**Course: Classical Civilisation 1A (CLASSIC1001)**

**Assignment: Commentary**

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Are you happy for your assignment to be used in future training of markers? **Yes**

Are you happy for your assignment to be used as an example for future students? **Yes**

a) Homer, *The Odyssey* 11.355-378, ‘Odysseus answered with careful tact…’ to ‘… the dangers you have passed.’

The passage from Homer’s *The Odyssey* is a piece of dialogue between Odysseus, the protagonist of the epic poem, and Alcinous, the king of the Phaeacians, who welcomed Odysseus to their island after his long journey on the sea. During a short interlude between two parts of Odysseus’ story about his travels, Alcinous asks him to continue telling the story, praising Odysseus as “a skillful poet” (11.369).

The fragment starts with a significant theme in *The Odyssey*: hospitality (*xenia*). Arete, Alcinous’ wife, has just told the Phaeacians not to “send [Odysseus] / away too fast, and when he leaves, you must / be generous” (11.340-2), demonstrating a proper way to treat guests in Homer’s world. Odysseus then agrees that “[i]t would be far better / to reach […] home with hands filled full / of treasure” (11.359-61), saying that he would even be content with staying in Phaeacia for a year before receiving the gifts, even though he is trying to hurry back to Ithaca and has already spent too much time in others’ hospitality, e.g., Calypso’s for 7 years. Thus, the beginning of the passage explores how gift-giving is a necessary part of *xenia*, while the duration of it should not be too short nor too long.

The other theme apparent in the passage is that of storytelling. Odysseus is described by Alcinous as “a skillful poet” (11.369), who is not one to “fashion lies / out of thin air” (11.365-6) and whose “story has both grace and wisdom” (11.368). These phrases praise Odysseus for his wonderful and apparently truthful storytelling, while the audience knows that Odysseus is either completely lying or at least embellishing his story. If this praise is interpreted as “polite scepticism” (Ahl, 2002), then it can be seen as a signifier of the unreliable nature of Odysseus as a narrator. If, however, it is to be interpreted as Alcinous and the Phaeacians being in awe of his storytelling and believing every word, the praise can be seen as a piece of dramatic irony because of the audience’s knowledge and the lack of knowledge on the Phaeacians’ side. In either case, the specific mention of a poet could be a humorous instance of self-reference: the poet telling the story of *The Odyssey* either praising or politely criticising the protagonist’s storytelling, thus making the audience reflect on the reliability and persuasive storytelling of the poet himself. Thus, the passage is an interplay between storytelling inside of stories and storytelling in the real world, the fine line between them fading and creating an interactive and direct way of storytelling in oral tradition.

b) Hesiod, *Works and Days* 202–18 (= pp. 42–3 West): ‘Now I will tell a fable…’ to ‘The fool learns only by experience.’

The passage in Hesiod’s *Works and Days* is a fable that the poet Hesiod himself addresses to his brother Perses in order to give advice about living an honest life, while also reprimanding him for trickery dealing with inheritance, which demonstrates the didacticism of the whole poem. The fable is about a hawk who holds a nightingale in its claws and voices its superiority in power out loud to the nightingale. Since Hesiod advises his brother to “hearken to Right and not promote violence” (Hesiod 214-5), saying that “violence is bad for a lowly man” (Hesiod 215), this fable is obviously a contrast between the natural world and the ideal of a peaceful human world, an urge for humans to be better than animals by abolishing violence. This idea is further emphasised by the story told preceding the fable, which tells about different generations/ages of humans, the current one being the most violent one and the next one being even worse. The apparent pacifism in Hesiod’s words is a stark contrast to his contemporary’s, Homer’s, world, where extreme violence is found either at war (*The Iliad*) or outside of it (*The Odyssey*).

Furthermore, the fable is a device for Hesiod’s political agenda: he “warns about a society ruled by the powerful” (Mavrommatis, 2012), the nightingale being a symbol for society and the hawk symbolising the powerful. This interpretation can be gained from the surrounding context of the fable, that is, Hesiod speaking to his brother Perses and a group of justice-dealing lords, which characterises the lords as the aforementioned powerful ones and Hesiod as the weak “singer” (Hesiod 209). In this way he highlights that the situation he and his brother are in now (bribed lords and an unfair court) is wrong, which again demonstrates how much of a didactic poem *Works and Days* is. Additionally, another interpretation can be gained from the fable, which further drives the didacticism by using it for religious purposes. Since most of *Works and Days* is about the inferiority of humans compared to the gods, the fable could be about the powerlessness of humans, who are represented by the nightingale, while Zeus is the powerful hawk who makes others “go whichever way [he] take[s them]” (Hesiod 208-9), thus saying that the kings are not a hawk, but rather the nightingale, who “[weeps] piteously” (Hesiod 205) at the power of Zeus. By making the fable’s moral transform from one about the division of society and violence to one about the omnipotence of Zeus, Hesiod uses the fable as a segue between moral themes and shifts the audience’s attention from one moral to another (Nelson, 1997).

