“So that his memory may never die;” the Agamemnon myth and its role in the *Odyssey*

The story of Agamemnon's death at the hands of Aegisthus and Clytemnestra is mentioned twelve times in the *Odyssey*. Traditionally, the death of the leader of the Achaians serves a double function: one the one hand, Agamemnon's death is seen as a warning to Odysseus for his journey back to Ithaca. On the other hand, the story serves as a means of inspiring Telemachus to action against the suitors by presenting Orestes as a model of filial behavior for his actions in avenging the death of his father. While the traditional interpretations of the Agamemnon story are valid, this paper will argue that the Agamemnon myth occupies a greater role in the *Odyssey* than is commonly acknowledged, and that the story of the return of Agamemnon acts as a means of joining the two epics together in a unified whole.

Agamemnon's return from the Trojan War gives clarity to four major themes that occur in the *Odyssey*, namely: the plans of Zeus; kinship ties as the basis of social and moral order; the changing role of the hero in the poems; and finally, the interaction of the gods and man throughout the epics.

The *Iliad* begins with an invocation to the muse, and provides notice that the poem will address the will of Zeus, and his intentions toward Agamemnon and Achilles:

> Sing, goddess, the anger of Peleus' son Achilleus
> and its devastation, which put pains thousandfold upon the Achaians,
> hurled in their multitudes to the house of Hades strong souls
> of heroes, but gave their bodies to be the delicate feasting
> of dogs, of all birds, and the will of Zeus was accomplished
> since that time when first there stood in division of conflict
> Atreus' son the lord of men and brilliant Achilleus. (1)

The poem makes it clear that the will of Zeus involved both Agamemnon and Achilles, and that since their disagreement involved competing claims, favoring one

would mean that the other would be chastened. After the Greeks were routed by the Trojans, and many noble warriors slain, Agamemnon recognizes that Zeus' will must be accomplished, and acknowledges his transgression against Achilles before the assembled Greek nobles.

> This is the word the Achaians have spoken often against me
> and found fault with me in it, yet I am not responsible
> but Zeus is, and Destiny, and Erinys the mist-walking
> who in assembly caught my heart in the savage delusion
> on that day I myself stripped from him the prize of Achilleus.
> Yet what could I do? It is the god who accomplishes all things. (234)

By the end of the poem, the plans of Zeus have been accomplished, but not in the manner in which the characters of Achilles and Agamemnon anticipated. Neither man earns a victory: Achilles has gained the glory he craves, but at a steep price. He is destined to die at a young age, and his glory comes with the loss of his friend, Patroclus. Agamemnon remains the king of kings, but by acknowledging that he was mistaken in his treatment of Achilles, his honor is diminished. But Zeus' plan for Agamemnon does not end in Ilium, for the king is fated to join the ranks of the heroes of Troy who have died before their time. In book eleven of the *Odyssey* the man of many guises is seen joining Achilles, Telamonian Ajax, Patroclus, Antilochos, and Sarpedon in Hades. [1]

The *Odyssey* begins with an invocation to the muse to sing about the wanderings of Odysseus, but strangely, also mentions the death of Agamemnon on his return from the Trojan War. Moreover, Agamemnon's demise is a reproach to those who would blame the gods for their rash decisions:

[1] Eva Brann points out in her book, *Homeric Moments* that Achilles' glory comes at the expense of the death of his friend Patroclus, and serves as an unintended consequence of the granting of his desire for glory (98-99). Brann, Eva. *Homeric Moments*. Philadelphia: Paul Dry Books, 2002.

