

## *Socrates' Poetic Transformation of Odysseus*

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The traditional stories that we are told in our formative years inform our understanding of justice. In Books II and III of *The Republic*, Socrates presents a system of poetic education for the fictional guardians of the city in speech by juxtaposing what has been said by poets such as Homer with what should be said to young men who would become good citizens. Through the process of comparing what has been said to what should be said, Socrates establishes for his interlocutors a fundamentally new teaching on justice and citizenship. Socrates interprets Homer such that listeners already familiar with Homer might reexamine their understanding of Greek myths, and thereby come to accept rule founded in reason as preferable to rule founded in force or deceit.

Parents, priests, and teachers tell us what is right and wrong. Yet upon what do we draw when it is time to make our own independent decisions about right and wrong, justice and injustice? The more religious will turn to holy writ for guidance, while those who have rejected works such as the *Bible*, *Torah*, and *Koran* may draw upon moral stories they were told in the past. Or, having discounted any idea of divine reward or punishment as children's stories, they may turn to rational inquiry and try to discern the consequences of their actions. Whether they reject or accept the stories they were told as a fair depiction of the consequences of human action, those stories provide them with their first conceptions of justice. And, as they come to an adult understanding of the questions of justice and injustice, they must accept, reject, or reinterpret the stories they were told as children. The only difference between the ancient Greeks and modern man is that they had Homer's epics, and we have the holy books of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam.

Socrates takes seriously the idea that the stories that make up our education inform our understanding of justice. In Books II and III of the *Republic*, Socrates presents a system of poetic education for the fictional guardians of the city in speech by juxtaposing what has been said by poets like Homer with what should be said to young men who would become good citizens. Through the process of comparing what has been said to what should be said, Socrates establishes for the interlocutors a fundamentally new teaching on justice and citizenship without changing the details of Homer's tales or replacing these with new stories. Socrates merely reinterprets Homer, and as a direct consequence helps the men who already are familiar with Homer to become more tractable to being ruled by philosophy and reason than by those who are merely the strongest or most clever. In short, by compelling them to examine what they learned from Homer, Socrates reeducates his interlocutors to accept rule founded in reason as preferable to rule founded in force or deceit.

A quick review of the guardians' education shows us that Socrates intended the guardians to be pious, slow to anger, courageous, moderate in their desires, and obedient to authority. By instilling these particular virtues in the guardians, it is assured that they not only will protect the city in speech from foreign invaders, but can be trusted not to abuse their power and turn their skills against the city. On the surface it would seem that the education the guardians should receive would be the one that made them most like Achilles. After all, he is by far the most capable of protecting the Achaian League's interest from the violence of others without himself becoming corrupted by the promise of wealth or tribute. He is not motivated by the acquisition of wealth or war spoils, and he clearly possesses all of the attributes that make for an excellent and noble warrior. Not only does he possess the physical splendor necessary for a warrior but his primary motivation is the acquisition of honor. And for Achilles to be worthy of the honor of his comrades he continually must prove his superiority in battle. Having been born of a goddess he has a special relationship with the gods that is expressed in the respect he offers the gods. He understands his place in the scheme of things and honors the gods as he himself would be honored by lesser men.

His one weakness, according to the standard Socrates sets for the guardians, is that he easily is angered. Contrary to a first impression, the anger that overwhelms Achilles in the *Iliad* is not the anger of a man who has had a prize forcibly taken from him, rather it is the righteous anger of a proud man who has been insulted unjustifiably. The danger of imitating Achilles is that it leads men to strive for an individual excellence independent of the good of the community. It also encourages men to believe that the greatest warrior is the man best suited to rule over others. Emulating Achilles might lead men to set themselves above being ruled by others because of their inflated sense of self worth.

Like Achilles, Odysseus is a strong warrior, but he is not remembered for his skill in battle. Odysseus is introduced by Homer as the "man of many ways" (*Odyssey* I 1). It is for his craftiness and quick wit that men respect Odysseus. He is remembered more for his deception of Polyphemos, the Cyclops, and the suitors than for his battle exploits during the Trojan War. In the *Iliad*, Odysseus is one of two Achaians who sneaks into the enemy's camp in the middle of the night, steals their horses, and kills a number of their men while they are asleep. This is hardly the act of a noble warrior motivated by honor. On the other hand Odysseus does prove himself to be one of the best men in council. His quick wits enable him and his companions to overcome apparently insurmountable odds. The deception that brings about the end of the Trojan war, the Trojan Horse, was Odysseus' idea. By declaring himself to be nobody, he is able to escape with some of his men from the carnivorous appetite of the Cyclops. And by clothing himself as a beggar, Odysseus is able to rid his home of the suitors who would eat up all of his substance after killing both Odysseus and his son Telemachos. Odysseus' merits are found in the use of his wits. Unfortunately, emulating Odysseus might encourage men to cheat others, because a cursory inspection of Odysseus leads men to believe that



his greatness is his ability to deceive others.

