

Violence and its functions in the odyssey and antigone



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In both Homer's *The Odyssey* and Sophocles' *Antigone*, violence and war seem to be considered honorable; great fighters such as Antilokhos, Akhilleus and Odysseus of *The Odyssey* and Eteocles of *Antigone* are glorified and celebrated as exemplary figures in their respective societies, courageous souls willing and capable of going into battle. Yet in both the poem and the play, a sense of deep tragedy and futility accompanies nearly every incident of violence. Each major battle is met with the question of whether the benefits of violence have outweighed its consequences, and the answer to this question is almost always no. Violence, in general, serves in both works as an unfortunate, tragic and even irrational resort, and belies the concept of honor and greatness of violence in the Greek world. In *The Odyssey*, Odysseus immediately rises to the forefront as a victim of violence. And it is often his own violent behavior that in turn troubles him later on. When Telemakhos visits Nestor while investigating his father's disappearance, the prince of charioteers recounts the price Odysseus would pay for attacking a Trojan town needlessly: " But when we plundered Priam's town and tower/ and took to the ships, God scattered the Akhaians./ He had a mind to make homecoming hard for them" (III, 140-2). While Odysseus is famed for his prowess in battle, the sacking of this town is a result of folly, not strategy or necessity; he and his fleet are therefore punished and forced to remain. However, Nestor, Diomedes, and Menelaos, three Akhaians who have not participated in this foolish act, realize that the battles they fought during the Trojan War bring them enough grief and sorrow, and sensibly withdraw from fighting any further. They are permitted by Zeus to escape. The significance of Odysseus' mistake of sacking Priam's town can be witnessed in the long and difficult journey he and his fleet are subjected to

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for the next ten years. If Odysseus does not attack the town, he can expect a safe departure from Troy; but since he does, Odysseus is compelled into his long and perilous journey across the seas. And during his exile from home, Odysseus commits another violent act that prolongs his journey to Ithaka. He blinds the Kyklops Polyphemos, son of Poseidon. Again, the use of violence to resolve his problems lengthens Odysseus' unfortunate and perilous journey to his homeland. Although one might attribute Poseidon's punishment of Odysseus to the fact that he reveals his identity to Polyphemos upon leaving the island, leading the Kyklops to beseech his father " that Odysseus, raider of cities, never/ see his home" (IX, 578-9), the fact remains that Odysseus' earlier decision to raid Priam's town is the cause of the mistakes he is making now. Underlying the hubris that gets Odysseus in trouble in his exchange with Polyphemos is the reckless, unrewarding violence he resorts to back at Troy. The illegitimacy of violence in *The Odyssey* can again be seen in the revenge cycle that appears both with Poseidon and Odysseus, and the Ithakan king and the suitors. When Poseidon tries Odysseus and throws his ship around the world, the god of earthquakes is fueled by rage and sadness for the harm done to his child. Poseidon's grief, fed by Odysseus' violent doings, feeds his own belligerence and desire to keep Odysseus away from house and family. The cycle of violence, pain, and revenge is unending. When Odysseus decimates the suitors, the extreme vehemence and insensibilities of violence are revisited. Odysseus launches the attack on the suitors in order to restore honor to his family, and, having defeated them, is described by Eurykleia, Penelope's nurse, as " a lion/ splashed with mire and blood" (XXIII, 49-50). Later, Eupheithes rises to avenge the murder of his son Antinoos and the violent struggle is

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perpetuated. Odysseus responds by killing him and advancing on the old man's supporters even as Athena warns all from pursuing "this bitter skirmish" (XXIV, 593). Only at the direct warning of Zeus' wrath does the son of Laertes command himself and end the senseless fighting. This ending to The Odyssey suggests that Odysseus' final actions somewhat lack honor because they are uncontrolled and purposeless; the violence gets out of hand and threatens to put Odysseus into trouble again. The ending also reminds the audience that violence is such a consuming, powerful, hurtful, ineffective solution to conflict and adversity. Violence only begets more violence, and in this way bears none of the honor commonly assigned to Greek warrior heroes. The inherent tragedy of violence is even more apparent in Antigone. The opening to the play, which immediately follows the fatal battle between Eteocles and Polyneices, sets the tone for the rest of Antigone. A violent war between two brothers begins the tragic cycle that will eventually destroy the entire former and present royal family, and put a curse on Thebes. The fate that befalls Antigone results from her public defiance of Creon's mandate that Polyneices not be given proper burial rites or honors. Instead, Antigone's brother "must be left to lie unwept, unburied, / For hungry birds of prey to swoop and feast / On" (28-30). Antigone buries her brother anyway, resulting in Creon's judgment that she will be executed for insubordination against the state. The deaths that occur later on in the play are the fate that Creon must face for his impiety and opposition to the laws of heaven. But underlying all the deaths and the problems Creon causes for himself is the very event that starts this domino effect of pain and suffering: the war between Eteocles and Polyneices. Polyneices wages this war on Thebes to regain honor and power, marking the beginning of a curse

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that will afflict Thebes and ruin its royalty. The overall misfortune of the characters in Sophocles' tragedies may be traced back to Oedipus and his fated doom; Oedipus leads a life of misery and regret as a result of his destined rule of Thebes, and his descendents naturally carry the burden of his curse after he has died. Nevertheless, in *Antigone*, what begins the final stage of the Sophoclean tragedy is a violent clash that ends lives and leads to catastrophe in Thebes. There is not much violence in *Antigone*; unlike *The Odyssey*, wars are not waged and battles are not fought; however, where violence reveals itself one can detect a disturbing link between tragedy and violence. Each incident of violence in the play is graphic and unrelenting in gloom. Birds and dogs tear apart Polyneices' body. Antigone hangs herself in quiet anticipation of reuniting herself with family in hell. Haemon "in remorse...leaned upon the blade/ And drove it half its length into his body" (1234-5). Eurydice does herself in, pressing a sharp-edged dagger through her bosom. Creon begs for death in the end, realizing the error of his rule. Once again, violence produces more violence, until at last the gods lift the curse. Unfortunately, in *Antigone*, the curse is lifted only when violence has consumed all. Violence, an inevitable part of Greek society, reveals its dark shadows and painful legacy in both *The Odyssey* and *Antigone*. Although in some cases the fighting and warring in poem and play showcase the honor and bravery of violence, the essential impression to be drawn from both tales is that violence is one of the roots of suffering, adversity, and anguish. Violence, even when carried out honorably, only causes more violence, and in most cases, when considered from a distance, is unnecessary and ineffectual. Violence, perhaps noble and great in some circumstances, is in and of itself ignoble, conferring little honor to those who engage in it.

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