

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

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Themes in Homer

MYTH (Iliad – Odyssey)
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MYTH

OVERVIEW The American classical scholar, Milman Parry (1902-1935), opened Homer to us in a series of papers on the oral formulaic prosody of Homer's text. (Homer's text was arguably in written version by the early eighth century B.C.E.) By examining the pattern of formulaic verses in Homer's dactylic hexameter, Parry was able to see inside the epic as a masterpiece of memory, 'the mother of the Muses.' Parry was able to control, shape, and imagine out the vast plan of Homer's two coherent epics. Ingenuity and control, powered by patterns carved out of the living texture of Greek, sufficed in Homer's genetic work to renew even the boilerplate challenges of extensive narrative.

ILIAD The artistic mystery opened in Homer's text, by the critical inventiveness of Milman Parry can be made equally transparent by thinking through the role of myth in the *Iliad*. Myth snapshots, like prosodic formulae, are in the finest sense filler. (One may find this line of reasoning useful to the whole evanescent study of what Greek myth is, as a working accompaniment to thought.) Apollo as the plague sender against the Greeks, or the fatal weakener of Patroclus; Zeus as the granter of Thetis' request that her son, Achilles, might be able to bring down calamity on the Greeks; Hera as the preventer of Achilles from killing Agamemnon; in each instance the figure of myth, with its accompanying tagline of narrative event, serves as a fast triggering developing of the larger Homeric tale, just as the prosodic octane identified by Parry drives its story forward.

Myth thus becomes the dramatic ally of the epic poet, as it complies with the traditional expectations of what the myth means, and where the tale is going. In a larger sense Homer's *Iliad* is itself a huge tapestry of mythic expectations, fulfilling themselves on the level of understanding and thought, just as the cunning structure of sound and semantics, in the dactylic hexameter, banishes everything but liveliness,

ODYSSEY *The Odyssey* is a myth—a prolonged story—containing any number of folklore elements --Odysseus and the Cyclops; the Old man of the Sea in dialogue with Odysseus; the tale of the tree trunk bed of Odysseus and Penelope—and celebrating the art of storytelling (Odysseus the bard, singing before his hosts in Phaeacia; Odysseus the fabulator, cross lying with Athena, as he and she attempt to identify one another, toward the end of the epic).

It is of particular interest to consider the relation of the narrator of the entire *Odyssey*, 'Homer,' to the work he 'composed,' *The Odyssey*. Does the composer of the epic 'stand outside it,' outside the entire work that follows the preamble, 'Sing to me, Muse, of that man...?' Is Odysseus as a creation a mythical figure created by the person who asked the muse to sing about Odysseus? What about the command to Odysseus, from Teiresias in the underworld, that he should continue on his journey, after killing the suitors, until he comes to a region so far inland that a man who meets him mistakes his oar for a winnowing rod? Does anything about this command seem to separate off the myth of the *Odyssey*, as a whole, from another world with its own rules and regulations?

FAMILY

ILIAD Language patterns and chunks of narrative myth prove to be major constructive elements in the make up of the tale of the *Iliad*. Family relations are of equally shapely architectural power.

The *Iliad* moves across patches of brute combat, in which hand to hand fighting seems the only relation possible among human beings. Yet even in the midst of the hottest brawls of the war, it can occur this way: a fighter on one side is struck by the recognition that his opponent is a member of a related family, or perhaps of his own family. Once this recognition sinks in, the fight is off, diluted into conversation. Or take the example of the most tender scenes in the wasteland of the *Iliad*: the separation of baby Astyanax, mama Andromache, and father Hector, as the man of the family decides he must leap into war and face the violence of Achilles. Or, even more crucially for the outcome of the *Iliad*, the decision of Priam to supplicate Achilles, begging to have the body of his son returned. The bond of family is intimate and strong in the *Iliad*.

ODYSSEY Family bonding is a dominant structural framework for the *Odyssey*. While Odysseus is fighting outside the walls of Troy, Penelope is carefully weaving (then unweaving) the tapestry by which she is buying time to hold off her suitors, and Telemachus, as ripening time approaches, is getting ready to set off looking for his dad. The audience of this epic thus triangulates the three-member family, making its movements into a series of landmarks by which to track the progress of the epic. Less concerned with combat than the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey* gives us a few more glimpses than the *Iliad* into the way families work. We see Helen and Menelaus at home together in Sparta, as though nothing had ever happened; we see Odysseus' old father and the maker of the family that drives the epic, working in his family vineyard; we see, in Nausikaa and her girlfriends at the river in Phaeacia, the pastoral playfulness that binds this girl to her loving parents who await her at the palace.