But setting aside his cunning, Odysseus displays qualities that Socrates would have the fictional guardians and his interlocutors possess. He is obedient to the gods, courageous, moderate in his desires, and he is slow to anger. He musters his courage when he descends into Hades at Circe's command to learn from Teiresias what he must do to return home. He obeys Teiresias when he moderates his desire for food and refuses to eat any of Helios' cattle. And he resists acting rashly upon his anger when he is insulted by the suitors. Patterning a life on the stories of Odysseus' exploits might lead men in a life of moderation and obedience as easily as it might lead them to deceive and trick others for personal gain.

As they are portrayed by Homer, both heroes possess qualities that make them worthy of emulation. Yet at the same time they support the accusation against poetry made by Adeimantus in the *Republic*. The stories of Achilles and Odysseus can be read in a way that sanctions the ideas that the right to rule should devolve upon those who can win by force or deception the ruling offices, and that such a life is preferable to a just life. Achilles' skill as a warrior earns him the respect of his peers while Odysseus' cunning enables him to conquer superior strength and numbers. It is no wonder that the interlocutors are encouraged by these stories to believe that men should be reduced to obedience through either force or fraud.

That is in fact the nature of Adeimantus' complaint in Book II of the *Republic*. Adeimantus claims that the stories told by poets like Homer support the vulgar opinion that it is preferable to be unjust provided that one maintains the reputation of being just. Homer is cited in support of the idea that "ruling offices and marriages, will come to those who seem to be just . . . [and] by throwing in good reputation with the gods, they [the poets] can tell of an inexhaustible store of goods that they say gods give to the holy" (*Republic* 363a). Adeimantus adds to this that the poets "say that the unjust is for the most part more profitable than the just; . . . they are ready and willing to call happy and to honor bad men who have wealth or some other power and to dishonor and overlook those who happen in some way to be weak or poor" (*Republic* 364a). Finally, Adeimantus claims that beggar priests and diviners use Homer as a witness to the perversion of the gods by human beings because he too said:

The very gods can be moved by prayer too.  
With sacrifices and vows and  
The odor of drink and burnt offerings, human beings  
turn them aside with their prayers,  
When someone has transgressed and made a mistake  
[*Iliad* IX 497-501] (*Republic* 364d-e).

In short, Adeimantus blames the poets for supporting the vulgar opinion that it is better to rule unjustly over others than it is to be just by pointing to poetic examples that praise the acquisition of wealth or power through the unjust treatment of

others. The common opinion of injustice founded in poetry even dismisses the fear of divine punishment, because the poets say the gods can be corrupted by votive offerings.

One distinction that Adeimantus neglects to point out, however, is that the abilities of Achilles and Odysseus that are admired by other men are in themselves morally neutral. Being sharp of mind is of no great advantage or disadvantage until it is applied toward a specific end. It can be used equally well in establishing justice or in executing injustice. Achilles' great physical talents earn him the admiration of others. But it is not his strength so much as the application of it in serving the rest of the Achaian league in battle that makes Achilles worthy of respect. His skills could have been turned against the Achaian league as easily as they are used in its defense. Socrates subtly draws attention to this distinction in his description of the guardians' education. By juxtaposing what the guardians should learn with what should not have been said in Homer's poetry, Socrates reveals that the importance of Homer's stories should not be found in the description of the means through which men acquire power over others, but in the ends toward which those means are directed.

Socrates' subtle presentation of Achilles and Odysseus as reference points against which an appropriate education can be judged compels the interlocutors to scrutinize what they learned from Homer's tales without throwing out the stories themselves. In fact, the greater the extent of the interlocutors' memory of Homer's tales, the more likely they are to be persuaded to reject the popular idea that force and fraud are preferable to justice, and accept that the best rule is the one founded in reason and the pursuit of the common good. However, in order to appreciate fully Socrates' subtle reinterpretation of Homer it is necessary to move through the argument as Socrates would have his interlocutors do. Therefore, a careful examination of Socrates' response to Adeimantus' criticism demands that we understand the references to Homer's poetry as Socrates' interlocutors did. I hope to accomplish this by comparing the original context of the citations to the context of their use in the *Republic*.

### Drawing in the Interlocutors

When Socrates begins his discussion of the guardian's education, he exhorts Adeimantus to join him, saying "Come, then, like men telling tales in a tale and at their leisure, let's educate men in speech" (*Republic* 376d). Ostensibly the men to whom Socrates refers are the guardians. But the city in speech that Socrates is creating is itself a tale within a tale. The description of the city is a tale being told to Glaucon, Adeimantus, and the interlocutors, while the conversation between the two brothers and Socrates is in turn a tale being told by Plato to his readers through the *Republic*. The tale within a tale is the means by which Plato educates his readers while Socrates is educating his interlocutors. In fact, the reader of the *Republic* now becomes an equal partner with the interlocutors as witness to the creation of



the education in speech occasioned by Adeimantus' complaint against poetry.

