton, 1960, p. 292.

The *Iliad* has a total of seven instances where the Muses are mentioned, and, out of those, six are invocations. It is thus the main text in which to study the Muses in Homer; by contrast the *Odyssey* only has one invocation and three other allusions. This reflects a heavily bardic and formulaic context in the case of the oldest Homeric poem, a world in which the focus is on epic tales and epithets where the form is equally – if not more – important than the content.

The first invocation is the most “classical” one, appearing at the beginning of the poem, in book one, line one: μήνιν ἄειδε θεὰ Πηληϊάδεω Ἀχιλῆος. The importance of this first invocation goes beyond the limits of the *Iliad* and even Homer, as this very first line of the *Iliad* would catapult the usage of an invocation of the Muse at the beginning of (generally) epic poems all throughout Greek and Latin literature, becoming a staple of the genre and having iterations past the Ancient World. It is also the first instance of the concept of Muses as a whole, even if – in this case, Calliope – is not referred to by name. We are sure, however, that the θεά appearing in *Il*.1.1 is none other than the muse, as it is preceded by the main verb associated with these goddesses; ἄειδε, “sing”. As for the context of this invocation, it focuses mostly on the main hero of the poem, Achilles, and his wrath, but it is worth noticing how all of it is tangled in an enumeration of hardships and struggles caused by this *ménin*. One of the most interesting characteristics of the Homeric Muses is their contextual association with fatality and calamity, departing them from the Hesiodic vision of them, the one that permeated through the rest of the Ancient World.

On the topic of this first invocation at the beginning of the poem and its legacy, Wheeler⁹ sets it apart from the other invocations, referring to this one as an introit. Although the name chosen for this schism within the invocations to the Muses is not without an implicit Christian bias and thus susceptible to nuances or changes, I deem crucial to differentiate opening invocations from the ones mid-narration, as they have an innate ritualistic nature outside of formulaic or strictly bardic usages. Wheeler ponders the possibility of an originally lengthier introit an *aoidos* could recite before singing in which they would pray to the Muses and specify the subject of their tale¹⁰ – both for the Muse and their audience. Only then would the singing start, and thus this introit was ritualistic in nature as well as performative, associating bard with the Muses and establishing their dynamics as they have been described before.

The next time the Muses are mentioned – this time by name –, happens to be the greatest example of the invocation of the Muses on Homer; the one that precedes the Catalogue of the Ships, in *Il*.2.484-93. Its importance lies not only in the fact that it is the first time the Muses are referred to by name in Greek literature, but also because it follows it with an explanation of the poet’s relationship with them and changes the overall impersonal narrative into a conversation between author and reader / listener – as if it were “breaking the fourth wall” – humanizing the narrator and pretending to relate the nuances of ancient epic singing. It also sets a precedent for most of the remaining invocations in the *Iliad*, as they will all start with the same verse, arranged, and probably used, in a formulaic matter: ἔσπετε νῦν Μοῦσαι Ὀλόμπια δώματ’ ἔχουσαι¹¹. The narrator

⁹ Wheeler, 2002, pp. 33-49.

¹⁰ Wheeler, 2002, pp. 35-6.

¹¹ In 2.484, 11.218, 14.508, and 16.112.

then follows this introductory verse with a call for help, for they know everything while he hears only a *kléos*, a “rumour”:

“Tell me now, you Muses who have dwellings in Olympus – for you are goddesses (θεαί) and are present and know all things (ἵστε τε πάντα), but we hear only a rumour (κλέος) and know nothing (οὐδέ τι ἴδμεν) – who were the leaders of the Danaans. But the multitude (πληθύν) I could not tell or name, not even if ten tongues were mine and ten mouths and a voice unwearying, and the heart within me were of bronze, unless the Muses of Olympus, daughters of Zeus who bears the aegis (Διὸς αἰγίοχοιο θυγατέρες), call to my mind (μνησαίαθ’) all those who came beneath Ilios. Now will I tell the leaders (ἄρχοντες) of the ships and all the ships.”¹²

Note that the verb used in this instance as the action needed for the narrator to deliver the Muses’ knowledge is *μυμνήσκω*, “to be remembered”, with the same root as *Μνημοσύνη*, the Muses’ mother who embodied the concept of memory, and, of course, of *Μοῦσα* itself. Thus, it could be argued that, in essence, Muses personify remembrance and recalling of the past, at least in narrative contexts.

