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The Lost Books of Ignorance

Preface

A handful of images are vital in understanding Zachary Mason's *The Lost Books of the Odyssey*--a king on his granite and shipwrecked throne; an almost-immortal warrior afraid yet surrounded by death; a mourning "widow" who weaves a funeral shroud of shadows and dust; a blind cyclops who would rather see darkness than his cave; a lost hero from an unfindable home beyond the sea; a book. Mason's forty-four stories reflect upon the events that are forgotten in Homer's *The Odyssey* where ignorance is accepted by some, but not my others.[1] Through ogres and enchanters, queens and kings, Trojans and Spartans, Odysseus and his companions face the complexity of knowledge, the revelation of ignorance, and the balance of the two.

[1] There are four relationships with ignorance: the fear of ignorance, ignorance in accepting death, finding comfort in ignorance, and the content with known ignorance.

A GREAT PERHAPS

The Odyssey reflects stories of heroes, princesses, battles, and honor. In contrast, *The Lost Books of the Odyssey* tells another side of Homer's stories, where heroes turn their backs, princesses run away, battles are never won, and honor is disregarded. Mason reveals the other layers of the many personalities portrayed nearly three millennia ago; beyond their prideful and heroic shells, there are layers of selfishness, deceit, regret, and fear. First and foremost is the kings and heroes who are plagued by frustration and concern when the knowledge of their ignorance resurfaces throughout their life.

Mason paints Odysseus the king of Ithaca and the legendary lost hero of *The Odyssey* as a reckless, though noble, warrior who faces challenges in order to eradicate his ignorance. However his travels, which sail for ten years, in most cases find Odysseus lost and confused, frustration often reaching him as he forgets his name, his home, his history.

Mason outlines a trail of ignorance in which the world is perceived in the same way as words whispered during a telephone game; with each passing era, misguided truths replace real truths, and ignorance and doubt replace the certainties of the once-known world. Mason utilizes Odysseus as an example of a human who, like many others, digresses further into ignorance and misunderstanding as he progresses through his life. In "Three Iliums," Odysseus wonders how it can be that he can enjoy the "greatest advantage, the only advantage, of living in the present" (80), though he is as ignorant as any generation prior and following him. Mason illustrates Odysseus as a frequently frustrated being in terms of accepting what he does not know; often times Odysseus notices that, despite his wit, he has "no leverage against fate" (83) and this

"ignorance is upsetting," though his "faith in logic" (141) is what allows him to deduct what he believes is the truth. Regardless of Odysseus' reasoning, ignorance is an inevitable trait in all humans, but the question is whether this personal ignorance is recognized or not. A common[2] conception of ignorance, as Mason points out, is that many know of the existence of their ignorance, but they do not know of what they are ignorant about.

Like Odysseus, who acknowledges what he doesn't understand, others like Athena, the goddess of wisdom and war, is portrayed by Mason as intelligent, but also unsure. Athena describes herself as "a hand trying to grasp itself by reaching into a mirror" (182); although she depicts her inclarity of the world as unchangeable, she accepts her inability to understand. Mason creates this ironic contrast between the goddess of wisdom and a mortal man, in that while Athena accepts her ignorance of her existence, Odysseus can not seem to grasp this same concept that Mason highlights: there are things that will be known and things that will remain unknown.

[2] Odysseus is just one example. Many from *The Lost Books of the Odyssey* face this realization of the unknown, though they can barely comprehend what it is that is unknown to them.

THE SIRENS

Odysseus' doubt in understanding his lack of knowledge of the known world travels to an island in the western sea between Aeaea and Scylla's dwelling place. From this island stems a tribe of half birds and half women: the Sirens. In their lullabies, the Sirens sing of the truth, something that all men crave to hear, for the Sirens sing the truth of whoever is listening. The Sirens lull that "No life on earth can be Hid from [their] dreaming,"[3] and the men that they beckon to their shores reveal more of man's desire to avoid ignorance and chase knowledge. Mason further reveals Odysseus' recognized vulnerability as he hears his own song from the sea witches, and his eyes open to the world as "orderly as the hexagons in a honeycomb," and close again to find that this pattern is "hidden… a code [he] could never crack" (83). From this, Mason unravels the complexity of the pattern of life that can never[4] be understood.