QUEST

ILIAD Quest dominates the whole epic, for the Greek forces have assembled in the first place, as a quest team attempting to recover Helen, their lost honor, or—depending how you look at it—shipping control over valuable cargo passing along the Dardanelles. What took precedent, among these alleged motives, is by now part of the imagination that made telling about all this of world historical importance. A wide variety of ancillary themes, as one can expect of any war, flare out around the center. Achilles, arguably the most complex and deeply inward of the Greeks—he is, after all, the child of a goddess, and the lover of a serious hero, Patroklos—is torn down the center of his being by the loss of Patroklos, who has stormed fatally into the fray, representing Achilles himself, and slaughtered by that representative. The wild bull unleashed in him, Achilles pours out across the enemy lines, searching for his love. The quest he puts on the line, in his struggle to guarantee the soul of Patroklos, is carried over into the fury that Achilles will soon focus on Hector. That final fury is pure quest to eradicate the foes of his own lover's beauty.

ODYSSEY *The Odyssey* is built around an individual quest, Odysseus'. Unlike the multileveled quest of the Greek army, to capture Troy and return Helen to her husband, the quest that pervades the *Odyssey* is built around one man's intense and protracted struggle to return home to his wife and son. That quest, which is the central theme in the *Odyssey*, is encased in a broad westward postwar world, which involved all the Greek forces from Troy, as they made their ways homeward. True it is, that the path home was studded with obstacles, which make for the richness of theme which pervades the Greeks' homecoming. It is not Odysseus' part to hurry his passage, for it is by savoring and overcoming them that this hero earns the right to quest. The picaresque in Odysseus' drive makes his individual struggle different from, say, those of Aeneas or of Dante (in *The Divine Comedy*), one of whom was driven toward empire building, the other toward overcoming himself into a cognitive spirituality, aligned with the higher insights of theology. The Odyssean picaresque carries inside it the potential for an irony at its own expense, for to yield to such temptations as the Laestrygonians, the Lotos Eaters, the Cyclops or Scylla and Charybdis, is to subscribe to a life fascination which was indulging itself at the expense of a lonely island queen, who was however as willing as her husband to do one day after another willing to do or undo life all over again.

CONFLICT.

ILIAD From the outset of the *Iliad*, as Agamemnon and Achilles face off, the epic tone is sharply confrontational. Agamemnon is the chief of the Greek forces, which are refractory at best, and fuels the volatile hostility of Achilles, who rivals him not only for power but for possession of Briseis, the slave he has won through conquest. Undying jealousy separates the two men. and after their opposing forces split at the highest level, the battle scene action, furor and armed combat, takes center stage. Hand to hand fighting, say between Glaukus and Diomedes becomes a visual metaphor for the furor of assault. Non stop conflict overwhelms the audience until the inevitable action break, which turns Achilles' pouting sulk, his adolescent hunkering down in his tent into the kind of transcendent turn into which the death of the loved one is transformed into the blazing power of the gods. Hector is the victim of this semi-final conflict, in which the death of the lovable mortal, the middle class family man Hector, is changed into a sacrifice. Priam's love for his son is released from this conflict, and from that love is released Achilles' version of love, his willing return of the body of Hector.

ODYSSEY The core conflict in the *Odyssey* brings Odysseus face to face with the suitors, who have been besieging his wife, Penelope, in her home on the island of Ithaca. The ongoing tussle, between Penelope's determined 'resistance,' the suitors' malingering scrounge, and the long enduring—but slow resolving—will of Odysseus to clean up the mess in his house: all these ingredients lead up to a stalemate of long duration, which is brought to an end, ultimately, by chance—Odysseus can see the smoke rising from the roof of his home on Ithaca, as he lingers on Calypso's island. The brutal conflict comes to a head in Odysseus' home, as the hero proves his durable strength, mowing down the suitors with his massive bow.