Homer’s appeal for knowledge in this instance also doubles as a special form of *recusatio*, a “refusal to give a full presentation of complex things”¹³ by only accepting to name the *archoús* and not the totality of Danaan soldiers which, understandably, he deems an impossible task; “to tell everything that happened at Troy would take a more than human poet”¹⁴. As such, it is the poet’s job to select the information they require in their poems, all the while being fully aware that whatever knowledge they were able to gather is only a mere *kléos* and thus incomplete¹⁵, for only the Muses have full access to this wisdom. This way, this invocation is a very explicit example of the poet’s self-subjugation to the Muses¹⁶, an idea that would be propelled through Hesiod to the rest of Greek and Roman literature.

Minton¹⁷ introduces a practical explanation to the placing of this unusually personal and long invocation before the Catalogue:

“The Catalogue, originating in Mycenaean times and reflecting in considerable detail the geographical and political knowledge of that earlier period, seems to have been transmitted orally *with little essential change* through the intervening ages. [...] No matter how often it was sung it was something essentially foreign in Ionian heroic song and must have made considerable special demands on memory [...], hence the poet’s deeply felt and genuine appeal [...]. The knowledge he asks for is enumerative

¹² *Il.* 2.484-493, Trans. Murray, Rev. Wyatt, 1924.

¹³ Ford, 1992, p. 73.

¹⁴ Ford, 1992, p. 76.

¹⁵ Ford, 1992, p. 86.

¹⁶ Franek, 2018, p. 3.

¹⁷ 1962, pp. 206-7.

knowledge of the sort still current and familiar in the tradition of the mainline poets, but almost lost to the Ionian bard”.

While this all may be true, and from a utilitarian viewpoint it greatly helps explaining the oddity of these verses, I would want to add a possible religious explanation for this passage that could also be applied to other invocations to the Muses not only in Homer but in a general sense, for ancient cultures were first and foremost religious societies in which beliefs were imbricated into every aspect of life. Thus, I would want to discuss the impact of the fear of *hybris* in the invocation.

With the term appearing as early as the *Odyssey*¹⁸ and being deemed as a common *topos* in numerous myths, it is apparent that *hybris* (ὕβρις) was a concept deeply rooted in the Greek understanding – just as guilt is still greatly present in traditionally Catholic cultures, for example. It is then understandable that there could exist an inherent fear of seeming full of *hybris* to the Gods – and more specifically, to the Muses – in claiming to know all events described in the poet’s epic poem with clarity and certainty, thus overstepping the traditional boundaries bestowed between humanity and the daughters of Mnemosyne. The poet, then, would use the invocation both as a formulaic resource and as a plea to the goddesses to demonstrate they are respectful and subordinate to them.

This idea is reinforced in the next allusion to the Muses in the poem, the only one that is not an invocation, but part of the narration. In 2.594-8, Homer relates the demise of the Thracian singer Thamyris at the hands of the Muses, who maimed him after he “declared with boasting that he would win even if the Muses themselves were to sing against him¹⁹”. This passage proves that the Muses are capable of harm to those who incur in *hybris* practices, reinforcing the *status quo* between the divinities and the *aoidoi* as just their servants and inferiors. It is interesting to note that not only does this narration justify – at least partly –, the peculiar nature of the previously discussed invocation, but it is also not the only time the poet tells us of the Muses harming bards in the Homeric poems. The reinforcement of the Muses as vengeful and powerfully brutal beings might play into the fear of *hybris* discussed above. Also, it is worth noting that, once more, the Muses are recalled in a fatal and dreadful passage.

Lastly, there is another invocation in the Catalogue; in 2.761 the author asks the Muse to recall him who was the best among the Achaeans, one of the central themes throughout the *Iliad* and integral to the narrative thread, as Telamon is described as the best warrior but only because of Achilles’ withdrawal. Once more, the Muses are invoked before a calamity of some sorts happens – in this case a battle –, and what is worth noting about this brief passage is its possible usage as an attention-seeking device, preparing the audience for an important section of the poem. As explained above, this is one of the theories trying to explain invocations in the narration and could be apply to all other previous and future invocations; this one just seems like the clearest one to me. This demonstrates that the previously discussed approaches are not exclusive in nature, and more than one interpretation can coexist.

¹⁸ Cf. *Od.* 15.329: τῶν ὕβρις τε βίη τε σιδήρεον οὐρανὸν ἵκει.

¹⁹ *Il.* 2. 594-6.

