

Reese Gerjekian
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Reading Response 4: Homer's Odyssey

Prompt: In this module, I would like you to compare and contrast two Greek heroes: Achilles from the Iliad (with a special emphasis on book 1, which you read in Module 2 of this course) and Odysseus from the Odyssey (with a special emphasis on book 9, which you read for this module). How do these characters embody what it means to be heroics? What characteristics do they share, and what separates them into distinctly different types of heroes? Then move on to discuss how Homer's characterization of Achilles and Odysseus might reveal something about the concept of masculinity in ancient Greek society.

In the epic poems of Homer, *The Iliad*, and *The Odyssey*, two of the most prominent Greek heroes are Achilles and Odysseus. These characters are quintessential figures of heroism in ancient Greek literature, yet they embody different aspects of being heroic. This essay aims to compare and contrast Achilles and Odysseus, examining their shared traits and distinct qualities and discussing how their characterization reveals insights into the concept of masculinity in ancient Greek society.

Both Achilles and Odysseus are renowned for their exceptional skills and play pivotal roles in the Trojan War. Achilles, known for his unmatched prowess in battle, is the greatest warrior of the Achaeans (Homer, *The Iliad*, Book 1). On the other hand, Odysseus is celebrated for his intellect and cunning, often called "Odysseus, the great teller of tales..." (Homer, *The Odyssey*, p. 211). Their courage and determination in adversity are hallmarks of their heroism.

Despite their shared heroism, Achilles and Odysseus differ significantly in their attributes and values. Achilles is characterized by his fiery temperament and pursuit of personal glory and honor. His rage and desire for revenge drive much of the action in *The Iliad*. In contrast, Odysseus is more measured and strategic, often using his wit and diplomacy to overcome challenges. His primary goal is not glory but a safe return to his homeland and family.

Achilles' heroism is predominantly demonstrated on the battlefield, where his physical strength and martial skills are unmatched. Odysseus' heroism, however, is displayed through his resourcefulness and resilience during his long and difficult journey home in *The Odyssey*. For instance, his encounter with the Cyclops Polyphemus showcases his ability to think creatively and outmaneuver his opponents (Homer, *The Odyssey*, p. 220).

The contrasting characters of Achilles and Odysseus offer insights into the ancient Greek concept of masculinity. Achilles represents the ideal warrior, embodying physical strength, bravery, and a sense of honor tied to martial prowess. Odysseus, however, represents a different aspect of masculinity, one that values intelligence, patience, and familial devotion.

The contradiction between these two heroes suggests that masculinity in ancient Greek society was not monolithic but encompassed a range of virtues and attributes. While physical strength and courage were highly esteemed, so were wisdom, cunning, and the ability to navigate complex social and emotional landscapes.

In conclusion, Achilles and Odysseus are both iconic heroes of Greek mythology, but their characters represent different ideals of heroism and masculinity. Homer presents a nuanced

portrayal of what it means to be a hero through their stories, highlighting the complexity and diversity of masculine virtues in ancient Greek society.

Bibliography

Homer. *The Iliad*. Translated by Robert Fagles, Viking Adult, 1990.

Homer. *The Odyssey*. Translated by Robert Fagles, New York, Viking, 1996.

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