Conflict however assumes many forms in the *Odyssey*, traps set along the hero's way as he makes his way from one obstacle (or seduction) to another. These way stop conflicts can take the form of folk lore—Laestrygonians, Circe, Cyclops, Scylla and Charybis--or of substantive enrichment, plunging the tale into its philosophical dimensions, as in the journey into the underworld. Odysseus can even 'fall in love,' if that is what we want to call his 'years long tarrying' on Calypso's island, which concludes with the mortal's fatigue, too much ambrosia. There are times when the ocean seems so vast and full of challenges, that we almost forget that there is a final challenge lying at the end of the road.

REVENGE.

ILIAD The *Iliad* is a seething epic, and we know from the beginning, in the explosions of anger between Agamemnon and Achilles, that there will be no rapid resolution to their dispute. Achilles is fiery and of divine origin, and has already, in losing his mistress to the commander in chief, giving into almost more visible wounding than he can endure. He must seek revenge, for a situation which barely tolerates resolution. Hunkering down in his tent with his lover and their top allies, he forsakes any simple loyalty to the Greek camp, and plainly remains an angry thorn in Agamemnon's side. When Patroclus is killed, all the fury in Achilles is released; he becomes a killing machine on a savage battlefield, until at last, having avenged his honor to full, he can find enough peace in himself to perform an act of grace, the returning of the body of Hector to Priam.

ODYSSEY Odysseus has long been needled by the presence of the suitors in his house, and by the morally precarious situation in which his wife has been left. One can understand the depth of built-up need for revenge which has been requiring a response, and as he gets closer to home, hears of the quest of Telemachus to find his dad, and feels the pressure of his own generational aging. Odysseus gets readier at this point to take a large revenge for the twenty year intrusion onto his home in Ithaca. In order to carry through a fitting response, to this prolonged intrusion, Odysseus needs to undertake what are (for him) careful preparations for revenge. This involves several conversations with his disguised Athena ally, who tests him out on the shores of Ithaca, as she arrives there, picking his brains, and strategizing with him over the best way to invade and disperse the suitors' hangout in Odysseus' home. By this time the final invasion of the home property is at hand. The dreadful slaughter of the suitors, the rapprochement with Penelope, and the mandate to continue inward, to where an oar is mistaken for a winnowing rod: all these developments are at hand, crowning Odysseus' wandering with a powerful new freedom.

LOVE

ILIAD Does our verdict on 'love in the romantic sense' apply to the *Iliad*? Is there nothing approaching romantic love apparent in the *Iliad*? Briseis is the war prize of Achilles, and is then traded to Agamemnon; who eventually returns her to Achilles. This is hardly romantic love. What then of our other two love-exchange specimens in the *Iliad*? Are Achilles and Patroklos romantic lovers, or for that matter are they lovers at all? One leans to a yes; these two male figures cluster apart; sulk and support together; despair and soothe with tell tale intensity; and in the end battle and cry for one another with the intensity no ordinary mortal affection comprehends. Perhaps in the scenes between these two men the narrative comes closest to the fire of tell-tale passion. 'Middle class' love, the man and woman teamed up together to create a child, to care for one another, to exist as a unit; this is the very definition of Hector, Andromache and baby Astyanax; and the evidentiary touch is provided by a once in a lifetime moment, when the baby is brushed and tickled by the plume on his dad's helmet, and giggles or burbles, is 'baby makes three.'

ODYSSEY Did Odysseus fall in love with Calypso, as suggested under the theme of conflict? It seems unlikely, and totally anachronistic. (Even Sappho, for instance, may have 'been in love,' and written about it, but can hardly have 'fallen in love,' which is that little step toward Romanticism which never fits the classical Greek setting. Can we try out other pairs? What about Odysseus and Nausikaa? Comical, no? Odysseus and Circe? Odysseus and Athena? Well, the joke must taper out. The Greek figure of personality, the personal lover, is not emotionally afflicted by that tenderness which to us love seems to connote, and which, some have argued, was not to begin blossoming before the early Christian period, when the Virgin Mary's sister in law intuited the heartbeat of her savior? Given that last example mustn't we, however, slow down on the instance of Odysseus and Penelope? Was Odysseus 'a loving husband' toward Penelope? Or does the language clash with the character we have come to associate with Odysseus; action-oriented, adventure-inviting, crafty. Odysseus and Penelope were hardly an item in language, even during the short period of time we see them together. It might be added that Penelope, as well as Odysseus, was realistically pre romantic, when faced with the evidences that her long gone husband had returned. She wanted to see the evidence that this was really the guy.