Daniel Maxson

Humn 1110

9/26/2014

Paper #1

Homer’s Odyssey - Justifying violence

I think the use of Violence as a grotesque deterrent to hostile action is justified in the Odyssey. Their society essentially runs on an honor system combined with the story and lore attached to each individual. Knowing that Odysseus is the king of Ithaca and is a great warrior hero who is cleverer than most men are, deters would be attackers. They fear Odysseus even if they have never met him. They know that to defeat him would take a joint effort between the independent city-states and even then, there are city-states that will come to Ithaca’s aid. The lore of his violence and capabilities in warring provide a wall that many attackers are disinclined to climb.

I think the violence is important in this time period because it is the means by which this patriarchal society maintains its version of peace. This version of peace is still in use today, we threaten retaliation and preemptive action if we think another nation is stepping out of line. The downside is that now our weapons have become powerful enough to guarantee the end of human existence. When you don not exercise your ability to perform violent actions others will assume that the stories and lore surrounding you are fake. This also leads to competitions to ascertain the validity of an individual’s prowess in fighting. These also are still performed today, ex. The Olympics.

I will try to show to the reason for some of the violent scenes and explain why they were justified in the context of the situation and society. The first example I have picked of grotesque violence come from Odysseus telling his story of encountering the Cyclopes on his journey home. Exploring the home of a giant would be the last thing on my mind if I ever encountered one, but Odysseus wants to poke the hornet’s nest. He prepares for both violence, his twelve best fighters, and for civility, with his victuals and offerings. Unfortunately, Odysseus starts with making the Polyphemus angry by telling him Zeus will avenge their mistreatment.

here we stand,

Beholden for your help, or any gifts

you give-as custom is to honor strangers.

We would entreat you, great Sir, have a care

for the god’s curtesy; Zeus will avenge

the unoffending guest. Pg. 153 Ln. 288-293 (Homer)

Odysseus hopes that the talk of god’s vengeance will cause this Cyclops brute, ignorant of hospitality, to give pause to his attack against these intruders. However, Odysseus is the ignorant one in this situation. He does not guess that Polyphemus is the son of Poseidon. He lies to the Cyclopes, telling him they were stranded. Thus, Polyphemus thinks they are stranded by his father Poseidon and out of favor with him, killing them might bring some favor with his father. The missteps here by Odysseus are tragic. His attempt to be clever with the Cyclopes ends up encouraging the Cyclopes to be grotesquely violent with the group. So at this point, the Polyphemus feels taking violent action against these trespassing guests would a justified action.

Neither reply nor pity came from him,

But in one stride he clutched at my companions

And caught two in his hands like squirming puppies

To beat their brains out, splattering the floor.

Then dismembered them and made his meal,

Gaping and crunching like a mountain lion-

Everything: innards, flesh, and marrow bones. Pg. 153 Ln. 312-318 (Homer)

Do we see the Polyphemus’ justification in the *poem*? With a sufficiently close reading and knowledge of Cyclopes lineage, we might have puckered up a bit when Odysseus mentioned Poseidon. Polyphemus feels justified in his actions; the intruders have told him all he needed to hear to make up his mind.

Now is Odysseus violent response justified? He has intruded in a home, stolen food and requested that Polyphemus host them or face his gods’ wrath. These actions are not heroic and would be condemned in many places today. In Odysseus view Polyphemus is a savage, he has already stated that there is no civilization on the island so killing or wounding the Cyclopes would not be a dishonorable thing. I think Odysseus already justified any violent actions back when he picked his twelve best fighters. He expected violence and low and behold, he is seeing it. Odysseus knows he is destined to return home so what does he have to fear from taking risks? The word that Odysseus might gouge out your eye will now be spread around this island and this is why Odysseus needs Polyphemus to know his name as they are escaping. Could Odysseus have been honest and honorable? Could the interaction between Polyphemus and Odysseus have gone civilly? It might have but then the story is less an epic and more of a nice adventure through the Mediterranean.

The slaughter of the suitors is my next example. The suitors, why not poison them? Might it be the stigma attached to poison being a woman’s weapon? This would not suit our story and would not matter to the justification for killing the suitors. Because they are men, do they get a chance at dying honorably? Is Odysseus being respectful to the honor of these men?

During the test of the bow, *“Telemachus here shows incredible self-awareness and uses the disdain in which the suitors hold him to the further the trap that Odysseus has laid.”* (Drumm, 2004) Telemachus learns that he is able to string the bow; he can match his father at least but more importantly, he feigns weakness in front of the suitors. If the young boy can almost string the bow, how could these grown men not? We see here the importance of lineage in the culture, and maybe a bit of the gods’ influence. In my personal experience if you cannot sting a bow, you will not be able to use the bow. To fully draw a bow you go past a point where the bow is string able. I think the gods’ prevent anyone from stringing the bow. It is important for Telemachus to know he can string the bow and know he is his fathers’ son. This will give him the confidence to stand at his side in the upcoming battle.

Odysseus knows that the suitors will die and so have we from the beginning so why are we shown such detail?

Odysseus’ arrow hit him under the chin

and punched up to the feathers through his throat.

Backward and down he went, letting the wine cup fall

from his shocked hand. Like pipes his nostrils jetted

crimson runnels, a river of mortal red,

and one last kick upset his table

knocking the bread and meat to soak in dusty blood.

Pg. 409 Ln. 15-21 (Homer)

*“Antinoos Must be having one of those uncanny half-intuitions people get when they sense something is wrong but can't pin it down,”* (Nagler, 1993)

Do we need to honor the suitors as men because they deserve respect? Is Antinoos’s death a good death? Is it honorable to be killed while drinking? I think Odysseus uses his first shot as an insult. Look here, your best deserves no notice of his impending doom. He is too busy drinking wine and getting drunk, is drinking wine a precursor to being harmed by Odysseus? He has removed the head of the suitors, a war tactic used by the great tactician.

Are the suitors at fault for assuming that Odysseus is dead? I don’t think so but because Odysseus is alive it becomes an injustice done to him.

Odysseus tells his son that is counting on him to bring no shame to the family if the fight to come.

They are prepared to face the vengeance of the suitors’ families. At the end of the *poem*, we find Laertes excited *“to see my son and grandson vie in courage!”* Ln. 570-572. He expects violence from the crowd he knows they have just cause to get revenge on Odysseus. Appropriate reactions to injustice are rare in the *poem* but here we see a clear one. Can we deny their justification for violence? Their sons have been murdered. Will not Telemachus have a just cause to seek revenge from these people? Would we ever get a resolution? One side or the other often feels slighted in some way, no matter the outcome. Resolutions are not perfect and grudges and human nature get in the way of accepting that a resolution is adequate. This is why Athena erases everyone’s memory.

# Bibliography

Drumm, E. (2004, August 25). Retrieved from http://academic.reed.edu/humanities/hum110/odysseyconvocation2004.html

Homer. (n.d.). *The Odyssey.* (R. Fitzgerald, Trans.) Farrar, Straus and Giroux. Retrieved 2014

Nagler, M. N. (1993, September 1). Penelope's Male Hand: Gender and Violence in the Odyssey. *Colby Quarterly, Volume 29*(no. 3), pp. 241-257. Retrieved from http://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2974&context=cq&sei-redir=1&referer=http%3A%2F%2Fscholar.google.com%2Fscholar%3Fhl%3Den%26as\_sdt%3D0%2C6%26q%3Dviolence%2Bin%2Bthe%2BOdyssey#search=%22violence%20Odyssey%22