

A musing contrast



Throughout time, men have used previously written literary texts as models for compositions of their own. This borrowing of ideas and concepts can be seen quite clearly in the works of Roman authors, who, for the most part, imitated the style of their Greek predecessors. Virgil, the poet-author of *The Aeneid*, created what can be viewed as simply a Roman telling of a Greek classic. It seems little wonder, then, that Dante, a follower and enthusiast of this rhymester of yore, hackneyed Homer by using Virgil as a model. While the mimicking of passages can be seen as a sort of homage to precursors of literature, one may also contrast the similar passages, providing insight into the differences in the attitudes and outlooks of the two authors; a fine example of this is seen between Dante and Homer. While both Homer and Dante invoke the help of Muses, Homer's invocation for the story of a hero is directed toward a spiritual entity about another man, whereas Dante's invocation is internal, directed toward himself in both cases. Homer begins this epic work with the line, "Sing in me, Muse..." — this appeal to the divine not only reveals an assertion of the historicity of the story, but also shows humility in asking for assistance from Olympus. The Muse Homer is most likely referring to is Calliope, the Muse of Epic poetry this is inferred by the idea of song mentioned in the above line. While admitting that the work is spoken through him in the section "through me tell the story...", the actual telling of the story was done completely by the Muse, leaving the blind singer with nothing to accredit himself with. The word "through" in this passage could be defined simply as "by the means of." Homer is simply the means by which the Muse will sing. Also, no one can challenge the validity of god(dess)-breathed word, leaving no way for anyone to question whether these events actually occurred. Dante also seemingly invokes divine

inspiration in his work, but further insight points to the idea that the invocation was directed internally. In the line " O Muses, O high genius, help me now," Dante begins to sound as if his request is to the same spirits to which Homer alluded. While the word " help" connotes a need of something now absent, later lines show to whom Dante truly appeals. The next line begins " O memory," because unlike Homer, Dante refuses to be a mouthpiece; he looks inward for inspiration instead of above. This can be attributed to the wave of autonomy that is visible in western works in the Late Middle Ages. Dante goes as far as to put himself in the position of the Muse in rereading the first line with the interpretation of the Muse as his memory, it seems he is referring to his memory as genius. This creates an all-together different tone than the self-denying invocation of Homer and this trend of contrast continues into the remainder of the passages. Another point of dissimilarity in the works is the author-protagonist relationship. Homer goes on for lines about the exploits of this yet-to-be-named hero, listing him as " skilled in all ways of contending," again directing recognition toward others, in this case, Odysseus. The adventures mentioned (" harried for years on end," and " plundering the stronghold of Troy,") were those experienced by another, simply recounted by divinity, through a man. Conversely, Dante desires to recount experiences of his own; he states that he will "...set down what he saw." The word " saw" indicates that it was something witnessed and participated in by himself. Dante continues by stating that "...here shall your excellence reveal itself," lauding praises to the Muse (i. e.: his memory). The word " excellence" could easily be defined as superior, making Dante (through his memory) superior to Homer's hero, Odysseus, who was simply " skilled" (implying expertise, but falling far short

of superior). Differences between the passages are not only limited to content; the flowing structure of Homer's passage allows a continuous praise of his character, whereas the structure of Dante's invocation allows a shift from praising divinity to indulging in narcissistic behavior. Homer's opening line "Sing in me, Muse..." leads into the second line that concerns "the man skilled in all ways of contending..." The remainder of the passage continues with the exploits of the Greek champion ("wanderer", "harried for years on end", plundered the stronghold of Troy, etc.) Homer even slates the conquered city of Troy as "proud," labeling self-promotion as a characteristic of a fallen state. Dante, however, has a distinct break in his invocation. The opening line mimics that of Homer, requesting the aid of a supernatural force. Then comes a semicolon, changing the pace and attitude of the passage, creating misdirection. The proceeding lines then strayed from this mood, though, portraying this request as not really to deity, but as to himself. This self-indulgence is apparent throughout *The Inferno* (especially when he compares himself to the greatest classical minds) but is at its height here, asserting his memory as "genius," knowing that "here will [his] excellence reveal itself." A far cry from Homer, Dante embraces the pride that the blind poet denied. Again, direct comparison provides a great insight. Altogether, much can be inferred from the authors of these passages simply by viewing them side-by-side. The flowing verses of Homer seem to carry lofty praises for his hero and give full credit to the divine, while Dante's somewhat choppy verses (mostly from the misdirection used through the semicolon) applaud his own works, crediting his own memory for the tale. While careful reading is needed to catch this distinction, a failure to notice it would disallow one to gain the full effect of these works. It seems obvious

that both Homer and Dante invoke the Muses similarly in these passages, but careful examination proves that Homer's invocation is more sincere, asking not only for help from the divine, but simply to be a tool, telling the story of a hero; Dante, though, directed his invocation internally, asking his memory to revive the experiences that he had while searching for Beatrice. This difference illustrates the rift between Greek and Pre-Renaissance ideals. Texts: "Sing in me, Muse, and through me tell the story of that man skilled in all ways of contending, the wanderer, harried for years on end, after he plundered the stronghold on the proud height of Troy." *Odyssey*, Book I, Lines 1-5 "O Muses, O high genius, help me now; o memory that set down what I saw, here shall your excellence reveal itself!" *Inferno*, Canto II, Lines 7-9