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A CROSS-READING OF ODYSSEUS' JOURNEYS IN THE BATTLE OF THE FROGS AND MICE: PSICHARPAX'S ANTI-ODYSSEAN PORTRAIT

The warfare described in The Battle of the Frogs and Mice (ancient Greek poem of uncertain authorship and dating which we know to have been used as a school text in the Byzantine period) is commonly read as a parody of the Iliad, because it imitates by parody the warfare between Achaeans and Trojans warriors. However, an analytical reading allows us to conclude the existence of another argument besides the one related with war: the argument of the journeys, specifically the journeys of Odysseus celebrated by Homer in the Odyssey. In my paper I intend to analyze on how the journeys of Odysseus intersect this mock-heroic universe, and on how they are adulterated and transmuted through parodic imitation, re-marking what kind of new interpretations they acquire in the new literary context. Odysseus' adventures (from Troy to Ithaca) are twelve and all of them are mocked in this three hundred lines' poem (although some instances are more direct in their mockery than others). My cross-reading between Batrachomyomachia and the odyssean model will converge on the following basic points: Psicharpax's portrait is painted as the exact opposite of Odysseus' profile and the epic parody allude to the sea-going adventures as signs of misfortune.

Keywords: *Batrachomyomachia*, Mock-heroic Poetry, Epic Parody, Journeys, Anti-Odysseus.

Batrachomyomachia is an ancient Greek poem of unknown authorship and date although it is known to have been used as a school text during the Byzantine period. In imitating the solemnity of the epic style, it celebrates the warlike altercation between the mice and frogs.

Literary studies dealing with this poem have usually involved a cross-reading of it with the *Iliad* owing to its mock-epic qualities parodying the ephemeral battle between animals, contrived as a heroic deed similar to the famous war between the Achaeans and the Trojans. The poem's first one hundred lines or so dwell upon the events leading up to the war and the reasons underpinning it: an encounter takes place between a foreign mouse

prince and his host, the frog king. Here, the *batrachomyomachian* stage is set where Psicharpax behaves as if he were a misfortunate traveller and a rather inexperienced sailor. The first line suggests that journeys are involved when the poet says on the first page he will begin his narrative with: *Ἀρχόμενος πρώτης σελίδος* (*Batrach.* 1¹). Apart from the grammatical differences, the expression which is composed of the verb *ἄρχω* and the adjective *πρῶτος* is identical in structure to what appears in the hemistichium *ἤρξατο δ' ὡς πρῶτον*. It is located at the point in the narrative (*Odyssey* 23,310) where, upon the defeat of the suitors, Odysseus tells Penelope about the misfortunes he suffered at sea². The mention of the Cycones indicates that at the beginning of the mock-heroic poem, the warlike story is also connected to the plot based on the odyssean journeys. Here the first line of the proem is the same as the line uttered by Odysseus as he begins to tell Penelope his fantastic tale.

My aim in this paper, therefore, is to look at the way in which the *Odyssey's* journeys intersect the *Batrachomyomachia*, and in so doing shed light on some of the common topics linking the two poems.

The expression *οὔατα πᾶσι* (*Batrach.* 5, *Od.* 12,177) about the episode of the Sirens is also repeated in the proem. While on the one hand, the mock-poet states the story he has just written will resound in all mortal ears, on the other hand, Odysseus (who narrates his stories at King Alkinou's court) describes how he has blocked the ears of all his companions so as to prevent them from listening to the Sirens' song. In this way, *Batrachomyomachia* works inversely to the Homeric model on which it is based; the mock-hero's song may be compared with that of a seductive although dangerous song, a bewitching song that casts all those who succumb to it into perdition. With reference to this eighth episode in Odysseus' journeys, *Batrachomyomachia* introduces topics to do with temptation and non-return. Owing to the fact that Homer's hero has been forewarned by Circe, he does not die at sea. However, Psicharpax is unaware of the danger he is in and is ignorant of what he does not know although he has the chance of finding out and allows himself to be won over by the promise of knowledge.

The Sirens' song is "a sort of anti-song, which can define normal song by what it is not"³. It may therefore be surmised that *Batrachomyomachia* is

¹ For the *Batrachomyomachia* references, I follow West edition. West, Martin L. [ed.]. 2003. *Homeric Hymns; Homeric Apocrypha; Lives of Homer*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

² For the *Odyssey* references I follow Goold edition. Goold, G. P. et al. [eds.]. 1995. *Homer: The Odyssey*, 2 vols. Cambridge–London: Harvard University Press.