[3] The Sirens talk of a green mirror, which is not only a representation of the sea that voyagers drown in in their desire to hear the Sirens' truth, but also a green mirror that reflects back to the listener to reveal another side to their story, from the view of the enemy, the defeated, the forgotten.

[4] The Sirens share a truth that can eliminate a sliver of the listener's ignorance, however most listeners never make it home to dwell on it after an encounter with the shipwrecking creatures. Moreover, this sliver is still not enough to appease a passing sailor, thus why Odysseus begged his crew to take him back to the island to hear more of the Sirens' song; men like Odysseus crave to learn of any truth they can sail to, but all they are granted with is an understanding of the world as a "province of meaningless chances, a mad dance of atoms" (83).

A CATCH-22 OF FATE

Because of the entropy of the natural world, chasing knowledge to expunge what is known of the unknown has been proved moot and unresolvable. Like his realization upon hearing the Sirens, Odysseus in "Sirens" recognizes that despite his intelligence, finding a way to learn more of what he does not know is a conundrum that is impossible to resolve. His intelligence gives him "no leverage against fate" and his only reward for his troubles is "an understanding of the full scope of [his] helplessness" (83). With fate, everything will reach an end; Mason alludes man's desire to conjure up ideas that will exist forever, yet there is no room for permanence in what will always be changing. Trying to outlive or outsmart fate only attempts to disrupt the natural world, though fate, like a rubber band, can be twisted or pulled, nevertheless it will always just snap back into place. Mason emphasizes that regardless of Odysseus' knowledge of the truth, it will not change what the future has in store for him.

This helplessness Odysseus comprehends ties closely to Mason's next assertion that man fears his own mortality. And while Odysseus aches to know more of his future, mortality, and the truth of all things, others find a love for ignorance and a fear for knowledge, for it is only a reminder of their impending death.

PRIDE MORTALITY AND DEATH

Despite his change of other *Odyssey* figures, Mason never discontinues his depiction of Odysseus as a fate-fearing man; in "Last Islands," Odysseus, nearing the end of his life, has feelings of regret, for his belief that everything he once knew is not true. This regret directly stems from Odysseus' wounded pride that perhaps he had done something wrong in the past that affected his future and now, elderly and afraid of death, he sees his life as unfulfilled and "not far from nothing," and with his awareness of his mortality and his death quickly approaching, he feels that "everything [he] knew has turned to smoke" (226).

Despite this fear in an older Odysseus, younger Odysseus once shared a different opinion that Mason highlighted before: while Odysseus originally recognizes the unchangeable effects of fate in "Last Islands," he doubts his own fate as he ages, adamant that "somewhere [he] must have made a mistake" (226). These thoughts are common in aging citizens and Mason recognizes this; while knowledge is craved and fate is followed amongst younger men, with old age setting in--knees become weaker and hearts become slower and minds become crippled from regret and hurt pride--the fear of death overtakes the fear of the unknown and these older men find a comfort in dwelling on their mistakes. All fear of ignorance is wiped away with old age, with the inclusion of Odysseus. Though Mason makes it apparent that Odysseus fears fate and his own mistakes, he no longer fears ignorance; Odysseus no longer has the fight within his elderly nature to chase what he does not know of everyone and everything, hence why Mason writes Odysseus in "Last Islands" as an elderly man who has lost his spirit in his travels. Like from *The Odyssey*, Mason mentions that Odysseus knows his death will come soon--somewhere

in the sea and of old age--but Odysseus decides against risking this occurrence sooner in “Last Island,” for as his “men, eager as hounds, were all for pursuing [the suspicious cartman],” Odysseus “demurred and [they] sailed away” (221). Similarly on this journey to see the islands he had visited from his expedition back from Troy many decades earlier, he forgoes learning of his former acquaintances’ whereabouts because he lost his desire to pursue the truth. Unlike his younger self--who once tied himself to the mast of the ship to hear the Sirens’ songs, who once returned to Scylla’s cave to see the monster that took six of his men--Odysseus, in old age, and in Mason’s story, veers from his path of pursuing danger to find satisfaction in only “wondering,” but “not [knowing]” (222).