Socrates continues by asking Adeimantus, "Do speeches have a double form, the one true, the other false" (*Republic* 376e)? To explain this comment, he claims

that first we tell tales to children. And surely they are as a whole, false, though there are true things in them too . . . . the beginning is the most important part of every work and that this is especially so with anything young and tender? For at that stage it's most plastic, and each thing assimilates itself to the model whose stamp anyone wishes to give it . . . . as it seems we must supervise the makers of tales . . . [and] persuade nurses and mothers to tell the approved tales to their children and to shape their souls with tales more than their bodies with hands. Many of those they now tell must be thrown out" (*Republic* 377a-377c).

At the end of this explanation the interlocutors cannot help but wonder what aspect of their own education was so inappropriate in the formation of their souls that it must be thrown out. Adeimantus asks such a question, to which Socrates' responds, "The ones Hesiod and Homer told us . . . . They surely composed false tales for human beings and used to tell them and still do tell them" (*Republic* 377d). These dead poets told their tales to the interlocutors through the rhapsodies who repeat these tales *verbatim*, and to this day they still repeat their tales to those who will read their epics.

Hesiod's *Theogony* and Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were for the Greeks what the *Bible*, *Koran*, and *Torah* are for the modern reader. They were the books that defined right and wrong and provided moral direction from the stories they told. It could be argued that Socrates merely is using these books as an example of what was done wrong in the past so that the interlocutors will understand the difference between their own education and the education that Socrates is providing the guardians. But if that is true, why would Socrates go on to cite numerous specific examples from the *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, and *Theogony*? The guardians never will be familiar with these works if they are educated in new tales. However, the souls of the interlocutors have been formed by these stories, and the interlocutors' understanding of justice is a product of being educated through these stories. Clearly, Socrates means not merely to describe the new education, but in so doing to moderate the effect of the old one upon his interlocutors. Socrates' intended audience for this education must not be the guardians, but the interlocutors who share an education founded in the poetry of Hesiod and Homer. Once the interlocutors grasp that Socrates' intent is to criticize their own education, they must ask themselves whether the guardians' virtues are the virtues they themselves should possess. And, if they accept these new virtues, they must reject what they previously had held to be virtues.

The education of the guardians is divided into three sections. The first section (*Republic* 377e-383c) consists of what should be said to the guardians about the gods so that the guardians will "honor gods and ancestors and not take lightly

their friendship with each other” (*Republic* 386a). The second section (*Republic* 386b-392a) consists of what should be said to the guardians about demons and heroes so that they will be courageous, obedient, and possess self-mastery. The third section consists of what should be said to the guardians concerning the activities of men so that the guardians will know how to act. This third section fails to materialize during the discussion of a poetic education, because Socrates claims that such a discussion is impossible -- at least, until “we find out what sort of thing justice is and how it by nature profits the man who possesses it whether he seems to be just or not” (*Republic* 392c). This division reveals that the education in justice sought through poetry is incomplete, albeit necessary. Essentially, the guardians’ education is limited to a discussion of piety, courage, obedience, and moderation. These virtues are the blocks upon which justice is built. Whether these virtues are the virtues of the ruled or a ruler remains to be seen. But one thing is certain. Socrates’ use of Homeric allusions is designed to instill a greater sense of piety, courage, and moderation in the interlocutors than they possessed with their common reading of the poets.

### Truth, Lies and Theology

As a means of encouraging piety, Socrates declares that one of the things the poets must say is, “the god is not the cause of all things, but of the good” (*Republic* 380c). This law was preceded by Socrates’ claim that it never must be said “how Uranus did what Hesiod says he did, and how Cronos in his turn took revenge on him” (*Republic* 378c). Those educated in Greek poetry would know Socrates means it never must be said that Uranus, the father of the gods, ever became jealous of his children and imprisoned them in the earth, nor that Cronos, son of Uranus, ever took revenge on his father by castrating him. Socrates adds that it must not be said “within the hearing of a young person that in doing the extremes of injustice, or that in punishing the unjust deeds of his father in every way, he would do nothing to be wondered at” (*Republic* 378b). According to his argument, if these stories are true, jealousy and revenge would be incident to the nature of the gods, and the gods therefore would be no better than men as tyrants -- full of hatred, lusting for power, and insecure to the point of violence. Not only would the gods be demeaned in the portrayal, but a man who sought violent revenge even against members of his own family could excuse his vengeful acts on the grounds that the gods would excuse such activity, since they had committed such atrocities themselves. By calling into question the wisdom of saying such things about the gods, Socrates is calling into question the very origins of Greek theology. By drawing the interlocutors’ attention to the human acts that might be condoned by these stories, Socrates encourages his interlocutors to reject a theology that tells men that whoever can conquer through force is entitled to rule over others.

