

Essay on homer's odyssey

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In the tenth book of the *Odyssey* Odysseus and his companions find themselves trapped in the cave of the Cyclops Polyphemos. After their monstrous host has munched his way through several of his guests, the remainder take action. Odysseus makes a sharp, wooden stake, cutting it from the massive cudgel discovered in the cave; then together with four of his men he plunges the stake into the eye of the drunken, sleeping Polyphemos.

Snodgrass, however, would dissent. His whole book is devoted to proving that not only did early Greek art rarely illustrate Homer, it was rarely even inspired by it. This theory is not a new one. Many other scholars have thought and pondered the same ideas. Snodgrass meticulously studies examples of scenes often thought to be illustrations of Homer. Geometric art, he argues, offers nothing that can be identified as Homeric; indeed, there is only one Trojan war scene and that is Ajax's rescue of the body of Achilles, a scene which occurs in neither the *Odyssey* nor the *Iliad*.

One of the more bizarre apparitions of geometric art takes the form of a pair of Siamese twins, warriors with two heads, four legs, four arms and one torso and the subject of some fascinating pages in Snodgrass's book. They were especially popular in early Greek art, but there is no clear Homeric influence here. Twice does the *Iliad* refer to the twins, yet significantly he does not mention their rather striking deformity. It is preferable to understand both the artist and Homer as drawing on the same body of legendary material.

By the mid seventh century figures on vases are beginning to be identified by captions. This at least makes it easier to determine whether the scene is from the Trojan war. Instead of two warriors fighting over a body we can be sure that we are looking at Menealos and Hektor fighting over the body of Euphorbos, as found on a famous Rhodian plate of the late seventh century, a picture that makes an impressive and appropriate cover for the book.

This could very well be an illustration of the Iliad book where Menealos abandons his attempt to strip the corpse. Evidence for this tradition can be found in the shield of Euphorbos by Menealos himself. This is certainly plausible and helps to show that common subject matter is insufficient to prove influence. On the other hand, where a minor character is named, such as 'Odios' in the embassy to Achilles, then we can be more confident that the artist had Homer in mind.

This is a book of enormous leaning and subtlety, and its conclusion is surely right, yet at the same time it seems something of a missed opportunity. It is devoted to a negative and tightly-argued thesis, that Homer's epic poems had only minimal influence on early Greek art. Snodgrass is re-thinking early Greek art as he goes, but he is re-thinking it within the restrictions imposed by the very narrow focus of the book as a whole.

Thus, the positive, for instance the illuminating chapter on synoptic narrative and on composition, can be rather swapped in the relentless negative arguments. Other will now need to work through the implications of his thesis, for example the role that must be assigned to oral tradition and all its local variations. Perhaps it is no conscience that his book should appear at a

time when the literary culture of the recent past is being eroded by an increasing emphasis on the visual.