IMMORTALS WELCOMING IGNORANCE

Mason's concept of how mortality plays a role in accepting ignorance surfaces repeatedly throughout *The Lost Books of the Odyssey*. Like the differences[5] between Athena and Odysseus, Mason writes of how one's mortality, or immortality, decides how well ignorance is accepted. First is the king of Mycenae, Agamemnon, who is portrayed by Mason in "Agamemnon and the Word" as discontent and unsatisfied. Agamemnon, on his throne built with granite and the skeleton of a ship, asks his advisors to retrieve the simplest possible explanation for the world. Mason follows Agamemnon's discontent as he is given a series of items: a book of the entire world in microscopic writing; a dagger engraved with the words "And this, too, shall pass"; a single ring with a word that is never specified that which its definition encompasses all things on earth. However Agamemnon finds that "even this is not enough" (28). Mason exploits Agamemnon to make his point of human condition: the world and all of its inhabitants can not be simplified, thus ignorance is in everyone. Agamemnon, like Odysseus, finds comfort in knowledge, but knowledge in its simplest form; his refusal to accept his ignorance hindered his ability to live fully until he had received what he had asked for--an impossible request. Mason's story of Agamemnon in "Agamemnon and the Word" pronounces the fact that there are things that cannot be simplified, learned, and satisfied, and those like Agamemnon and Odysseus are Mason's symbols of those who fight their entire lives to avoid this revelation.

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[5] In "A Great Perhaps," Athena and Odysseus are contrasted in terms of how they accept what they do not know of the world. While Odysseus has difficulty with it, Athena is easy to accept her ignorance.

On the other hand there is Athena, a goddess who stands as a pillar for wisdom, who accepts her ignorance. But unlike Odysseus and Agamemnon, Athena is an immortal, unfamiliar with death. By depicting Athena as uninformed[6] and unafraid, but Odysseus and Agamemnon as uninformed and afraid, Mason accentuates what mortality entails: whether ignorant or not, death will come to everyone. Mason's explanation of mortality extends to his next point about the ignorance of death.

[6] Athena may be intelligent, but there are things even she does not understand. 'Uninformed' implies that there are things, such as the meaning of her own existence, that Athena understands that she will never comprehend.

ACHILLES AND DEATH

Accepting the presence of death formulates into a fear that most--like Odysseus and Achilles--have tried to avoid, for once something is known, it cannot be entirely forgotten.

First is the Greek hero of the Trojan War, Achilles. Achilles is the semi-immortal whose only weakness is his heel, the only thing that could become the warrior's death and downfall. Mason's *The Lost Books of the Odyssey* delineates Achilles with a fear of death, a trait that is not apparent in *The Odyssey*. In "Achilles and Death," Odysseus takes Achilles into a tomb where dead bodies surround him, in which "Achilles [averts] his eyes" (42). The warrior is like and unlike Athena in that he once felt that invincibility that came with being an immortal, yet he is still mortal. Similar to *The Odyssey*, Mason notes that Achilles already knows of his fate, and takes it in stride, but death is something he is neither comfortable with nor attune to. Although he shielded himself from the presence of death, he could not bring back his ignorance to it. Mason proposes that death can be processed in a multitude of ways, and he wields Achilles as one side of the spectrum--someone who has trouble swallowing the idea of death.

In another story, "The Myrmidon Golem," a living clay sculpture of Achilles, created by Odysseus, fights in the Trojan War; but once his friend Patroclus dies, "Achilles [stays] with the body through the day and night" (76). The clay sculpture, though not as intelligent and outspoken as the real Achilles, still has trouble accepting death, regardless of the fact that he is ignorant to the concept of death itself. With "The Myrmidon Golem," Mason reveals a truth of how many want to deal with death: they don't.

