Self, Identity, and the Other: The Egyptian "Tale of the Shipwrecked Sailor" and the *Odyssey* in the Classroom

As early as the tale of Helen and Menelaus' visit to Egypt in the *Odyssey* and as late as 130 CE, when the emperor Hadrian inscribed the very last Hieroglyphics, the land of the Nile has captured the imagination of the Greco-Roman world. It is no wonder: both near and far, similar and "other", Egypt and Egyptians present a variety of lenses for viewing and analyzing "the barbarian"—and oneself. This paper takes a story from Egypt's Middle Kingdom (c. 1940 BCE), the "Tale of the Shipwrecked Sailor," and demonstrates how it can be used in the classroom alongside the *Odyssey* to discuss concepts of self, identity, and the "other" in Greek literature. In this paper I will first introduce the tale and its similarities to the *Odyssey* before turning to the differences that illuminate key concepts of Greek (and Egyptian) culture and identity.

Although quite short—fewer than seven pages in R.B. Parkinson's translation—the "Shipwrecked Sailor" shares many formal characteristics with the *Odyssey.* Among other things, it is written in verse, begins *in medias res,* and contains a tale within a tale told by a first-person narrator. In terms of plot, the tale resonates all the more strongly: A man is shipwrecked, all his companions are lost, and he washes up on a magical island where he receives guidance on how to return home. Most importantly, the protagonist is characterized as a "clever" man who saves himself with his ability to know what to say and say it well.

Key differences, however, lie in the matters of authorship, transmission, and medium of the two texts. The "Shipwrecked Sailor" ends with a traditional Egyptian scribal signature, declaring the work copied from start to finish and naming the copier. This is a strong contrast to the oral tradition of Homeric poetry. Highlighting this difference can feed discussion about song culture versus book culture as well as creating a window into cultural norms and the role of

literacy and writing in different cultures. This can be useful background for reading Classical Athenian literature, in which writing becomes a sign of a tyrannical cultures as opposed to the debate and discussion that takes place in democracies (e.g., lines 940-50 in Aeschylus' *Suppliants*, a play which centers on the complicated identity of the Greco-Egyptian Danaids; Chapters four and five of Deborah Steiner's *The Tyrant's Writ* discusses democracies and monarchies and their relationship to the written word).

Furthermore, while the "Shipwrecked Sailor" at first reads like a simple folktale, it is filled with esoteric religious symbolism and allusion to Egyptian myth. This grounds a seemingly universal tale firmly in Egyptian tradition. Likewise, through Odysseus' interactions with foreign peoples, the *Odyssey* is constantly reminding its audience of Greek ideals and what it means to look and act Greek. Both works give us insight into culturally specific ideas of self and society as well as views of foreign lands and foreigners.

We know from evidence of trade that Greece and Egypt were in contact from at least the thirteenth century BCE. Still, the relationship between these two lands on the Mediterranean is often passed over. When it is explored, it is often through the eyes of Herodotus' second book of the *Histories*, Aeschylus' *Suppliants*, Euripides' *Helen*, or Plato's accounts of Egyptian law and society—all Classical works written mostly by Athenians. Reading Egyptian tales can act as a countermeasure to the often xenophobic or confused depictions of Egyptian life and culture, allowing the Egyptians to speak for themselves. The "Shipwrecked Sailor" in particular has enough similarities to and differences from the *Odyssey* that reading these two works side by side can be a valuable exercise in comparing, discussing, and analyzing unique cultural perspectives.

Bibliography

Parkinson, R.B. 2009. *The Tale of Sinuhe and Other Ancient Egyptian Poems 1940-1640 BC.* Oxford.

Steiner, D. 1994. *The Tyrant's Writ: Myths and Images of Writing in Ancient Greece.* Princeton.