In addition to questioning the very origins of the gods, those familiar with the *Theogony* also would note that Uranus imprisoned his children because he was



convinced his children might overthrow him and usurp his rule. Instead of preventing this *coup*, such unjust treatment of his children encouraged them to rebel. Cronos fails to learn from his father's example, because he makes the same mistake after successfully overthrowing his father. Cronos eats his children as they are born so that they might not rise against him, but when Zeus is born Cronos is deceived by his wife, who hands him a stone to swallow instead of his son. Zeus matures and then leads his siblings against his father after Cronos is persuaded to regurgitate the children he has swallowed. Both tales speak of a god and a father justifying the suppression of political opposition by force. Both tales speak of regicide. Both tales speak of justifiable patricide. Most importantly, both tales show that the gods rose to power through the use of force and fraud.

These are the stories that the guardians will not be allowed to hear, and as a result of not hearing these stories, they will not be encouraged to become easily angered with one another. They will not be able to justify patricide or regicide. They will not remember stories that encourage violent political change. But the interlocutors do remember these stories, and they do excuse such human behavior on the basis of these stories. By drawing their attention to what these stories might encourage in the fictional guardians, the interlocutors are compelled to examine what they, themselves, have learned from these stories. By presenting the *Theogony* in this manner, Plato forces his readers to examine what the Greek tales of the origin of men and gods encourage.

Socrates continues to urge this questioning when he claims that

Hephaistos' being cast out by his father when he was about to help his mother who was being beaten [*Iliad* I 586-94] and all the battles of the gods Homer made [*Iliad* XX 1-74; XXI 385-513], must not be accepted in the city, whether they are made with a hidden sense or without a hidden sense (*Republic* 378d).

These things should not be said if "those who are going to guard the city for us must consider it shameful to be easily angry with one another" (*Republic* 378c).

The reference to Hephaistos' being cast out by Zeus comes from early in the *Iliad*, when Hephaistos, Hera's son, tries to dissuade her from angering Zeus by reminding her of the suffering they both endured the last time that she clashed with Zeus. Hephaistos reminds Hera of this experience, because she is questioning Zeus' decision to honor Thetis' request that the Achaians be made to suffer so that Achilles' honor might be restored by rescuing the Achaians from the Trojans. Achilles' honor was diminished when he was forced to give Briseis, whom he had received as a prize for outstanding performance in battle, to Agamemnon. Hephaistos explains to Hera why he reminds her of their suffering by saying "this will be a disastrous matter and not endurable if you two are to quarrel thus for the sake of mortals and bring brawling among the gods" (*Iliad* I 573-5). It is clear that the reference to Hephaistos' being thrown out also is a reference to the gods easily becoming angered with one another. Socrates' stated concern is that these



poetic examples might encourage the guardians to become easily angered with one another. But there are additional concerns that are not stated, yet they are readily apparent when we look at the citations in their original context. The quarrel between Hera and Zeus referred to here is a disagreement between two of the most powerful gods about the affairs of men. Zeus has been persuaded by Thetis, a goddess and Achilles' mother, to honor the petulant request of a mortal who feels slighted because his prize has been taken away. Hera is angry with the Trojans because Paris, a Trojan, accepted Helen as a bribe from Aphrodite for throwing a beauty pageant in which the contestants were Hera, Aphrodite, and Athene. Looking at the Trojan war in this context not only reveals the war to be founded in something rather trivial, but shows the gods to be motivated more by selfish interests than any sense of what is good for human beings or for themselves. According to the stories presented by Homer, the gods are not the cause of what is good for human beings, but the cause of war and strife. If gods choose sides, they cannot be above petty self-interest. The implication that the gods are not in agreement as to what is good for men inhibits men from accepting the idea that just principles order the universe. Therefore, if the interlocutors are to accept that there is a good for human beings based upon universal just principles that can be discovered by the use of human reason, the idea that the gods fight over human interests must be rejected.

The battles among the gods to which Socrates refers in the above citation also are found in the *Iliad*. The stories of these battles ostensibly are to be rejected because they reveal gods who are easily angered with one another, and they show the gods as the source of evil for men. It seems unjust that the gods kill men in a battle that they themselves have encouraged. Additionally, those who know the stories of the *Iliad* will recognize how the battles among the gods diminish the noble aspects of the gods. In the first battle among the gods to which Socrates refers, Homer grants Zeus two reasons for permitting the gods to fight against each other in the midst of the battle between the Achaians and the Trojans. The first reason is found in Zeus' encouragement to the gods to join the battle. He tells them "if we leave Achilles alone to fight with the Trojans they will not even for a little hold off swift footed Pelion . . . . I fear against destiny he may storm their fortresses" (*Iliad* XX 27-30). The second reason is narrated by Homer. He states that Zeus was "amused in his deep heart for pleasure, as he watched the gods' collision in conflict" (*Iliad* XXI 389-90). It is a matter of interpretation whether Zeus is amused by their fighting, or he knows that by fighting each other the gods can exercise their hatred against one another and learn the error of taking sides with mortals against fate understood only by Zeus. In either case, the examples reveal the gods, Zeus excepted, to be less than perfect in their understanding of what is good for man or for themselves. If these stories continue to be accepted as fact in the communal memory of the Greeks, the belief that there is a standard of justice founded in reason by which all human action can be judged never will be established. After all, what hope is there of grasping by human reason such a



standard of justice if the gods who are immortal fail to agree upon what is good and just?