ODYSSEUS AND DEATH

Similar to Achilles, Odysseus comes to a realization of another's death. In "Penelope's Elegy," Odysseus' wife, Penelope, dies, but she still wanders as a spirit through the halls of his home in Ithaca. Odysseus refused to acknowledge Penelope's death, because "he knew she would turn to ash and shadows as soon as he touched her" (31). Mason uses the "ash and shadows" as an analogy for Odysseus' recognition of Penelope's death. If Odysseus "touched her," it would mean that he finally accepted the death of his wife, but for Odysseus, "nothing is more disgraceful than to acknowledge the presence of death" (31). Odysseus is not entirely ignorant to Penelope's death, but from what Mason describes, Odysseus refuses to accept it. By forcing a false hood of ignorance over his eyes, he does not have to remember that his wife is no longer with him.[7] Mason contradicts his analysis of Odysseus in terms of ignorance through the story; the Odysseus in battle, overseas, and with his rivals is very different than the Odysseus facing death.[8] In "Atena in Death," Odysseus is granted with the ability to choose the path of his afterlife; in his final decision, Odysseus wishes to spend it as a younger version of himself again, traveling the seas from a war that he only remembers as painful and successful, and to an island that is composed of just small memories and his desires; he does not want to forget himself--his identity--but he does "not want to know that he [is] a ghost" (168). Mason paints Odysseus to be

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[7] One of Mason's themes involves forgetting ignorance, whether that be forgetting one's own ignorance in general, or forcing ignorance to cover what one already knows. Mason's primary example is Odysseus, who never really forgets that he is ignorant of many things, but in "Penelope's Elegy," Odysseus does try to recall his ignorance of Penelope's death so that he wouldn't have to face it. In many stories, Mason emphasizes that ignorance often goes hand-in-hand with death.

[8] Note that in 'Pride Mortality and Death,' Odysseus, when faced with old age, loses his desire to attain knowledge, and in some ways, accepts what he does not know.

fearless and striving for knowledge--much like how *The Odyssey* portrayed him to be--but when his death comes, he decides to be ignorant of it, as well as his former life. Odysseus' conflicting beliefs can be attributed to Mason's inclination to show how one's ignorance changes as he grows, learns, ages.

NO-MAN NORMAN

The only other time Mason depicts Odysseus to be someone who would rather be ignorant is in "The Book of Winter." Odysseus awakens one day in a snowy cabin in the woods, ignorant to his name, story, and reason for being there; with the exception of wolves, deer, and trees, he is alone. After months of going through food supplies, firewood, and frustration over who he is, he finally recovers a book, *The Odyssey*. After some deduction, he finds that he is the Odysseus that the book talks of, and "with relief," he burns the book so that he "can begin anew, [he] who was once Odysseus and now [is] no one" (145). In this situation, Mason rewards Odysseus' curiosity by appeasing his ignorance, but Odysseus still returns to being nameless and forgotten. By returning to that ignorance of his identity, Odysseus can pursue a new life; this particular story goes against all of the depictions Mason originally laid out for Odysseus. While Mason tells of a noble and prideful Odysseus in some stories, and a death-fearing and fearful Odysseus in others, "The Book of Winter" tells of an Odysseus who would rather pursue a life alone, nameless, and forgotten. Mason's way of creating Odysseus like this is to further show how much a desire for ignorance can change with one person.

A MAN OF "GREAT STRENGTH" AND "COPPER BEAUTY"

Mason takes a similar approach to Odysseus with Achilles. Achilles, like Odysseus, is prideful and prefers knowledge over ignorance, with the exception of death. In 'Victory Lament," Achilles defeats all of the gods until he takes Zeus' throne and reads his book. Upon taking the throne, Achilles' ignorance is forgotten, but it is remembered when he kills the Emperor of the Heavens, Zeus, and the Earth below him crashes down upon his fall. But at the very top, Achilles finds no satisfaction in defeating the gods. As he sits in the Heavens, docile devas wait for him "to impart [his] wisdom, which is that [he has] learned nothing, know nothing, wish [he] had never picked up a sword, left [his] hut, been born" (166). With his newfound knowledge after reading the book, he realizes that he knows nothing of the true world and his ignorance is what pronounced his regrets. Mason harnesses Achilles to represent a typical human being who faces the same existential and ignorance-related issues. In "Victory Lament," Mason allows Achilles to struggle with what he learns from Zeus' book, because as he attains more knowledge, he realizes that he truly doesn't know anything.[9]

[9] This concept is Mason's shared philosophy: as one learns more of the natural world, he realizes that he knows less, further pushing him into further ignorance.

