

The Limits of Memory as Persuasion in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*

Entreaties to remember, which seek either to ask or to command, are found in numerous places in Homer—from the commands to “remember the battle-strength” in the midst of combat, to Priam’s request that Achilles “remember his own father,” to Telemachus’ plea that Nestor remember the things that Odysseus did for him at Troy. Over a third of the instances of the verb *mimnesko* in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are exhortations that one remember something in order to achieve a certain purpose. Egbert Bakker has argued that “[memory] also makes that reality present and is, as such, a strong mental experience...memory in Homer is not a retrieval of stored facts, but a dynamic cognitive operation in the present, a matter of consciousness, or, more precisely, of the activation of consciousness” (Bakker 2002). Memory is a powerful force, and it is no surprise that entreaties used by men to persuade both men and gods alike often employ the command *tōn mnēsai*, “remember these things.”

It is important also to note that reciprocity undergirds the majority of actions taken in Homer; this is no different when it comes to memory. In his application of Sahlins’ spectrum of typologies among pre-state societies to the study of the Homeric poems, Donlan argues, among other things, that “the political organization of reciprocities, therefore, is an index of the social organization itself” (Donlan 1982). This reciprocity and its integral role in Homeric society is evident in the structure of the commands to remember. These are always paired with an enumeration of past deeds done for the recipient in order to elicit the fulfillment of the favor being asked for. In this way, past deeds are brought to stand vividly in the present through remembering—and then these are used by the petitioner to create a reciprocal exchange, a *quid pro quo*.

These commands to remember that follow the formula of *tōn mnēsai* work with astonishing success. Telemachus employs them with both Nestor and Menelaus and obtains information about his father; Priam uses them to invoke pity from Achilles and to acquire the return of Hector's body; and others such as Nestor, Penelope, and Thetis use them to obtain favors from deities, such as surviving in battle, gaining protection for one's son, or turning the whole Trojan War to the advantage of the Trojans. These commands always achieve the desired result, whether the request is big or small, with the exception of one instance: Hecuba's plea to Hector in Book 22. Scared for her son's life, she requests that Hector remember his childhood, the care she has given him, and his family in the hope that he will not go out and fight Achilles. But despite her entreaty to remember, Hector engages in battle with Achilles and is killed. Why, then, does the command to remember fail at this particular moment when it succeeds at every other moment in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*?

This paper argues that the reason for the failure of Hecuba's entreaty lies in the fact that it does not represent an equivalent exchange according to the demands of Homeric reciprocity. Hector reveals this in the soliloquy he gives after his mother's request: the potential *euchos* that Zeus could extend to him and the consequent glory of his deeds whether he lives or dies are not a fair trade off for the items that stand present in front of him through Hecuba's request to remember. Memory in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, then, is only successful inasmuch as the favors brought to the mind's eye are roughly equivalent to the favor being asked.

Bibliography

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