A final element of the citation that started this part of the argument must be explored before moving on. Socrates implies that these scenes from the *Iliad* told by Homer may or may not have a hidden sense. If the hidden sense Socrates alludes to consists of the conclusions to which I have pointed, the reason that Socrates does not state his case openly is simple. The questions that are raised by a careful examination of these allusions amount to heresy. (Of course, one of the charges upon which Socrates was convicted was worshipping gods different than those of the city). If the very origins of the gods are incongruous with an education that will encourage men to be pious, courageous, and moderate, qualities usually assigned to the just man, the theology of the city cannot support justice and the laws founded upon that theology cannot hope to be just. Thus, Socrates would have no choice but to hide his meaning for fear of reprisal from the city.

There also is a second possibility of what Socrates could have meant by “hidden” that does not preclude the first explanation, if we think what has been said by Socrates about the nature of the fictional guardians also applies to men. He claims that the men who will benefit from this education must in nature be like noble dogs that “possess sharp senses, speed to catch what they perceive, and finally, strength if they have to fight it out with what they have caught” (*Republic* 375a). In short, the one who will benefit from this education “will in his nature be philosophic, spirited, swift and strong” (*Republic* 376c). These statements would imply that only a few men would benefit from this education. What Socrates means by hidden could imply that those men who lack these qualities will not grasp the importance of the citations, nor will they understand their implications, even though they possess in their memory all of Homer’s stories. The men who lack these qualities might be capable only of a literal understanding of the stories they are told, and the meanings are hidden only in the sense that their non-philosophic nature prevents them from grasping the importance of the tales told to them by the poets.

These two possibilities complement each other if it is possible that the non-philosophic men would take Socrates’ simple statement about the nature of the gods as heresy because of their inability to go beyond a literal understanding of the tales they were told. This possibility not only explains why Socrates would illustrate his teaching with a fictional education presented to fictional guardians, but it explains why he uses such a large number of specific citations when explaining what it is that the guardians should not be taught. Men who are remotely philosophic will begin to question what they learned from poetry about the gods while the non-philosophic men will not be able to accuse Socrates of worshipping gods different from those of the city. Socrates never denies that the gods exist or that they take an interest in the lives of mortals. He only claims that what the poets have said about the gods leads men to become unjust. His accusation is not directed at the gods, but at the poets from whom we know the gods.

Socrates continues his argument concerning piety by claiming that it must be established that the god is not the cause of everything for men but only the good: "... of the bad things, some other causes must be sought and not the god" (*Republic* 380b). I understand Socrates to mean that when men lay the blame for their suffering upon the gods, they excuse themselves from any responsibility for their own actions. For human beings to be affected by laws, they must accept responsibility for their own actions. For these reasons Socrates claims that the following citations from the *Iliad* must not be accepted:

We mustn't accept Homer's -- or any other poet's -- foolishly making this mistake about the gods and saying that:

Two jars stand on Zeus' threshold  
Full of dooms -- the one of good  
the other of wretched;

and the man to whom Zeus gives a mixture of both,

At one time happens on evil,  
At another good;

but the man to whom he doesn't give a mixture, but the second pure,

Evil misery, drives him over the divine earth [*Iliad* XXIV  
527-32];

nor that Zeus is a dispenser to us

of good and evil alike [*Iliad* IV 84]

And, as to the violations of oaths and truces that Pandarus committed, if someone says Athena and Zeus were responsible for its happening [*Iliad* IV 70ff.], we'll not praise him; nor must the young be allowed to hear that Themis and Zeus were responsible for the strife and contention among the gods [*Iliad* XX 1-74] (*Republic* 379d-380a).

All of these citations support the idea that the gods randomly distribute both joy and evil to men without any sense of reward or punishment. If that is true there can be no basis for human law, because men cannot be held accountable for the consequences of their actions. Socrates' claim that some source other than the gods must be sought for the bad things that happen to men implies that although Socrates recognizes that evil events befall good and bad men alike, he realizes that the idea that suffering is randomly distributed leads men to believe that there is no reason why being just should be preferred over being unjust. For if good and evil are randomly distributed, then no benefit can be derived from being just, and no punishment will be suffered for being unjust.

