HOMER'S ODYSSEUS AND OVID'S PERSEUS:
A COMPARISON OF HEROIC VALUES

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The myths of ancient Greece are full of great battles in which gallant heroes combat hordes of vicious enemies. Only these kinds of grandiose battles are worthy of the epic heroes of mythology. Odysseus and Perseus are two mythic heroes famous for fighting both mortal and immortal enemies in the course of their extensive travels. In the *Odyssey*, Homer illustrates Odysseus's battle against the suitors to regain his wife and household. Similarly, Ovid narrates the story of Perseus's fight to gain a bride in his *Metamorphoses*. Although the two scenes contain some similarities, Homer's depiction of Odysseus's battle ultimately contrasts with Ovid's description of Perseus's battle in that Homer upholds the traditional virtues of the Greek hero, whereas Ovid mocks and critiques these values.

These two episodes are similar in several aspects, and viewing these similarities is critical in highlighting the differences between the poets' viewpoints. Both battles occur at celebratory events, which are relatively peaceful before the fighting begins. Perseus's feast is so abruptly disturbed by Phineas's arrival that Ovid compares it to "a calm sea rudely disturbed by a violent, howling gale" (*Met*. V.6). The arrival of Andromeda's ex-fiancé disrupts this serene scene with the violent intensity of a hurricane: Phineas is full of rage and out of control. Similarly, Odysseus' fight to regain his house and wife begins in a peaceful context; however, Odysseus attacks the suitors so suddenly that he causes them to run "in a panic through the hall" (*Ody*. XXII.26). This level of violence is completely unexpected, contributing to the intensity of the scene. Ironically, once the fighting is over, Odysseus directs his servants to begin singing and dancing so that everyone will perceive the commotion as a wedding feast (*Ody*. XXIII.137-41). In both scenes, the extreme violence of the fighting is juxtaposed with the merrymaking of feasts.

In combat, both heroes receive divine protection from a particular goddess who assists in their respective victories. In Perseus's battle with Phineas, the goddess Minerva uses her talents liberally to ensure Perseus's victory. Up to this point, Minerva has protected Perseus, and she continues to help him defeat his opponents in this battle. Minerva does not hesitate to help the hero in this circumstance and willingly protects Perseus to the extent that he emerges victorious and unscathed. When the fighting begins, Minerva arrives to encourage Perseus and protect the royal family (*Met*. V.46-7). However, she does not stop with merely

supporting his endeavors. As the fight rages on, she "cause[s] fresh strife and confusion," which literally floods the hall with the blood of the men that she has helped Perseus defeat (*Met*. V.155-6). While Perseus is a great epic hero, he is primarily victorious because of Minerva's aid.

In the *Odyssey*, the goddess Athena comes to Odysseus's aid, but she does not physically help him remove the suitors for the majority of the battle; instead, she gives him advice on how to triumph. Instead of fighting for him, she tests him to ensure that he truly wants the suitors gone and that he will go to any lengths to achieve his goal (*Ody*. XXII.252). In the midst of the fight, she appears in the form of Mentor, urging him to annihilate the intruding suitors (*Ody*. XXII.215-46). Eventually, once she has sufficiently tested Odysseus's will, she "hold[s] up her overpowering aegis" and the will to fight deserts Odysseus's enemies (*Ody*. XXII.316). While she is present with Odysseus during the entire battle, she refrains from actually helping him until she has discerned his motives.

In addition, both of these heroes are pitted against inept, cowardly opponents who cannot measure up to the heroes' skill and experience. Phineas, Perseus's adversary, is a coward but insists on fighting Perseus for the sake of his marriage to Andromeda. When he first breaks in on the feast, he hurls his javelin at Perseus and then hides behind the altar (*Met*. V.35-7). If he had not chosen to hide, the battle would have been over with one blow. Although he escapes and eventually rejoins the fray, he does not possess "the courage to brave his foe at close quarters" (*Met*. V.89). Ovid paints a picture of a malicious coward who lurks around the outskirts of the battle killing lesser warriors, too fearful to approach his enemy. Preferring to fight from a distance, Phineas waits to join his companions to fight Perseus, thus avoiding one-on-one combat with his opponent (*Met*. V.157). While all of these examples illustrate Phineas's cowardice, none embodies it more than his eventual defeat. Instead of dying honorably while fighting, the "cowering villain" begs for his "miserable life" and is turned to stone along with the rest of his men (*Met*. V.222, 231). Ovid depicts the inadequacy of his hero's opponent throughout the battle as he contrasts Perseus's heroism with Phineas's obvious cowardice.

The suitors Odysseus battles are also cowardly, but they are more willing to put up a fight worthy of the epic label. Once the men discover Odysseus's true identity, "they all [look] around for a way to escape" (*Ody*. XXII.46). One of the suitors, Eurymachus, tries to excuse the rest of the suitors by blaming the already dead Antinous. By placing the entire fault with Antinous, he hopes to avoid a confrontation with Odysseus (*Ody*. XXII.51-62). Unfortunately for Eurymachus he is the next man to die. For most of the battle the suitors fight well, but they do not possess Odysseus's skill at strategic fighting. Once Athena gives the

victory over to Odysseus, he and his men chase them "like vultures […] / Descending from the mountains upon a flock of smaller birds" (*Ody*. XXII.322-3). This simile not only demonstrates the extent to which the suitors are outmatched but also compares the valor of Odysseus to that of his enemies. Odysseus is brave like a giant bird of prey, and his enemies are the small birds who fly away at the slightest sign of danger.

