

The Odyssey: *Vengeance is sweet*

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protevi@lsu.edu / <http://www.protevi.com/john/FH/PDF/OdysseyVengeance.pdf>

I. Warrior vs. soldier

II. Odysseus the first bourgeois

III. Oikos vs polis

IV. The “family values” of the *Odyssey*

I. Warrior vs. soldier: the beserker rage of Achilles: we must approach via "historical-libidinal materialism"

a. historical differences: only in isolated high-intensity combat (capital investment concentrated in the weapons of only a few warriors) is beserker rage effective: in phalanx warfare it is counter-productive and selected against by group discipline; in guerrilla warfare it's similarly counter-productive as the emphasis is on stealth and mobility. These war conditions change over time, given the capital investment strategies of societies, so that, like anything else, you can't really usefully talk about WAR with a capital W, but only about types of wars.

b. libidinal bodies: certain things trigger beserker rage, setting the body off into that zone: but they're different in different societies: for the Greeks, the death of the beloved, as in the case of Achilles and Patroklos; for the Vikings, the sight of the decadent southerners; for the proto-Nazis, the Jew, the communist, the impure woman; for the GIs in Vietnam, all sorts of things, as the My Lai massacre showed. In other words, the beserk body has triggers just like the erotic body has: certain words and images make blood flow and hearts beat. Hence the link of Ares and Aphrodite

c. material forces: the economic system of the Eastern Med relied on internal class domination of warriors over peasants and on external piracy to do something with the excess warriors: only so many are needed after a few generations as peasants get acclimated to being dominated, but you can't have bunches of unemployed warriors hanging around causing trouble, like the suitors: drinking, wenching, and athletics is only able to channel a certain amount of the energy. (Compare the Crusades.).

II. Odysseus as first bourgeois:

The practical man, the interior man, he swallows insults in order to reap vengeance later by subterfuge. Cyclops; the disguises in his own home. He must keep cool, rework his warrior body: no rage triggered by insults. This body reformation points the way to the hoplites: courage is no longer running ahead to win glory (praxis [practice]: the telos [the complete and perfect object of the action] is contained in the action itself: “bravery is its own reward”), but staying in line with your fellows to safeguard the city (poiesis [production]: the telos is outside the action [the city is protected]).

III. *oikos* vs. *polis*

Book 24 is essential to the unity of the poem from at least two perspectives: *oikos* versus kingdom and alliance versus filiation. At the end of Book 23 Odysseus has repaired his *oikos* (the relation to his slaves) and his marriage. But having the poem end here would enshrine our bourgeois domestic values as supreme. For Homer, I would argue, *oikos* and marriage are only foundations for the real work of repairing the political unity of the island and the inter-generational male line of Laertes / Odysseus / Telemachus. Thus we shouldn't overestimate the husband / wife relation relative to the grandfather / father / son relation: in other words, we shouldn't overestimate alliance relative to filiation.

IV. The family values of the *Odyssey*

Think of what Odysseus teaches Telemachus: how to lie, cheat, get the gods on your side, overwhelm your helpless enemies, mercilessly kill helpless servants. And he's the model Greek! All that by way of saying that we have to work quite hard after 2000 of Christian culture to see the Greek [and of course the Roman] warrior culture not as anti-Christian (as the Christians themselves saw it), but as a-Christian. Of course the negotiation of Christian culture with the warrior (how to tame him into a soldier, even a "Christian soldier") is a long and intricate question of "values," which I read as the struggle for body formation. An interesting reading of Augustine's *Confessions* awaits those who take up this perspective in next semester's course: the father vs. mother struggle for Augustine's body (which he discusses in terms of "soul") is played out over chastity, the incredible rush of being at the gladiatorial games, and so forth. That Augustine was not adverse to using Imperial forces in his struggles with the Donatists, that he gave us the canonical formulation of the "just war," only shows that the warrior / soldier question is not by any means overcome in Christianity, merely reworked. Similar questions could of course be posed regarding Charlemagne, Roland, the Crusaders, and many more.