On the surface all four of the citations support Socrates' claim that the poets encourage the idea that man is not responsible for his own suffering. The first citation quotes Achilles explaining human suffering to Priam. Homer attributes the second citation to the Achaians who are preparing for battle, and the third citation refers to Zeus commanding Athene to encourage Pandarus to violate the truce between the Trojans and Achaians and fire an arrow against Menelaos, who is about to settle the question of Helen in single combat with Paris. The last citation



again refers to Zeus encouraging the gods to join in the battle on whichever side they see fit. All of the citations reveal the gods to be taking an active role in the distribution of evils to men. Achilles claims that gods make men suffer. The warriors claim that war or peace depends upon the whims of the gods. The third citation reveals the direct involvement of the gods in renewing the fighting between the Trojans and the Argives. And the fourth citation refers to Zeus' commanding Themis to draw the gods together in council so that the gods can be encouraged to join in the battle. Two points strike the attentive reader. The first point is, Achilles explains that human suffering is the result of the gods' arbitrary intervention in human affairs, when in fact it is his prayer to his mother and her subsequent plea to Zeus that sets into motion the events that take the lives of Achilles' companion, Patroklos, and Priam's son, Hektor. The second point is that every negative example of the gods' intervention in human affairs comes from the *Iliad*.

The reliance on the *Iliad* for these negative examples intrigues the reader who remembers that Zeus is quoted near the beginning of the *Odyssey*, "Oh for shame, how the mortals put the blame on us/ Gods, for they say evils come from us, but it is they, rather, /Who by their own recklessness win sorrow beyond what is given" (*Odyssey* I 32-4).

Reflection on the difference between the two epics continually returns to one major distinction. From the suitors to Odysseus' companions to Odysseus himself, all of the men who suffer in the *Odyssey* bring suffering upon themselves, while, with a few exceptions, those who suffer in the *Iliad* are the victims of fate. The deaths of Patroklos and Hektor both come about with the assistance of the gods. The deaths in battle are increased because of the gods' wanton involvement, and the fighting is renewed when the gods encourage a mortal to violate a truce. In the *Odyssey* men are no longer at war. They reap the consequences of their actions with little interference from the gods. In the end, those characters who have remained loyal and displayed virtue are rewarded. The swineherd, Penelope, Telemachos, and even Odysseus reap the benefits of being loyal, patient, moderate, slow to anger and obedient, while the suitors, the unfaithful servants, and Odysseus' immoderate companions who disobey the commands of Odysseus and the gods are punished. It would seem, then, that the *Odyssey* is better suited to supporting the idea that men are responsible for their own sufferings.

Although it is a little premature to declare that Socrates prefers Odysseus to Achilles because Socrates does not mention Zeus' statement about mortal misunderstanding of fate, the previous citations do show some hesitation on the part of Socrates to accept Achilles and the *Iliad* as examples of what men should be taught. And if Socrates intends to modify the interlocutors' understanding of justice, we can begin to see how Socrates is teaching by using his interlocutors' memory of the poetry of Homer.

After Socrates establishes that in order for men to be pious the gods must be understood to be the cause of all that is good for human beings and not what is evil,



he claims that a god should not be portrayed as a “wizard, able treacherously to reveal himself at different times in different ideas, at one time actually himself changing and passing from his own form into many shapes, at another time deceiving us and making us think such things about him” (*Republic* 380d). As it is argued, if a god is the cause of all that is good, any transformation would by necessity be into a worse form. And “since, as it seems, each of them [the gods] is as fair and as good as possible, he remains forever simply in his own shape” (*Republic* 381c). According to Socrates’ argument, if men are to be pious the gods can never be shown to be less than the cause of all that is good, and their transformation would imply that the gods are capable of deforming themselves into something worse than the good. Therefore, Socrates claims that Homer should not be allowed to say, “the gods, like wandering strangers/ Take on every sort of shape and visit the cities” [*Odyssey* XVII 485-6] (*Republic* 381d). According to Socrates’ argument, this quote should be censored because it supports the idea that the gods can transform themselves into something less than the source of the good. Those familiar with the *Odyssey* would know that the quote continues, “. . . watching to see which men keep the laws, and which are violent” (*Odyssey* XVII 487). They also would know that the citation is not Homer speaking as a narrator but one of the unjust suitors chastising Antinoos, the leader of the suitors, for hitting the beggar with a footstool. Furthermore, they would recognize the irony in the suitor’s claim that the beggar might be a disguised god, because the beggar actually is a disguised Odysseus. Odysseus’ disguise enables him to move freely among the suitors determining whether or not they are just. The divine judgement that the suitors fear is transformed into human judgement and execution by Odysseus’ transformation. Ironically, through his base transformation, Odysseus learns what only the gods supposedly could know. He learns who is just, who is unjust, and what motivates men to action.