The three final invocations to the Muses in the *Iliad* should be discussed together, for they are very similar in nature and are built very similarly, with a clear formulaic approach in mind. They are the ones in 11.218-20, 14.508-10 and 16.112-3, and they all start with the very same verse that appears in the previously discussed Catalogue invocation, followed by narrations of critical points in the Greek's struggle²⁰ under the consequences of Achilles' withdrawal – which, again, points to the invocation as an attention-seeking device. Also, they are all, as we have come used to, fatalistic and cataclysmic in nature. They exemplify a very formulaic pattern consisting of a crisis-struggle-defeat sequence²¹ applicable to these contexts that could be extrapolated to the rest of the Homeric invocations, at least to a degree and with some alterations.

The Muses in the *Odyssey*: the relegation to a concept.

There is a stark difference between the treatment of Muses in the *Iliad* and in the *Odyssey*, which could be explained by the differences in context between the two poems. It is generally agreed upon that the *Odyssey* is – at least – a generation younger than the previous poem and, as such, a change in contextuality is expected. As stated before, this epic has less allusions to the goddesses, with only one invocation. There also appears to be a greater focus in bards in the world of the *Odyssey*; four of them appear throughout the poem, and two of them are named and receive characterization. This could be explained with the change of intertextual context; the *Iliad* happens in Troy during a war, in which bards were probably very scarce; while the *Odyssey* is a *nostos* and, as such, has a plethora of locations, some of them being palaces that required the services of *aoidoi*. However, there appears to be a more profound conceptual change extra-textually, something concerning the Muses themselves, as I hope to relay below.

The only invocation in the poem is the one at the beginning²² – the introit, as I have previously discussed. Even if in form there are similarities with the one in the *Iliad*, there is still one key change that indicates a shift between the two poems; in this poem, the Muse does not sing (ᾄδει), but tell (ἔννεπε). This change of terms allows the poet to add a focus on narration and, what is more significant, to take away the Muse's signature action to relegate it on the multiple bards in the poem. Singing will then not be an inherent characteristic of the goddesses, and this plays into their de-humanization and conceptualization, present throughout the poem. Slowly but surely, it seems as if *aoidoi* were displacing the Muses, not fearing *hybris* anymore and probably supported by a social system that encouraged it.

There is no other mention of the Muse – for all allusions to the goddesses save for one use the singular form – until book 8, verses 62-75, tied to the presentation and characterization of Demodocus, the *aoidos* at king Alcinous' palace. The Muse is said to have “loved [Demodocus] above all other men (ἐφίλησε), and gave him both good and evil (δίδου δ-ἀγαθόν τε κακόν); of his sight (ὀφθαλμῶν) she deprived him, but gave him the gift of sweet song (ἤδεϊαν ἀοιδίην)”²³. The Muse presented here is not the previously

²⁰ Minton, 1960, p. 296.

²¹ Minton, 1960, p. 296.

²² *Od.* 1.1.

²³ *Od.* 8.63-4, Trans. Murray, Rev. Dimock, 1919.

established all-knowing atemporal deity, but an endower of bards, reducing her power to her link with humanity. Just like in Thamyris' case in the *Iliad*, Demodocus was also harmed by the goddess(es), although this time we do not know the motives that prompted the Muse to do it. However, we can see a link between the two poems in this way; once more Muses appear within a demise or struggle, even if in this case it is compensated with their gift to the bard. If anything, however, this passage cements the link between the Muses and the *aoidos* in a way the *Iliad* never managed to do, assessing their relationship in a more direct and approachable way, and bestowing upon the figure of the singer a direct divine protection by expressing how much he was favoured by the Muse.

The Muse is once again mentioned in 8.477-91 in relation to Demodocus. In calling upon him, Alcinous announces that “for among all men that are upon the earth minstrels win honor and reverence, for the Muse has taught them the paths of song, and loves the tribe of minstrels”²⁴. Once again, the Muse gets used only in relation to the bards and only to show her affection towards them and her gifting of song to them; all other attributes or abilities seem to have disappeared. The second instance of the Muse in this passage offers more interesting commentary; it is said by Odysseus, and goes as follows:

“Demodocus, truly above all mortal men do I praise you, whether it was the Muse, daughter of Zeus (Διὸς πάις), that taught you, or Apollo; for well and truly do you sing of the fate of the Achaeans, all that they did and suffered, and all the toils they endured, as if perhaps you had yourself been present, or had heard the tale from another (ὥς τέ που ἢ αὐτὸς παρεὼν ἢ ἄλλου ἀκούσας).”²⁵

