

**Course:** Classical Civilisation 1A: Early Greece from Troy to Plataea

**Assignment:** Commentary

**Matriculation number:** [REDACTED]

**SM12:** [REDACTED]

**Word count:** 1970

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(a) Homer, Odyssey 18.58–87 (18.66–101 Fagles) ‘And at that... to his dogs to bolt down raw!’”:

This extract comes from book 18 of the Odyssey, meaning that it takes place towards the end of the poem. By this point, Odysseus has returned to Ithaca and the events in this extract are part of a carefully orchestrated series of events to ensure the eventual climax of the slaughter of the suitors and the restoration of Odysseus as king. In this extract, the beggar Irus challenges Odysseus to a boxing match.

The passage begins with Telemachus ensuring that no one else in the crowd would harm Odysseus, declaring he could “count on *me*, your host” (18.74). In this situation, the only one that knows the beggar is Odysseus in disguise is Telemachus. Therefore, to everyone else, it appears that he is extending *xenia* to his guest. The importance of *xenia* is highlighted by Homer in several other occasions. For example, when Odysseus returns to Ithaca, both Eumaeus and Penelope extend *xenia* to him (13.48-140, 19.288-291). The inclusion of this is a repetition of the same key theme reinforces the importance of *xenia* in Greek society and shows to extent to which it was expected.

Homer’s presentation of Odysseus as powerful is illustrated in his vividly descriptive language such as ‘big rippling thighs’ (18.78) and ‘broad shoulders’ (18.78). In this passage, Odysseus is immortalised as a powerful, heroic figure who is motivated by the desire to avenge the dishonour caused to his wife and household. Furthermore, this is his first display of *kleos* since returning to Ithaca. The presence of the suitors (18.82) alongside this display of *kleos* foreshadows their eventual defeat at the hands of Odysseus.

We can also note Athena’s intervention in the way she involves herself by ‘fleshing out the limbs of the great commander’ (18.81). Her aegis allows Odysseus to succeed in this scene as Athena’s disguise allows his identity to go undetected. This corresponds with how she disguises Odysseus upon his return to Ithaca (Homer 13.454). Athena’s intervention on Odysseus’s behalf relates to the wider theme of divine intervention. As a great hero among the Greeks, Odysseus had the favouritism of Athena.

This passage illustrates Homer’s use of minor characters to profound effect in the Odyssey. In this case, Irus functions as a foil to Odysseus; his weakness and cowardice both contrasts and accentuates Odysseus’s powerfulness and courage. This is illustrated through Antinous’s insults which reflect Irus’s characterisation (18.87-102).

Furthermore, Homer uses this scene to foreshadow the eventual downfall of the suitors. While disguised as a beggar, Odysseus defeats the brazen beggar Irus (Homer 18. 109-116). Therefore, one can only assume that he will do the same to the brazen nobles once he returns to his noble form. The parallel of these scenes indicates that Odysseus is getting closer to his goal of killing the suitors to return to his place as King of Ithaca.

(b) Hesiod, Theogony 535–45 (p. 19 West): ‘For when gods and mortal men ... whose designs do not fail’

This extract comes from Hesiod’s Theogony which is a depiction of how the divine order and humans came to be. This extract portrays the myth of the gods and mortals meeting at Mecone where they were to settle the issue of divisions of sacrifices between gods and men (Hesiod. 535-36). In the wider context of Theogony, this extract is a parenthetical narrative among the second and third succession myths.

This extract is an account of the first sacrifice to the gods and it sets the precedent of humans establishing or renewing a contract with the gods through sacrifices (Hemingway, 2003). This therefore illustrates the importance of sacrifice as a ritual in Greek society.

The gods in this depiction are portrayed as anthropomorphised as they interact with the humans. However, they are presented in a way which reflects their higher power and authority over the humans. Hesiod illustrates this by making the explicit distinction between ‘gods and mortals’. The idea of divine superiority is emphasised by Prometheus attempting to mislead Zeus by disguising the bones to make them seem desirable while hiding the good meat for the humans (Hesiod. Theogony. 537-42). Hesiod presents the view that Zeus sees right through the trick as he states ‘how unfairly you have divided the portions’ (544). This can be interpreted as Hesiod displaying his piety towards Zeus as he viewed him as a powerful divine figure that could not be tricked by humans, thus perpetuating the idea that Zeus chose the bones to go with the trick to punish humans for their attempt to mislead gods. The result of this interaction is that Zeus hid fire from humans as a punishment, as it brought them to an equal level as the animals who ate their meat raw. This had a significant impact on Greek mythology as it shows the overt superiority of gods and their power over humans.

The story of this myth acts as a cautionary tale of the consequences of humans trying to outwit the gods. It can be compared to the story of Pandora (Hesiod. Works and days. 83-103) who released all the evils of humankind, which reflects the theme of humans bringing upon themselves a worse existence. It emphasises Hesiod’s firm conviction concerning the absolute omnipotence of Zeus.

The concept of sacrifice in this extract is oxymoronic as it is what brings the humans and gods together, but it also sets them apart. The gods did not need the meat to sustain themselves whereas the humans did. As a result, this story is an aetiology of the practice of sacrificing only the bones to the gods while humans keep the meat and fat (Hesiod. Theogony. 556).

(c) Sappho fr. 1.