Though these battles contain similarities, in significant other ways the stories are different, illustrating the poets' different opinions of heroic values such as courage and cunning. In his fight for Andromeda's hand, Perseus fights alone with great courage, although Ovid ultimately mocks this traditional heroic virtue. Perseus has several allies in this fight, but they are all killed rapidly. Thus, towards the end of the battle, "he [is] alone / And the rest [are] determined to crush him" (*Met*. V.149-50). As the sole defender of his bride, Perseus fights bravely. So strong is his valor in battle that he single-handedly kills so many men that he tramples "on piles of the dying" (*Met*. V.88). Indeed, when Phineas initially attacks him, Perseus "savagely flung the spear back" without first considering his actions (*Met*. V.35). By painting Perseus's retaliation as savage, Ovid undermines the idea of heroism. Furthermore, although Perseus is courageous, courage alone is not enough to save him. In several instances Perseus relies on less manly and heroic ways to dispatch his enemies. For example, he kills one fighter with a giant bowl (*Met*. V.80-4). For no apparent reason, Perseus discards his sword in favor of a bowl, a more feminine item. Additionally, he uses Medusa's head to win the fight, which is a cowardly and dishonorable way to triumph since he does not give his individual combatants a chance to fight back (*Met*. V.179-209). Perseus is a courageous hero, but Ovid undermines his courage by also revealing some less-than-heroic deeds.

In contrast, Odysseus enlists the help of loyal servants and fights cunningly, as opposed to using brute strength and rash courage. Odysseus recruits his son and several loyal servants to help him drive the suitors out of his house. Once the fighting begins, Telemachus and two servants "[take] their stand alongside […] Odysseus" (*Ody*. XXII.120-1). These extra soldiers are greatly needed because of the sheer number of suitors. Odysseus is a courageous warrior who fights intelligently, instead of attacking blindly, demonstrating not only his true courage but also his strategic brilliance. He organizes the entire battle so secretly that the suitors have "no idea how tightly the net / Had been drawn around them" (*Ody*. XXII.35-6). In this battle, Odysseus acts as a great general, directing the deployment of his troops. Contrary to Perseus, this "great tactician" neither has nor needs a secret weapon to magically defeat his enemies (*Ody*. XXII.111). Odysseus relies on his fighting skills and his cunning wit to carry

the battle, and, in the end, he emerges a victorious and honorable hero.

Another way in which the stories differ is in tone and language, which both authors use to their advantage in illuminating their notions of heroic ideals. Ovid uses the tone and language of his epic battle for comic effect, mocking the ideals even as he writes about them. For example, toward the beginning of the conflict, two eager young fighters rush into the battle. In the process, however, they slip and fall in a pool of blood, which allows Perseus to kill them quite easily (*Met*. V.76-7). Ovid uses this kind of slapstick comedy, albeit rather morbidly, in a scene not typically considered funny, to further his critique of heroism. Another comic death occurs when Pettalus kills the bard and calls out: "'You can sing the rest of your songs/ To the shades of the Styx'" (*Met*. V.115-6). The minstrel has done nothing more than sing, yet one man finds it sufficient reason to violently kill him, and, by means of a comic speech, dispatch this peaceful bystander to Hades. Instead of using his skills to attack another fighter, Pettalus attacks an unarmed minstrel, demonstrating Ovid's lack of belief in heroic courage. In a final example, one combatant kills an elder named Emathion who is praying and denouncing their "impious brawl" (*Met*. V.102). This incident is less comic, but it once again shows the contempt Ovid places on the supposed heroes for their lack of courage. This man, trained in combat with other warriors, prefers to kill unarmed bystanders instead of honorably fighting his opponents. When Perseus's rivals finally do decide to be courageous and attack him, Medusa's stare comically freezes each in succession before they realize the danger.

Contrary to Ovid's morbid humor, Homer uses the language in his scene not only to advocate his notions of heroism but also to demonstrate these qualities in his hero. Odysseus's initial speech to the suitors, in which he insults them and lists their crimes, sets the tone for the rest of the battle (*Ody*. XXII.65-72). This episode is not Perseus's comic little brawl; it is full-fledged, violent retribution. Homer's description of Odysseus in armor only solidifies this characterization of the battle. With his "well-wrought helmet / With a plume that [makes] his every nod a threat," Odysseus must have appeared terrifying (*Ody*. XXII.127-8). Toward the end of the battle, a soothsayer named Leodes begs Odysseus for mercy, claiming that he did nothing to deserve death (*Ody*. XXII.334-41). Even this speech does not hinder Odysseus from killing him; he asks Leodes how often he prayed "that my sweet homecoming would never come" (*Ody*. XXII.345). Although he does exact vengeance, Odysseus does so justly, only killing the people who actively plotted against him. At the end of the battle, Odysseus is described as "a lion that had just fed upon an ox in the field" because he is so covered with blood and gore (*Ody*. XXII.426). While Homer uses imagery similar to that of Ovid, there is nothing comic about his scene. He presents the

picture of a man who just killed scores of other men for the injustices he suffered at their hands. This violence is premeditated and, because of the offenses the suitors have committed against him, perfectly justified.

Odysseus's fight against the suitors contrasts with Perseus's fight with Phineas in several different ways, all of which highlight the differences in their opinions of heroism. Perseus has virtues typical of the epic hero but appears less courageous and heroic beside Odysseus. Although heroes were common in mythology, they often fought for different ideals, representing great differences among the peoples who told these stories.

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