³ Scodel, Ruth. 1998. "Bardic Performance and Oral Tradition in Homer." *The American Journal of Philology*, 119 (2), 188.

conceived as the reverse of an epic poem, an opposite version of the song as it is understood in its canonic sense, or in other words, as an epic convention. "Odysseus is the figure in all Greek mythology adept at plotting and surviving ambushes".⁴ Psicharpax seeks to imitate this model but fails and instead plays the role of an anti-Odysseus, an inexperienced sailor who fails to return to his homeland, because he has perished in one of the dangers he confronted on his voyage.

In managing to escape from a ferret-cat, Psicharpax reaches the lake inhabited by the frogs where he drinks honey-sweet water and is detained in conversation with Physignathus on the shore. This situation is thematically the same as the experience Odysseus goes through: in fleeing from the Cyclopes, the hero and his crew disembark in the land of the Lotus-Eaters, where they dine and stay to learn about the customs of the local inhabitants; the sailors who have eaten the lotus fruit, which is honey-sweet, forget about going home. Thus, the second stage of the journeys in the *Odyssey* represents the danger of detention and forgetting. At this point, it is worth mentioning the symbolic nature of the water at the lake and its lotus parallel found in the epithet *μελιηδής* (*Batrach.* 11, *Od.* 9,94), which is so typical in Homer. The act of drinking water is, in my opinion, the same as eating the lotus fruit and it is the reason why detaining on the lake shore presents a threat and indicates the on-set of disaster. Odysseus does not eat the lotus fruit and as a result continues on his homeward journey to Ithaca. Psicharpax, on the contrary, drinks the water and never sees his family and friends again.

A stranger's arrival in an unknown spot at a fountain or by a river, where he meets a person of royalty, who helps him and accompanies him to the local palace, is a frequent situation that often happens under different guises in the *Odyssey*. If looked at from an overall perspective, it may be seen that this is the pattern followed by the first part of *Batrachomyomachia*: the mouse is a new-comer to the lakeside where the frogs live and he is approached by a member of royalty who leads him to his watery palace with the intention of hosting him in a fitting manner. This thematic sequence matches the epic stage of odyssean journeys, which, in the Homeric poem, acts as reverse parody in terms of the sacred ritual of hospitality. "Every hospitality of the Apologoi is tainted by deviations from, and perversions of, the elements of the normal hospitality scene."⁵ Thus, in the episode in-

⁴ Louden, Bruce. 1999. *The Odyssey: Structure, Narration, and Meaning*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 19.

⁵ Reece, Steve. 1993. *The Stranger's Welcome: Oral Theory and the Aesthetics of the Homeric Hospitality Scene*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 124.

volving the Laestrygones, where King Antiphates' daughter leads the sailors to her father's palace, a catastrophic inversion of the norm occurs, because they will be devoured there. A similar situation happens to the mouse, when he perishes as he is being borne along to the frog's royal abode.

Psicharpax is approached by Physignathus (described as polyphemus) who asks the stranger about his origins and offers him gifts. Academics have already noted the homonymous link between the Frog's King and the name of Homer's Cyclops *πολύφημος* (*Batrach.* 12, *Od.* 1,70). The manner in which Physignathus makes his introduction reminds the reader/listener of the odyssean episode with the Cyclops. The similarity between Physignathus and Polyphemus "creates expectations that are fulfilled in humorous ways in the ensuing narrative, in the sense that like Polyphemus, Physignathus is a disastrously bad host."⁶ Indeed, as some authors have noted⁷, the frog's first words spoken to the mouse have been re-written from the first part of Polyphemus's speech to the newly arrived outsiders: *ξείνε, τίς εἶ; πόθεν ἦλθες ἐπ' ἡίονα;* (*Batrach.* 13); *ὦ ξεῖνοι, τίνες ἐστέ; πόθεν πλεῖθ' ὕγρὰ κέλευθα;* (*Od.* 9,252). The formulaic questions about identity and origins are a traditional device in Homeric poetry and, in the sphere of welcoming rituals, they are used in *Batrachomyomachia* in atypical fashion. As a rule in the *Odyssey*, asking the stranger questions only comes later, after a meal. Polyphemus is the only host in the epic poem who questions the outsiders as soon as he has met them and before offering his guests the meal they are due. Physignathus' behaviour therefore resembles that of the Cyclops and the meeting between the two animals recalls the topic on which the *Odyssey's* third adventure is based and which Reece interprets as a parody levelled at the subject of hospitality.⁸ Instead of offering the sailors a meal, Polyphemus makes a meal of them. Physignathus and Polyphemus end up by offering death as a welcoming gift, because if the frog causes the mouse to drown, the Cyclops slays six of Odysseus' companions. However, in terms of the character who is the Homeric hero's

⁶ Sens, Alexander. 2006. "Τίποτε γένος τοῦμόν ζητεῖς; The *Batrachomyomachia*, Hellenistic Epic Parody, and Early Epic." In Bakker, Egbert J. et al. [eds.]. *La Poésie épique grecque: métamorphoses d'un genre littéraire*. Genève-Vandoeuvres: Fondation Hardt, 2006, 242.