> Oh for shame, how the mortals put the blame upon us
> gods, for they say evils come from us, but it is they, rather,
> who by their own recklessness win sorrow beyond what is given,
> as now lately, beyond what was given, Aigisthos married
> the wife of Atreus' son, and murdered him on his homecoming,
> though he knew it was sheer destruction, for we ourselves had told him,
> sending Hermes, the mighty watcher, Argeiphontes,
> not to kill the man, nor court his lady for marriage. . .(307)

The mention of Agamemnon's death at the beginning of this second poem indicates this demise has something to do with the accomplishment of the will of Zeus in the *Odyssey*. But what is the connection between Agamemnon's death and the will of Zeus? How is the first poem linked to the second in this regard? A clue can be found in book eleven of the *Odyssey*, where Odysseus meets Agamemnon in Hades. It is Odysseus who points out the fact that Agamemnon's downfall comes at the hand of his wife: "Shame it is, how most terribly Zeus of the wide brows/from the beginning has been hateful to the seed of Atreus/through the schemes of women. Many of us died for the sake of Helen,/and when you were far, Klytaimestra plotted treason against you" (414).

The reader is provided with another hint that Agamemnon's fate, and the plan of Zeus, is somehow tied into the fate of his wife Clytemnestra. In book three of the *Odyssey*, Telemachus is told the story of Agamemnon by Nestor; this marks the second time that the young man hears this story. The Gerenian horseman tells Telemachus that "the doom of the gods had entangled her [Clytemnestra]," and that she succumbed to the wishes of Aegisthus after much entreaty (329). Clearly, the will of Zeus, as it pertained to Agamemnon was related to the fate of his wife, and her lover.

There is an obvious parallel between Agamemnon/Clytemnestra and Odysseus/Penelope since both men were returning from Troy to their homes and estranged wives. A second parallel can be drawn between Agamemnon's return and betrayal by Aegisthus, and Odysseus' return and betrayal by the suitors. But do the parallels lead to the conclusion that the fates of Agamemnon and Odysseus are somehow tied together and that the events in the *Odyssey* somehow accomplish the will of Zeus? In order to answer this question, attention must be paid to the second major theme that runs through the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, although its full implications might not be so clear without further explanation. This second theme deals with the notion of the importance of kinship ties to the Greeks during the time of the Trojan War. The clan or tribe was the primary political entity during the time of the war, and was also seen as the basis for the moral and social order. A sense of the importance of family is derived from the repetition of each patronymic that is uttered as part of every hero's ancestry (some of which can be quite detailed), and by the fact that each king contributed his own personal army to the Greek cause. The sense of kinship forms an obligation to respond to a request for aid, and extends to the suppliant/host relationship that is manifest in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. The strength of this kinship/friendship bond is demonstrated in chapter six of the *Iliad*, when Diomedes and Glaucus, opposed in battle, discover that they are "guest friends" from the time of their fathers, exchange armor, and vow not to fight each other.

The strength of the friendship bond is important in these poems, however, the bond of kinship is more important. What may not be readily apparent in the poems is that Agamemnon and Odysseus are related to one another through their wives. Helen

and Clytemnestra were the daughters of Leda and Tyndareus (or Zeus, depending on the myth); [2] Penelope's father, Icarius, was Tyndareus' brother. Helen, Clytemnestra and Penelope were cousins, making Odysseus, Agamemnon and Menelaus tied not only by the relationship of "guest friends," but also by a blood relationship. There is another blood relationship that also might not be readily apparent in the Agamemnon story: Aegisthus and Agamemnon were cousins. This fact would resonate with the ancient Greeks and makes the slaughter of Agamemnon by his blood relative more heinous.

There are two aspects of the blood relationship to focus upon. The first is that of a homecoming gone horribly wrong. Agamemnon is slaughtered by his wife and her suitor, and blood relation, Aegisthus. The second aspect is that women can be treacherous, and are not to be trusted. This second message is delivered by Agamemnon himself, when he meets Odysseus in the underworld:

> So there is nothing more deadly or more vile than a woman
> who stores her mind with acts that are of such sort, as this one
> did when she thought of this act of dishonor, and plotted
> the murder of her lawful husband. (414)