Sappho wrote this poem as a prayer dedicated to the goddess Aphrodite. This fragment is unique in that it is the only fully surviving fragment of her poetry. She writes in the style of lyric poetry which is generically personal and emotional, which reflects the mood and tone of this poem.

In this twenty-stanza fragment, Sappho writes in the first person. The use of her own name (1.16) suggests that this could have been composed for a real life, personal situation. Sappho's poetry offers a unique female perspective of the world of women and their views towards love, when writing was primarily dominated by men such as Homer and Herodotus.

The invocation of Aphrodite in the first line, 'rich-throned Aphrodite' (1.1), establishes direct communication with the goddess. The portrayal in this poem suggests that, for Sappho, her relationship with Aphrodite was personal. This point is illustrated through the jest in the line "who is it this time I must cozen to love you, Sappho?" (1.15-16). In this presentation, Aphrodite is anthropomorphised as a figure whom Sappho can go to with her issues of unrequited love for help. Her presentation is both delicate and powerful through the imagery of the 'Gold chariot' and 'pretty sparrows' (1.8-10). The theme of divine intervention on behalf of helping humans is very different to Hesiod's presentation of the gods as punishers of humanity (Hesiod. Theogony 535-45).

This fragment depicts Sappho praying to Aphrodite as she grieves. She implores Aphrodite to use her godly powers to help her win over her reluctant lover. Love is a key theme in Sappho's writing and she presents it as unrequited and tormenting. Sappho uses the trope of love being like a disease in her reference to her 'pain and sickness' (1.3).

Some scholars suggest that Sappho's poetry indicates she was homosexual. As Brehninger states, her writings 'clearly celebrate eros between women' (2014: p.151). In this example, the use of the word 'she' (1.5-6) could suggest that her lover was a woman. However, some scholars discredit this as a translation issue. Regardless of whether she was homosexual, the meaning of the poem does not change; the focus is still on the theme of unrequited love.

Towards the end of the fragment, Aphrodite reassures Sappho that her love will come around eventually, that "she will love despite herself" (1. 19). This indicates that love in Greek society is viewed as an unstoppable force, especially with the promised intervention of the goddess of love. This fragment fits well within the wider context of Sappho's works as it presents her as a devout believer in love.

The line 'if ever in the past you heard my voice from afar and hearkened' (1. 5-6) suggests that she has prayed to Aphrodite before. This emphasises her devotion to Aphrodite as being beyond a casual reverence for a goddess. Aphrodite acts as a muse for Sappho and she views her as a powerful force in her life and relies on her guidance. This implies that reverence for the gods permeated all aspects of Greek life, in this case it was at the very least influential in poetry.

(d) Herodotus 7.103: 'Xerxes' response was to laugh . . . 'from a position of ignorance'

This extract depicts a dialogue spoken between the Persian King Xerxes and the exiled Spartan king Demaratus. The extract is an anachronistic story told to illustrate the overarching theme of whether a hierarchical or egalitarian military arrangement produced superior fighters. It is situated in the context of the Persian expansion, which is a key focus for Herodotus in his writing. The reasons given for the invasion of Greece were revenge, gain and living up to the Persian tradition of expansion (Herodotus.7.8) which were all contemporary concerns.

This passage relates to the ascension of Xerxes as the Persian King who succeeded his father (Herodotus.7.2). This passage also refers to Demaratus, the ex-King of Sparta (7.103) who has been exiled and now has joined Xerxes in his attempt to invade Greece in the second Persian war.

Herodotus establishes two very different military arrangements in this passage. He juxtaposes the Greeks who fight in egalitarian arrangement as free men (7.103) with the hierarchical arrangement of the Persians where men are 'urged on by the whip' by their leaders (7.103). This distinction is important as it gives the reader an insight into the different military arrangements at the time and how they may reflect these societies in general. This makes Herodotus's writings very useful as a historical source.

Demaratus is a valuable source of information for Xerxes in his war with the Greeks. Prior to this passage, Xerxes asks Demaratus questions that indicate what he can expect from the Greeks in battle (Herodotus.7.101). Demaratus highlights that the Spartans became quintessentially Greek in the case of a Persian invasion (Herodotus.7.102) as they were Greek speaking peoples. He warns Xerxes that they would fight to the death, even if they are outnumbered (Herodotus.7.102). Xerxes disregards this by saying that the Greek army would not be able to attack a 'numerically superior force' if they were allowed their freedom (7.103). The Persian idea of men being 'urged on by the whip' is interesting as it juxtaposes an idea of slavery with the Greek concept of freedom. This is an example of Herodotus drawing out fundamental differences in the views of Persians and Greeks within his narrative.

This passage suggests that the Persians placed a lot of emphasis on numerical values in armies. This is illustrated through the repetition of values, 'a thousand men – or ten thousand or fifty thousand' (7.103) Xerxes's disregard for the Greek army suggests he is confident in his numbers being enough to defeat them.

This extract is very much from the Persian perspective and references to things that Demaratus has said give us the contrasting view. The final line, 'you're just talking rubbish from a position of ignorance' is ironic when you consider the Persians eventual defeat in a series of battles leading up to Plataea in 479BC.

Herodotus's recording of the events is interesting. This must be assumed to have been supplemented by his own ideas of what may have been said between these individuals to illustrate his point. This reflects how the first histories were recordings of oral stores. Despite not being necessarily true, these fables are still useful as they are historically revealing about how Herodotus may have wanted to construct his own past.

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