d) Herodotus, *The Histories* 4. 201, ‘For a long time, then, the siege wore on’ to ‘the oath became null and void’

The passage in Herodotus’ *The Histories* is a story about the end of the battle between Persians and Barcaeans, inhabitants of the city of Barca in Libya. The Persians, under Darius (the Great)’s rule, had attacked the Barcaeans to avenge the death of Arcesilaus, son of Battus III and Pheretime. Under Amasis’ command, the soldiers were experiencing heavy losses in the war, as were the Barcaeans. To gain the upper hand, Amasis tricked his opponents by creating fake ground from planks and soil on top, organising a meeting with the Barcaeans and swearing an oath that “would stay firm ‘as long as this earth lasts’” (Herodotus, 4.201), tricking them into opening up their walls and letting the infantry in. Although there is room for debate about the honour in technically keeping an oath but finding a loophole or deceiving the other party, called “sidestepping” by Bayliss, Herodotus’ lack of reprimand or praise for the trick highlights his desire to write only the truth and what actually happened, that is, “human events” (Herodotus 0). However, this moment of trickery and cunning (*metis*) contributes to a recurring theme in *The Histories*, adding to the list of deceitful feats achieved by great rulers, for example, the Babylonian queen Nitocris’ tomb (Herodotus 1.187) and Croesus’ advice to Cyrus (Herodotus 1.89). Additionally, the lack of condemnation can be interpreted as Amasis “righting a wrong by his actions” (Bayliss, et al., 2014) because of the purpose of the invasion: avenging the murder of king Arcesilaus, for whose death all of the Barcaeans were “partly responsible” (Herodotus 4.200). Therefore, Amasis is justified in the “sidestepping” of his oath because he was wronged first, the fact of which provides insight into Herodotus’ (or the Greeks’ at that time) world view/sense of justice, which is of justifiable revenge. It could also contribute to the theme of divine retribution apparent in *The Histories*, the Barcaeans deserving punishment by a trick because of their collective responsibility for murder.

A recurring rhetorical device in the passage is dramatic irony: as the narration of a large part of *The Histories* is from the perspective of Persia, both the audience and the Persians know of the wordplay taking place; however, the Barcaeans are not aware of the ruse. Therefore, there is a small bit of tension created in Herodotus’ audience in the precariousness of the Persian trick as the Barcaeans might find out about it and foil Amasis’ plans. As such, the passage is not just a piece of history that Herodotus has written, but a narrative with stylistic devices and themes. Possibly, the narrative structure of *The Histories*, including the passage, is there because Herodotus’ main sources are eye witnesses and other people who know the stories, which means that Herodotus, just like Homer, has written down a piece of oral tradition.

e) Image

The featured relief is part of the northern frieze of the Siphnian treasury in the southern part of the sanctuary of Apollo at Delphi. Built around the 6th century (Pedley, 2005), it depicts the mythical Gigantomachy, the two un-armoured figures on the left representing the gods and the armoured soldiers standing and defending themselves on the right representing the giants. The gods are depicted as winners in the battle because the giants are retreating and running from the two gods, while one of the giants is lying on the ground dead (or near death) and another is being eaten alive by a lion presumably on the gods’ side. Furthermore, the giants are represented as humans, particularly, hoplites, with their symbolic aspides (hoplons), which marks them as lesser beings than the gods, the armour being a human characteristic. The two gods fighting alongside each other are possibly Apollo and Artemis, judging by the quiver of arrows visible on the back of one of them, and the fact that they are a fighting pair, signifying the power of the divine archer twins. The gods’ superiority is further emphasised by the two gods being taller than the giants, wearing simple Ionic and Doric chitons instead of armour and strangling a giant with their bare hands instead of using a weapon, demonstrating their divinity by showing their natural strength and prowess in combat without the use of any supplementary tools.

Additional context can be given on the history and location of this piece. The treasury itself is near the entrance to the sanctuary in the southeast corner, and the northern frieze is visible at the top of the side of the building as visitors of Delphi go along the Sacred Way to visit Pythia herself. Although the east frieze is the first thing visitors see, the north frieze is a dynamic display (helped by the continuity of friezes made in the Ionic order) that draws the visitors’ attention as they walk along the side of the building, watching the Gigantomachy as it plays out going from left to right with the viewer seeing the battlefield from the gods’ side as they attack the giants. Furthermore, the treasury itself was built by the Siphnians, inhabitants of the island of Siphnos, which is located very far (more than a 300 km journey by sea and by land combined) from the sanctuary. The distance that the people had hauled the marble from the islands of Siphnos, Paros, and Naxos (Neer, 2001) to build the treasury is a display of wealth, which was gained by the Siphnians from the gold and silver mines (Herodotus 3.57-58). The theme of divine power reminds any visitor that they are humans and should be god-fearing people, who give offerings to the gods.

# Bibliography

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