THE DEATH OF SCYLLA

Mason tells of Scylla, a sea monster who lives in a cave in the cliff across from the whirlpool Charybdis, whose regret shines as bright as Achilles' when he took Zeus' throne. Scylla, who hid in her cave for fear of Odysseus,[10] would rather live in ignorance to her knowledge of how and who was going to kill her. Because of her knowledge of her impending death, she is constantly in a state of fear and worry, which, like Achilles, became her downfall. Mason draws a parallel between Scylla and Achilles in that both are expecting death, which instilled a fear in both of them until they died. Upon Scylla's death, she recalls that hers "has been a miserable life… and [she wished she] had never heard the name Odysseus" (108). Mason's connection between knowledge and regret shares a glimpse into the truth that there are things that are better left unknown. Through Scylla, Achilles, and Odysseus, much like his interpretation of knowledge and regret, Mason reveals that ignorance and bliss also compliment each other.

[10] A prophet once told Scylla that a man named Odysseus was going to kill her one day, so she hid in her cave on a high cliff, starving and lonely, awaiting the day that he would come.

IGNORANCE IS BLISS

Similar to Scylla, Mason also gives Polyphemus and Cassandra a desire for ignorance. First is the story of Polyphemus, the cyclops son of Poseidon, who is blinded by Odysseus when his the warrior's crew steal from his cave. After some time and coming to terms with his situation, Polyphemus finds that he is more content with being blind, and in a way, he is "grateful," and "sight would be a distraction" (152). Mason compares blindness to ignorance and sight to truth; with blindness, Polyphemus finds content because it helps him focus on what is important. So with ignorance, Mason believes that it is vital in allowing someone to lead a satisfying and happier life.

THE FORTUNE TELLER

Mason further explores the bliss of ignorance with Cassandra, the princess of Priam. Because she desired to attain knowledge from the Greek god Apollo, she received the gift to see the future every time she looked to the sun. But with this gift, and "staring, sun-blind eyes she learned the sad ends of Hector her brother and Priam her father and wept for them even as they sat beside her" (173). Cassandra's perpetual sadness promotes Mason's point that ignorance, in terms of death, is often a better way to live than knowing everything. Cassandra's knowledge of all that was to come only threatens the peace of her life as she tries to veer her loved ones from their inevitable fates. Even her own fate is known to her, and like Scylla, she faces a miserable life with this knowledge. Mason uses Cassandra to hypothesize what life would be like if everything was known and understood. But ignorance, especially with fate, death, and existence, should remain incomprehensible, which Mason emphasizes throughout the *The Lost Books of the Odyssey*.

A SCALE

"An onion, an ocean, a palimpsest, a staccato machine of oiled iron gears. These are among the metaphors" (182) which Mason uses to describe knowledge and comprehensibility. Mason concludes that there are facts to be known and facts to be unknown; there are facts to be understood and facts that can never be understood; there is knowledge and there is ignorance, and there is a balance between them. On one side, there is Cassandra and Scylla and Polyphemus, who battle a fear of death and love for ignorance; on the other side is Agamemnon and Achilles, who battle with a fear of ignorance and a love for knowledge. And finally, Mason tells of Odysseus, who balances between accepting both his ignorance and what he already knows. And like with all things, ignorance must come with moderation. So through the king Agamemnon, the warrior Achilles, the widow Penelope, the blind Polyphemus, the lost hero Odysseus, and the book *The Odyssey*, Zachary Mason elaborates upon the concept of ignorance, and stresses a need for it. From heroes to nobodys, island to island, *The Lost Books of the Odyssey* does not depict ignorance as a flaw, or knowledge as a hindrance, but both as a necessity.

Works Cited

Mason, Zachary. *The Lost Books of The Odyssey*.