The humour of the *Odyssey*

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Unlike most epics, the *Odyssey* contains a number of humorous episodes. The laughter, however, is not there simply to amuse: there is often an underlying point, closely related to the larger aims of the poem.

Laughs are not something one would naturally turn to an epic for. There is little to laugh at in the *Iliad*, and the same is largely true of the *Aeneid*, of Lucan's *Civil War*, Milton's *Paradise Lost* and so on. Like tragedy, high-style epic (as opposed obviously to parodic epics like *The Battle of the Mice and Frogs*) imposes certain expectations of seriousness. Indeed, in many cultures, laughter has been seen as something not quite proper, unbefitting a gentleman or gentlewoman, or serious literature: Plato for instance is very severe on the pleasure people get from laughing at comedies.

Homer (if it is he) seems however to have decided to challenge this idea in the *Odyssey*. Not that one should go to him for belly-laughs, but there is a vein of gentle humour running through the work in a way not generally found in epic.

Laugh if you dare

Though humour is a key component of the *Odysse*y, it is mostly the bad guys who do the laughing. The Suitors 'die laughing', as Homer puts it, at Odysseus' violent treatment of the rival beggar Irus, without seeing that they are looking at their own future fate. Eurymachus causes laughter by saying the lamp-light reflected from Odysseus' bald head shows he is there 'not without the help of the gods'. Exactly; but Eurymachus is blinded to this truth by his own humour. The Maids, too, unwisely laugh at their master in his beggar's disguise. Odysseus and his family, by contrast, seldom laugh, and never in so foolish a manner.

Dirty minds

The humour is generally discreet. Smutty humour we might not expect, but it is not entirely absent. We get close to this in book 6, when Odysseus is awoken on Scherie by the sound of girls playing ball. He is naked, covered in brine, and terrified he will meet another Cyclops or similar. The poet tells us that 'he intended to mix with the fair-haired girls even though he was naked'. Does 'mix' mean 'have a conversation with', or ...? The *double entendre* is clear, but Homer passes quickly on.

The second, more substantial, example is the somewhat rugby-club reaction of the male gods to the sight of Ares and Aphrodite trapped adulterously by the invisible nets rigged up by the cuckolded Hephaestus, in Demodocus' song in book 8. The women gods stay away out of shame, but Apollo and Hermes make the most of the situation:

> *Apollo: Hermes, would you be happy to be chained up like that, if you could sleep with golden Aphrodite?*
>
> *Hermes: Apollo, if only! Even if there were three times as many chains, and all you gods and the goddesses could see me, I'd be happy to sleep with Aphrodite like that!*
>
> *'Unquenchable laughter' rings out round Olympus.*

Coarsely humorous it may be, but this story has a clear relevance to Odysseus' situation. We have adultery in a husband's absence, which is a possibility back on Ithaca. The lame Hephaestus is a much less powerful figure than Ares, but he has his revenge through cunning and deception: he pretends to be absent but is not, and captures the lovers by means of a stratagem. So Odysseus is obviously at a disadvantage against the crowd of yobbish suitors, but restrains himself from revealing who he is and defeats them by cunning. Hephaestus captures the pair in a net of wires, and there is a simile of the dead suitors being like fish caught in a net.

The full 'humour' of this story is available only to us who know the truth about the situation on Ithaca: the Phaeacians and Odysseus cannot see it. Seriousness lurks behind the humour.

Joking apart

This type of 'ironic' humour is in fact a major feature of the *Odyssey*. We have seen it already in Odysseus coming out of his bush to confront not (as he thinks) monsters, but (as we know) a young princess. This scene is repeated when he reaches Ithaca, and is deposited on the shore with all his wealth given him by the Phaeacians. There are the slight variations that the young person is now Athena disguised as a prince and Ithaca has been disguised by her to confuse Odysseus. There follows a contest of wits between the two. Odysseus is very pleased to see the prince (because an effete young man is less of a problem than a Cyclops?), and asks where he is. Athena replies rather patronizingly that he must either be simple or have come a long way if he doesn't know 'Ithaca', which (to add to his confusion) she describes in terms quite unlike the real Ithaca. To rub her mockery in, she says that Ithaca is (she's been told) famous even in Troy.

Odysseus is not, as Athena clearly hopes, thrown by all this but, on the point of making a naive reply, instead answers with his own cock-and-bull story about being a Cretan in exile. He responds to her mockery of his need to ask about Ithaca, by saying 'Oh, Ithaca! Yes, I used to hear of that when I was in Crete', the implication being that, coming from important Crete, he could not be expected to remember somewhere as insignificant as Ithaca. Furthermore, his story may be nonsense, but it is still very cleverly crafted for the situation. He casually tells how at Troy he was too independent to command his men as demanded by the fearsome Idomeneus, so that on his return Idomeneus' son tried to rob him of all his treasures gained at Troy: Odysseus killed him. The reference to his service at Troy caps the youth's mockery, and the story of killing a powerful man's son who tried to steal his property is a clear warning to the youth, if he has any such ideas.

That Athena had hoped to fool Odysseus is made plain by her affectionately exasperated response to this nonsense: 'You're shameless, too clever, and never tire of trickery!' She calls off the pretences and reveals herself, but the battle of wits continues. She preens herself that Odysseus did not recognise her, and then claims to have ensured that it was she who ensured that the Phaeacians gave him a good welcome. We know this is not quite

right, and Odysseus is having none of it: he points out that she has been absent for almost all of his wanderings, until he was safe on Scherie. This forces her to acknowledge the truth of what he says and to admit, rather shamefacedly, that the reason for her absence was fear of her uncle Poseidon's anger, if she got in the way of his punishing Odysseus for blinding the Cyclops.

This particular contest of wits has thus essentially been fought to a stand-still, but the immortal Athena is not prepared to give up against a mortal with the honours even. So, as they discuss his return to the palace, she starts using the tactic of casually dropping into the conversation facts that come as bomb-shells to Odysseus. She tells him that Penelope is surrounded by suitors trying to win her hand (and his kingdom), which has him crying out that if she hadn't told him he'd have blundered in and suffered Agamemnon's fate. Then she says she will go to Sparta and recall Telemachus, which has him asking why she didn't just tell the boy the truth and save him the journey: no doubt she wanted him to have a hard time too. 'Oh, I did it so that he could win glory — not that the suitors are not waiting in ambush to kill him!' To this Odysseus does not rise, having perhaps learnt that a goddess is going to win a contest of wits like this.

And indeed Athena does have the 'last word'. To disguise him for his time in the palace, she dresses him as a beggar, but piles onto him rather more foul-smelling and dirty clothes than seems entirely necessary. Yes, the weather is turning cold but, since these garments are not just smelly but also threadbare, their number is unlikely to make very much difference. Still, if Odysseus ultimately comes off worst in this contest of humour, he has now got more to worry about than smelly clothes and mocking goddesses.

It should be clear therefore that the humour of the *Odyssey* is of a sophisticated, subtle, and varied kind. Since we are an audience served by an omniscient narrator, we generally see through all the deceptions and appreciate the humour, but not all the characters can do the same. Those who can, or have the wit and intelligence to cope with tricky situations, survive. When Athena tells Odysseus he is in Ithaca, but describes a quite different island, he does not know the truth but does see something 'funny' is going on, and reacts accordingly with a speech full of cunning and wit, designed to keep him safe in this odd situation. Humour in the *Odyssey* therefore can indeed be quite a serious matter.

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