⁷ Gleis, Reinhold. 1984. *Die Batrachomyomachie: Synoptische Edition und Kommentar*. Frankfurt: Verlag Peter Lang, 119. Fusillo, Massimo. 1988. *La Battaglia delle Rane e dei Topi. Batrachomyomachia*. Milan: Guerini e Associati, 91. A. Sens (2006: 242).

⁸ S. Reece (1993: 123–43).

opposite, Psicharpax expires in his host's habitat, while Odysseus manages to escape from the Cyclops' cave.

Unaware of the risks involved in going for a ride in a watery environment, Psicharpax ends up by accepting this way of crossing the lake, because he wants to learn about life in the water and get to know about the marvels of the lake. This was why he quickly jumps onto the back of his new friend. The lack of caution demonstrated by the mouse at the beginning of his journey contrasts with Odysseus' cautiousness as an experienced hero, in demanding that Circe and Calypso swear they will not inflict any suffering upon him when he arrives at Eeia (*Od.* 10,342–46) or leaves Ogygia (*Od.* 5,177–91). Circe and Calypso both reveal themselves to be hostile and helpful goddesses; both offer him a bed and comfort; both detain the hero on their islands and provide the means he needs for embarking upon his journey which nearly always brings him close to death. Psicharpax, on the other hand, fails to extract any promise from the king of the frogs, who, like the two goddesses, extends hospitality to him, offering his own palace and tells his guest what to do while making the crossing: that he should hold on fast to the king's back if he is not to slip off (*Batrach.* 63). Psicharpax shares none of the astuteness and caution that characterises the Homeric sailor and blunders when he fails to demand assurance from the lake-dweller that no harm will come to him on his journey.

Although the Ogygia episode is concerned with the second last adventure in the *Odyssey's* linear narrative, it is in fact the first adventure to be described in the poem (thereby introducing us to Odysseus' first journey). It is here that the hero weeps in distress wanting to go home, torturing his heart with misery and longing (*Od.* 5,151–58). And that is the reason why he leaves the island amid great rejoicing. The adjective *γηθόσσοτος* is applied as much to Psicharpax as to Odysseus at the moment of embarking upon their respective expeditions (*Batrach.* 64, *Od.* 5,269). Similar to what Odysseus goes through when he has to grapple with misfortune at sea after leaving Ogygia and Eeia, Psicharpax also becomes a victim tossed about in the tumultuous waters of the frog's lake, although unlike his heroic counterpart, he does not manage to come out unscathed.

Odysseus' last words before he is washed up in Scheria shares certain features, such as the rock and the sea monster, with Psicharpax's monologue in the scene before he drowns. In the third monologue uttered at sea (*Od.* 5,408–23), Odysseus bemoans his fate in not being able to cling to the rock against which he has been violently thrown by the force of the sea and the wind or of some god who may possibly send against him a *μέγα δαίμων*. However, this water creature does not scare Odysseus, but rather

Psicharpax. It is owing to the sudden appearance of the water snake (*πικρὸν ὄραμα*, *Batrach.* 82), that the inexperienced sailor falls off his companion, the frog's back, as if, to use the mouse's mournful words, he has fallen off a rock (*Batrach.* 94). The dying mouse's monologue therefore serves to subvert the topic of Odysseus' third soliloquy: Psicharpax has fallen victim to the water snake, a monster which Homer's hero fears but fails to encounter. And while the fate of one is due to the rock (which symbolises the frog's back) moving away (*ἀπὸ πέτρης*, *Batrach.* 94), the threatened demise of the other is embodied in the way he is forcefully thrown against Scheria's rocky coast (*ποτὶ πέτρῃ*, *Od.* 5,415).

In opposition to the heroic model, where Odysseus manages to arrive safely on the shores of Scheria, the mouse is a novice at seamanship and fails both to reach his destination (the frog's palace) and to return to the shore from which he has departed.