Reflection on the original context of the citation reveals the deeper meaning of what Socrates intends the interlocutors to learn about the transformation of the gods. According to the logic expressed by the suitors, the edicts of the gods are to be adhered to only out of fear of punishment. In addition, the gods cannot possibly know when men are being just or unjust without disguising themselves and personally testing them. In short, the suitors conclude from the idea that the gods can transform themselves that men should be just only for fear of punishment, and that their actions and motives can be hidden from the gods. When the idea that the gods can be bribed with votive offerings is added to these misconceptions, it is easy to see how Homer can be said to support the idea that injustice is preferable to justice. But when it is remembered that it is one of the unjust suitors who expresses this particular idea, and that this suitor along with all of the others is punished for his unjust behavior, not by a god, but by a man who transforms into a lesser form, those familiar with Homer’s works begin to see at least that the *Odyssey* supports the idea that men are responsible for what befalls them.

Once again we see how Socrates’ careful selection of citations from Homer’s



works, placed in the correct context of the *Republic*, compels the interlocutors to examine the roots of their understanding of justice and to modify that understanding. As a consequence of this particular examination, the interlocutors must begin to reject the negative conception of justice under which men adhere to the law only for fear of punishment. They also must begin to accept that men are not merely victims of evil that the gods randomly distribute, but are responsible for the consequences that befall them.

This reading of the *Odyssey* discourages men from attaching themselves to the law in the negative sense of fearing punishment, and encourages them to attach themselves to the law and the gods because the gods are the source of all that is good. This idea is underscored when we recall that Socrates claims that the poets must say about anyone who is punished by a god:

the god's works were just and good, and these people profited by being punished. But the poet mustn't be allowed to say those who pay the penalty are wretched and the one who did it was a god. If, however, he should say that the bad men were wretched because they needed punishment and that in paying the penalty they were benefited by the god, it must be allowed (*Republic* 380b).

A belief in gods who disguise themselves encourages the wrong kind of piety. Therefore, Socrates' argument supports the removal of the citation concerning the transformation of the gods. However, in its original context, the quote concerning the transformation of the gods supports a very different idea. Those familiar with Homer's works recognize that the citation illustrates how a transformation or lie can be useful for men who are trying to determine whether or not other men truly are just, and it illustrates how a deception can be used to gain an upper hand against an enemy. The suitors are not punished by a transforming god, but by a man who disguises himself in order that he might know the minds of others. In all of its aspects, the punishment of the suitors is an example of human justice winning out over injustice. Their punishment encourages other men to view their own joys and sufferings as consequences of their own actions instead of random distributions of the gods. As Socrates has reminded his audience with the previous citations, Achilles is the character who claims that evils are randomly distributed by the gods, while Odysseus shows, through his attempt to test the suitors, that men are the authors of their own successes and sorrows. And even though the interlocutors agree that the citations should be excised when divine intervention is the subject, those who reflect on the citation's original context would want to see it reinstated because, properly understood, it portrays the impiety and flawed understanding that leads the suitors to commit injustices. As a result of their examination of their formative poetry, the interlocutors are obliged to reform their understanding of the quote that supports the idea that the gods are capable of transforming themselves.

Socrates concludes his argument concerning piety by explaining what it

means to hold a lie in one's soul. After claiming that the gods would not want to transform themselves or give mortals the impression that they can do so, because that would be tantamount to the worst kind of lie, he explains what he understands a lie to be.

“. . . to lie and to have lied to the soul about the things that are, and to be unlearned, and to have and to hold a lie there is what everyone would least accept . . . . [what] would most correctly be called truly a lie -- the ignorance in the soul of the man who has been lied to” (*Republic* 382b).

I understand Socrates to mean that the worst kind of lie is an ignorance in the soul. Ignorance, as defined here by Socrates, is not knowing the truth. This definition of a lie would imply that anyone who accepts the stories concerning the gods and models their life upon those stories has been lied to, and as a result of hearing those stories holds a lie in their soul. The ignorance in the soul of a man is the result of accepting the half-truths of poetry for truth itself. In short, anyone who fails to go beyond the stories they were told in their youth about the nature of justice possesses an ignorant soul. As Socrates' audience considers the comments made in reference to the importance of telling the appropriate tales to children, they have to question whether or not they are ignorant in their own souls from having listened to the tales of Homer and Hesiod.

In showing why the gods never would need employ lies, Socrates also reveals their appropriate uses. Lies are useful when they are “used against enemies, and, as a preventive, like a drug, for so-called friends when from madness or some folly they attempt to do something bad” (*Republic* 382d). Mortals also tell lies “because we don't know where the truth about ancient things lies -- likening the lie to the truth as best we can,” we make the lie useful (*Republic* 382d). Socrates applies this standard of reasoning to the gods and comes up with no reason for the gods to lie. They cannot be afraid of enemies so they have no need of a strategic lie. The gods' friends cannot possibly go mad so there is no need for a preventive lie. And since the gods are immortal they cannot possibly be ignorant about the past. To say such things would mean that the gods are less than the source of the good for men.