The most important information that we learn here is that Apollo, just as the Muse(s), could bestow the gift of singing upon the bards, making the goddesses more expendable. It is also interesting to note the use of Διὸς πάις, in contrast with the usual epithet of Διὸς θυγατέρ(ες). This reflects upon a de-humanization of the Muses, as πάις is deemed as gender neutral and less specific of a word than the very obviously feminine θυγατέρ. As such, it is understood that the Muses are not a fixed idea with a concrete mythos, but a more diffused one, being able to change in number, in functions, and even in gender. Finally, I would like to discuss the last verse in this extract, in which Odysseus praises Demodocus for singing about Troy as if he had been there. This is a capability previously associated to the Muses, as discussed above, that is now attributed to the best of bards – or even just to *aoidoi* in general. Odysseus, being a participant in the war, is used here as a “fact-checker” of some sorts, verifying the tale that Demodocus sings about, without needing an invocation or divine validation at all. Once again, bardic activity becomes centerfold, with a relegation of the Muses to a lower stratum.

In 22.347 there is a possible allusion to the Muses, but it is not very clear as, in a context in which traditionally we would expect Μοῦσα or even θεά, we are confronted with the use of θεός, in masculine. This could either refer to Apollo – for it is stated above that he could do the same “job” as the Muses –, or to a conceptual kind of Muse, as it has been previously observed that their allusion is not restricted to the feminine gender, as the process of de-humanizing that encapsulates the *Odyssey*'s relationship with the Muse.

²⁴ *Od.* 8.478-81.

²⁵ *Od.* 8.487-91.

There is still, furthermore, a dependence to the bard; in this case Phemius is the one who refers to them while claiming he is ἀυτοδίδακτος, as in, taught only by the Muse / Apollo and no other mortal, trying to provide a plausible argument for Odysseus to not kill him by stating his special relationship to divinity²⁶.

The final instance of the Muses in the *Odyssey* and thus in the Homeric epic poems is peculiar in nature. Appearing in book 24, verses 60-2, they are alluded to by the ghost of Agamemnon while recounting Achilles' funeral to the hero himself. In them, not only are the Muses mentioned collectively for the first time in the poem, but it is stated that they constitute an ennead: "and the Muses, all nine (δ' ἐννέα πᾶσαι), replying (ἀμειβόμεναι) to one another with sweet voices (ὀπὶ καλῇ), led the dirge (θρήνεον)"²⁷. This is the only time that the Muses appear as characters in the narration, and they are presented singing the *threnos* for a fallen hero – again, a context of fatality and ultimate defeat²⁸ surrounding the apparition of the Muses. Even if they stand by other divinities such as Themis, they are not represented as such, going from their de-humanization and conceptualization in the rest of the poem to stripping them of any divine prowess; here they are just mere characters. However, I believe that there could also be an intent of linking the *Odyssey* with the *Iliad* by pluralizing the Muses precisely when surrounded by Iliadic heroes. In this way, this passage is a nod to a mentality that put deities at the center of their tales and were later displaced by heroes and other humans.

Conclusions. The Muses as symbols of an evolving context.

If one thing remains consistent throughout the Muses' iterations in the Homeric poems is their special relationship with *aoidoi*, reflected not only intertextually, but also noting how only the narrator and bards call upon them within the poems; the two notable exceptions are Odysseus, who has a bardic-like nature reflected in the *Apologia* of books 8-12 of the *Odyssey*; and Agamemnon's ghost, who, as stated before, has a special context.

The other guiding common thread through almost all instances of the Muses in these poems are their connection with fatality and calamity. No clear conclusion can be taken from it, but it can help theorize about a possible chthonic aspect of the primitive Muses that could have been lost through the ages. Similarly, through the poems I have stated the evolution that the Muses had through each of the contexts; while in the *Iliad* they were more focused and seen as omnipotent powerful beings with the true knowledge of past events, in the *Odyssey* their depiction is more faded and is seen always in relation to bards, as donors of their poetical prowess. Seeing as how both facets appear in the future Hesiod's *Theogony* – albeit the *Odyssey*'s one being more discussed than the *Iliad*'s –, one can only speculate about the ideological and societal changes that took place throughout the 8th century BCE in Ionia in contrast with Hellas that brought upon the different treatment of the goddesses within the poems.

²⁶ Franek, 2018, p. 5.

²⁷ Trans. Murray, Rev. Dimock, 1919.

²⁸ Minton, 1960, p. 308.

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