In realising just what the difficulties are when crossing the lake, Psicharpax regrets having accepted the invitation and, in despair, he starts weeping copiously and tearing out his fur with his claws (*Batrach.* 69–70). Odysseus' companions have the same reaction when upon receiving Circe's instructions, the hero tells them about the route leading to the house of Hades (*Od.* 10,567–68). The expression *τίλλε δὲ χαιτάς* (*Batrach.* 70) is an adaptation of *τίλλοντό τε χαιτάς* (*Od.* 10,567), both of them occupy a final position in the line, and confirm the parallel that foretells the misfortunes about to befall them. The ship's crew-members, like the mouse, desiring to return to their homelands, start pulling out their hair/fur, when they realize they have embarked on a voyage leading them to the resting place of the dead.

After having expired in the waves, the corpse of this unfortunate passenger floats aimlessly in the middle of the lake. The adjective *δύσηνος*, which describes the recently deceased mouse (*Batrach.* 105), is also used when speaking about Elpenor's soul in *Odyssey* 11,76, the first that Odysseus met when he was in Hades. Elpenor was not a very gifted member of the crew and died on Circe's island when he got drunk and fell. The same situation happens to Psicharpax, although the other way around: the mouse falls off the frog's back and then drowns in the turbulent waters of the lake.

The association with the shipwrecked epic hero is also perceived in the expression *μέσσωι πόντωι* (*Batrach.* 107), the same one that, in three out of the four times it appears in the *Odyssey*, refers to the episode where Zeus drums up a storm as a punishment for profaning Helios's cattle in Thrinacia (5,132; 7,250; 12,388). Owing to the disrespectful behaviour of his companions when they failed to abide by the divine law imposed upon

them, Odysseus sees his ship smashed to pieces on the high seas, although he himself is dragged all the way to Ogygia. Psicharpax's death therefore contrives to draw a similarity with the two storms that Odysseus survived before and after his stay in Ogygia.

The path I have taken in making a comparative analysis of *Batrachomyomachia* and the odyssean model converges on the following basic points: Psicharpax's portrait is painted as the exact opposite of Odysseus' profile, and the epic parody (some instances are more direct in their mockery than others) allude to the sea-going adventures as signs of misfortune. In complying with its prospective function, the proem matches the deeds celebrated in the mock-epic with the dangers experienced at sea by the polytropic Odysseus, which he subsequently survives. It thereby traces out the path the mouse will follow so that it is, at one and the same time, a war-like and a sea-faring expedition. It should also be recalled that when Odysseus is speaking with Calypso, and later with the Phaeacians and Eumaeus, he complains he was forced to go through much suffering both in warfare and at sea (*Od.* 5,223–24; 8,182–83; 17,284–85).

Batrachomyomachia closes not by recalling the *Odyssey's* last adventures but by referring to what Odysseus says is the most terrible scene he has ever witnessed in all his sea travels: the scene involving Scylla (*Od.* 12,258–59). The expression ἡδὲ πόδας καὶ χεῖρας (*Batrach.* 300), used when describing how the army of crabs slaughters the mice, is taken from the episode about the six-headed monster (*Od.* 12,248). Scylla's monstrous strength is therefore re-used to characterise the warrior-like prowess of the crabs: Scylla snatches up six sailors by their hands and feet, while the crabs defeat the mice by amputating their tails, feet and legs. The horrifying description of the epilogue traces the mock-hero's activity as an interrupted *Odyssey*-like trajectory. That is, the misfortunes that victimise Psicharpax as well as the adversity he himself brings against his own kind are nothing more than the stages of an unfinished journey, quite the contrary of Odysseus' cosmic journey. His is perfect because it is complete owing to the fact that the hero travels between opposite poles and successfully passes all the tests he is put to, ending up by returning to his point of departure. "Odysseus' crafty nature enables him to survive even in the most desperate of circumstances".⁹ Psicharpax on the other hand does not share the same skill enabling him to survive extreme situations neither does he have the same wily nature and, instead of escape death, he dies as victim of

⁹ Graziosi, Barbara — Haubold, Johannes. 2005. *Homer: The Resonance of Epic*. London: Duckworth, 147.

a trick played against him, by the most hateful of beings, a creature from the water-world. Scylla represents the ninth odyssean adventure, the one that is the most painful to bear according to the hero of many wiles. The mock-poet parodies Scylla at the end of the war between the animals, not only in order to re-model the mock-epic's outcome along the lines of the *Odyssey's* most painful mishaps, but also, and more importantly, to portray the war as if it were a sea voyage, in imitation of the journey Odysseus has embarked upon. The warfare between these animals thus manages to attain a status equivalent to an epic deed.¹⁰

¹⁰ Other similarities between *Batrachomyomachia* and the *Odyssey* may be drawn. The examples I have talked about here have allowed me to conclude that Psicharpax's watery journey is a repetition of the Homeric model, the odyssean one, although it differs from it because it subverts it by resorting to the rules of parody.