

Classics / WAGS 23: Second Essay

Rick Griffiths, ESNH 306

Mon. (02/28) 2:00-4:00 (reg.)

Wed. (03/02) 1:00-2:00 (reg.) &
6:00-7:00

Thurs. (03/03) 6:00-7:00

Fri (03/04) 3:00-4:00

ILIAD 24 AND ODYSSEY 23

Due: March 5 (Saturday) electronically by 5:00 PM

Length: 1,250 words (ca. five pages)

After the climactic combats of book 22, both epics proceed to scenes of reconciliation (Achilleus and Priam) or reunion (Odysseus and Penelope).

→Use some aspect of these scenes for perspective on the differences in outlook and style of the two epics. That is, formulate a close and selective comparison of these scenes that leads to a broader reflection on the epics.

The total pattern of similarities and differences would sprawl endlessly in all directions. Instead of aiming for comprehensiveness, try to find some specific theme (e.g., family, memory, trust, divine help, hospitality, exchange), device (e.g., simile, embedded tale, representation of violence), or image (e.g., object, setting, gesture) that encapsulates what you find central in the contrast between the scenes and, in turn, between the epics that they are concluding. Of particular interest will be how these passages recall and transform passages from earlier in the respective epics. Again, assume what has been worked over in class and move on to new territory.

Or, rather than for *Iliad* 24 and *Odyssey* 23, you may also formulate a comparative topic concerning other passages in the epics (e.g., about the climactic battles in both books 22, such as Athena's role or the treatment of bodies; or about Priam [*Iliad* 24] and Laertes [*Odyssey* 24]), but please talk with me in advance.

In evaluating the essays I look for how fresh the observation is, how insightful, how well grounded in textual evidence, and how difficult (i.e., how well would the writer have to know the epics in order to make these observations?). Almost all of what writers present will be valid, but will provoke a scale of responses: “du-uh,” “okay, but so what?,” “not bad,” “nice,” and, “(for unsuspected but undeniably valid connections) “no kidding?”. The contrast of larger qualities of the epics need not be global (i.e., epic of war vs. epic of peace; du-uh), but should offer new clarity about narrative techniques (e.g., time and memory, artistic self-consciousness), underlying values, handling of gender, or other significant issues. Generalizations about fate and the gods tend to be tricky.

First-year students: Please sign up for a conference on March 3 (Thursday) or 4 (Friday) (sign-up in class on Monday, Feb. 28; times on CMS page) and e-mail me a draft in advance of the block in which you have your conference.

Intellectual honesty:

Please consult *Intellectual Honesty* on the course CMS page. Use of secondary sources, including the Internet, is not required or encouraged. All sources used should be cited. The reading questions, material from discussion, and e-mailed questions/comments can be taken as common knowledge and need not be cited. I refer any suspected plagiarism to the Office of the Dean of Students. When in doubt, please contact me. Once you start the essay, it is probably best to work up to the topic by a process of your own rereading and rethinking.

Editing:

Citation: Again cite rather than extensively quote the texts and do not summarize plot. Cite by book and line number, as in the reading notes (e.g., *Il.* 24.534-669).

Organization: Make sure that I have a sense of plan. Ask yourself with every paragraph: What work is this paragraph doing to advance the argument?

Possessives: Be careful; names ending with –s throw writers off. If you want to be hyper-correct: Modern proper names are always made possessive by –s (e.g., Fagles’s); ancient names ending in –s receive just an apostrophe (Achilles’, Odysseus’), with the exception of monosyllables (Zeus’s).

Some hypotheticals:

We've been drawing comparisons to the *Iliad* throughout our discussion of the *Odyssey*. Let me map out some comparisons from earlier books in the epics that might have worked had the assignment addressed these earlier passages. These are *not* possible topics but rather illustrations of the technique.

Assemblies (*Iliad* 1 and *Odyssey* 2): A petulant prince (Achilles, Telemachos) convenes an assembly of chiefs to address a plague (from Apollo, of suitors) but ends up throwing down the scepter in rage and withdrawing. The assemblies both show a state of disorder: the cowardly and bullying Agamemnon is mishandling the war and cheating Achilles; the suitors are pillaging Odysseus' household. Wise elders speak up (Nestor, Halitherses) to no avail. Both of these alienated princes enjoy the help of Athena; both will find a father (Odysseus) or a father-figure (Priam as a stand-in for Peleus).

→Larger issues that this might illuminate:

Various directions are possible: By reducing the grand Achillean gesture to a small bit of comedy from a tyro hero, the *Odyssey* presents straightforward confrontation as kid's stuff compared to the seasoned guile of Odysseus and eventually of Telemachos himself. The *Odyssey* deals with soluble problems: the inept prince can grow up, and legitimate kingship can be restored. The *Iliad*, by contrast, invests no such faith in the legitimacy of kingship or in the hope for misguided young heroes – at least Achilles – to outgrow their problems without being destroyed in the process. The *Iliad* celebrates instead the glory of that brutal process of revelation. But the *Odyssey's* merry celebration of trickery will lead to pools of suitors' blood on the very ground where Telemachos hurls the scepter, so one should generalize cautiously.

Protagonists crying on the shore (*Iliad* 1, *Odyssey* 5). In *Iliad* 1, Achilles quickly lapses into crying on the shore, asking for his mother; our first sight of Odysseus (*Odyssey* 5) captures him also crying on the shore, wanting to go home. Both enjoy the attentions of the gods (Thetis, Hermes acting for Zeus). Both are frustrated after ten years of delay.

→Larger issues that this might illuminate:

The heroes move in opposite directions: Achilles opts initially for security and godlike privilege (or is it childlike self-assertion?); Odysseus, renouncing a secure immortality, opts for risk. Achilles heading initially toward mom (Thetis); Odysseus is fleeing earth-mother Kalypso. Considering the captive bodies at the base of the conflict (Briseis, Odysseus), we see a movement from the traffic in women to the traffic in Odysseus, irresistible boy toy that he is. However, unlike the women, Odysseus is self-trafficking; but, then, so is Penelope as she prepares to give herself away at her own second wedding. The themes turn out to go in many directions, and one has to be careful not to overgeneralize from these initial movements toward or away from mom, since by the end Achilles will renounce security and Odysseus will achieve it.

Helen (*Iliad* 3, 6, and 24; *Odyssey* 4 and 15): Helen makes a memorable cameo appearance both as the cause of the war and then in peacetime. She spars with her significant other (Paris, Menelaus) for the benefit of another hero (Hector, Telemachos). Aphrodite's direct involvement (*Iliad* 3) is paralleled by the memories of the goddess's interventions at Troy (*Odyssey* 4). As child of Zeus, Helen has particular ties with immortality (poetic, in Elysium).

→Larger issues that this might illuminate:

Beats me. Years ago I found that writers were encountering such frustrations in getting this appealing topic to go anywhere that I put it off-limits. The *Odyssey's* poised and somewhat witchy Helen unquestionably remakes the distraught and ambiguous Helen of the *Iliad*, but the *Iliad*-Helen is maddeningly hard to pin down. The later Helen does show how the *Odyssey* gives female characters more agency than in the *Iliad* and accordingly sometimes judges them more harshly. But the similarities of *Iliad*-Helen to Achilles (e.g., child of a god, caught between mortality and immortality, higher level of perception) resist distillation. The *Iliad*-Helen may be just too enigmatic and too anomalous among the female characters of the epic to allow much traction for a comparison.