The fact that the slaughter of Agamemnon is accomplished by a blood relative makes it appear more heinous than if it was accomplished by an ordinary rival for the throne. Agamemnon's story acts as a warning to Odysseus; not only should Odysseus be careful about his homecoming, but also about the people he considers "guest friends." Just as Agamemnon would not expect to be betrayed by his cousin, Odysseus would not expect to be sabotaged by his "guest friends," among them Eurymachos, who

[2] Helen was generally acknowledged to be the daughter of Zeus and Leda, while in some versions of the myth Clytemnestra is either the daughter of Tyndareus and Leda, or Zeus and Leda.

it is revealed in book sixteen of the *Odyssey, s*at upon the knees of Odysseus, and was fed by the man of sorrows.[3] Similarly, Agamemnon's warning to Odysseus in the underworld about the treachery of women is made all the more ominous when Clytemnestra's relationship to Penelope is understood. The message is not a vague, generalized warning: it is a warning about women who share a blood relationship. The meaning is all too clear: if my wife, who is of the blood of Tyndareus did this to me, then your wife, who shares the same blood can do this to you.

It is apparent that the will of Zeus involves the homecoming of Odysseus, and that the homecoming will be perilous. Agamemnon is presented as a hero in the *Iliad*, but is he the proper model for Odysseus in his return home? Before addressing this issue, it is perhaps helpful to step back and survey the role of the hero in each poem. In the first poem, Achilles and Agamemnon receive a great deal of attention: their agon is the cause of the troubles for the Greeks. The parts played by Menelaus and Odysseus in the first poem, while noteworthy, are relatively minor: these two are much less important than Patroclus, Diomedes, Idomenus, and Telamonian Ajax. By the second poem, the roles have been reversed: Achilles and Agamemnon have been relegated to the land of the dead, having died before their time, while Menelaus and Odysseus take on added importance. Menelaus serves as a precursor to Odysseus, being driven ashore by the gods, journeying to foreign lands, acquiring great wealth in his travels, and re-uniting with his wife in his ancestral home.

But there is more at stake in the nature of the hero than an increase in status, or even a successful homecoming. The very nature of the hero has changed from poem to poem. In the *Iliad*, both Achilles and Agamemnon are preeminently men of action;

[3] See page 465 of the *Odyssey* for Eurymachos' discussion of his treatment as a child, by Odysseus.

while they have time to reflect, Agamemnon after he is brought up short in his address to Achilles and the other kings, and Achilles during his meeting with Priam regarding the ransom of Hector, these times of reflection are the exception rather than the rule. Contrast the behavior of the heroes of the *Iliad* with those of the *Odyssey*. Neither Menelaus nor Odysseus is a man of action alone: both take time to reflect before acting. Consider the many names of Odysseus in the poem: the man of action, the man of may wiles, the man of many plans, the man of cunning; all these names bespeak a man who carefully considers his options before acting. Consider also that the goddess who acts as counselor to Odysseus is Athena goddess of wisdom, skilled in the art of weaving many plans.

It is no surprise that Athena confides to Odysseus that she protects him as a kindred spirit, one who thinks first and acts after due consideration. Having awakened from a deep sleep on the island of Ithaca, but unaware of his location, Odysseus is greeted by Athena, disguised as a shepherd. After concocting a tale to hide his true nature, he is addressed by Athena in book thirteen as follows: "Always you are the same, and such is the mind within you, and so I cannot abandon you when you are unhappy, because you are fluent, and reason closely, and keep your head always," (433-434). The hero, it seems, has evolved, and Agamemnon acts as a sort of negative model for Odysseus: being king and taking action are not enough; planning and tactics need to be emphasized in order to accomplish one's goals.

The final theme concerning the death of Agamemnon involves the goddess Athena, protectress of Odysseus and weaver of intricate plots. It was Athena who first mentioned the fate of Orestes to Telemachus in book one of the *Odyssey*. Here the

traditional reading of the Agamemnon myth, namely that it was used as a means of goading Telemachus into action, is reinforced by Athena's words to the young prince: "Or have you not heard what glory was won by great Orestes/among all mankind, when he killed the murderer of his father,/the treacherous Aigisthos, who had slain his famous father?" (312).

Athena's role as the protector of Orestes from the crime of matricide was well known in ancient Greece. Without her aid, Orestes would have been hounded by the Erinys for the ineluctable crime of matricide. In similar fashion, Athena acts as a protectress of Telemachus, and to a greater extent, Odysseus. Consider the testimony of Nestor to Telemachus regarding the treatment Odysseus received at the hands of the goddess:

> If only gray-eyed Athene would deign to love you, as in
> those days she used to take care of glorious Odysseus
> in the Trojan country, where we Achaians suffered miseries;
> for I never saw the gods showing such open affection
> as Pallas Athene, the way she stood beside him, openly; . . . (328)

Yet, the parallel between Orestes/Telemachus and Agamemnon/Odysseus is made even more evident upon Odysseus' destruction of the suitors and subsequent dealings with the families of the suitors. Odysseus knows in his heart of hearts that there will be trouble with the families of the suitors. He is aware that the only proper form of justice that can be exacted for killing the suitors is the establishment of a blood feud that can be expected to last for a long time. When Odysseus expresses his doubts about killing the suitors to Athena, he is also expressing his doubts about the consequences of such actions. The goddess assures him that she has considered the weaving of her plans from many angles, and tacitly acknowledges Odysseus' concerns

about the aftermath of the slaughter. As is the case with the weaver of plans, she has considered this eventuality, and devised a unique solution: she will appear to the families of the suitors and intervene to stop further bloodshed: "Hold back, men of Ithaka, from the wearisome fighting,/so that most soon, and without blood, you can settle everything" (541).

In both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, the goddess Athena plays a major role as protectress and sponsor for her favorites, but her role is larger than this. She also acts as adjudicator to the polis, and assists in the transition from a kinship-based system of justice to a rule-based system of justice. Once again, the connection between the Agamemnon myth and the Odysseus myth is clearly demonstrated, and serves to transition from one form of behavior (the administration of justice in a kinship system) to another form of behavior (the administration of justice in a rule-based system).

Both poems begin by stating that the will of Zeus will be accomplished. In both poems, Agamemnon will play a role in accomplishing Zeus' will. At the outset of the Trojan War, Agamemnon's fate appeared bright: he was the king of kings, possessed of a beautiful wife, faithful friends, and great wealth. Yet, by the time of Odysseus' adventures, his fortunes had changed and everything he valued was taken from him.

Amidst these changing fortunes, Agamemnon remains true to his friend Odysseus, by offering counsel and guidance for Odysseus' homeward journey. Yet one must not forget that the world of Agamemnon is not that of Odysseus. In the *Odyssey*, the reader witnesses a change from laws based on kinship ties, to laws based on rules. Similarly, the reader witnesses a transformation of the hero from a man of action to a man of thought. Finally, the reader is witness to a lack of strategy in the execution of a

ten year war, and marvels at the cunning of a man who wins through and beats overwhelming odds upon his return to Ithaca.

In the end, the plans of Zeus are fulfilled, but not as expected. Agamemnon, the shepherd of his people, is gone; Odysseus, man of many plans, has made a successful journey home. It would be easy to say that Agamemnon acts as a foil to Odysseus, so that the misfortune of the former burnishes the renown of the latter. But the plans of Zeus are not always straight or evident to men. In the end, Agamemnon is redeemed in our eyes by his friendship to Odysseus; a friendship that extends past death. If he falls short of the requisites of a new type of hero, he prepares the way for Odysseus. For Odysseus represents a new kind of plan by Zeus: he is more than a warrior; he is more than a king; he is more than the man of many wiles; he is the beginning of what it means to be *human.*

Works Cited

1. Homer. "The Iliad." Trans. Richmond Latimore. Great Books of the Western World. Ed. Mortimer J. Adler. 2 ed. Chicago: Encyclopaedia Brittanica. 306. Vol. 3 of The Iliad. 60 vols., 2007.

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