The utility of a lie for mortals, however, is another matter. Lies can be useful against enemies, lulling them into a false sense of superiority, as Odysseus' example shows. In that sense it would be useful to deceive men. Not returning an entrusted weapon to a friend who is not in his right mind also clearly would be a useful lie. But the third useful lie is the most intriguing. Because we are mortal, it is impossible to know with any certainty what happened before we mounted the stage of existence. Therefore, the most important lies human beings can tell are those that inform us about the distant past.

In order for men to explain the past they must resort to rumor and fictional tales. As tales are passed from one generation to the next, they take on the appearance of expressing fact. And once established as fact, they appear to relate



the truth. For mortals, the texts that were written in the past or the stories that were passed down orally are to some extent immortal. Because they were written before the current generation came into existence, these stories possess the greatest authority for answering the questions of what happened in the past. Therein lies the utility and the danger of poetry. Men use their understanding of the past to guide their actions in the present. If the stories told by poets to explain the past induce men to believe that the gods are unjust, or that injustice is to be preferred over justice, men are much more likely to become unjust themselves. Men who rely on the stories of the poets for examples of how to live their lives might not see the folly of injustice and might act on this poetically induced madness. Because Socrates understands how this third kind of lie operates on the soul, he encourages men to modify their understanding of what they learned from poetry. The men who find the common opinion concerning injustice attractive have accepted the poets' stories of the past as truth. Socrates knows that presenting the reasons that the gods would not find lies to be useful would force his interlocutors to reflect on why human beings would find lies useful. Not only are the interlocutors encouraged to reflect on what drives men mad, and why men have enemies, but they are obliged to reflect on why men concern themselves with what happened before their generation was born. If they previously had accepted what Homer had stated as truth, they now are obliged to question the validity of his authority regarding what happened in the past, and in questioning his authority to speak of ancient things they now can question freely the system of justice derived from their reading of Homer.

Socrates illustrates what should not be said about the past by stating, "we'll not praise Zeus' sending the dream to Agamemnon" [*Iliad* II 1-34] (*Republic* 383a). The dream to which Socrates refers is a false dream sent to Agamemnon by Zeus that deludes Agamemnon into believing that the gods now will let the Achaians take Troy. Agamemnon plays into Zeus' hands by rousing the men to battle the Trojans without Achilles. Zeus intends for the Achaians to fail miserably in order that they will understand how much they need Achilles. The idea is that the failure of the Achaians to take Troy will cause them to restore the honor to Achilles that he believes he so richly deserves, so that his martial skills might save them. This clearly is an example of a god lying to a mortal so that evil might befall men, in response to a prayer made to a god by another mortal. But if the veracity of the entire story can be questioned, the interlocutors are free to comprehend Homer as an allegory and reinterpret sections like the one mentioned above so that the stories support an appropriate teaching on justice. Or they are free to reject the story completely if it fails to encourage the right behavior.

In either case, remembering the original context of Socrates' citation obliges the interlocutors to consider further what men have learned from Homer about lying and the gods. In order to remain consistent with the theology that Socrates has proposed for the guardians, the interlocutors must reject the idea that the *Iliad* is a factual depiction of events that occurred before they were born. In rejecting



this conception, they now are open to understanding the epics as allegorical moral tales whose utility is found in their educative properties, but nonetheless stories that adults must look beyond as they face questions of justice. Socrates' explanation of the three types of lies has set the interlocutors up for this new understanding of poetry.

So we find at the end of the first section regarding poetic education that the interlocutors are prepared to understand Homer's poetry as formative tales possessing truth only in the moral teachings they impart. When combined with the arguments that have gone before, the interlocutors' continued acceptance of the tales told by Homer and Hesiod as truth oblige them to accept the vulgar conception of justice that comes from a literal reading of the texts. Even without dwelling on the question of the possible truth of Homer's tales, if the interlocutors have been following the conversation, they understand that accepting Homer's tales as truth means that they also must accept the possession of a lie within their souls that amounts to ignorance. In closing the discussion of the theological teachings imparted by poetry, Socrates claims that if the descriptions of the transformation of gods are never taught to the guardians, they will be "god fearing and divine insofar as human being can possibly be" (*Republic* 382c). However, Socrates no longer means that men should fear the gods of the Greek epics. The temperamental, vengeful and jealous gods of Homer and Hesiod's poetry have been replaced by an idea that god is the source of all that is good, and that men are the authors of their own suffering. Instead of fearing the caprices of the gods, men now should begin to fear turning away from the gods who are the source of all that is good. It also must be remembered that the teaching on theology is not intended for the guardians but for the interlocutors, who must learn anew from the tales in which they were educated. Their acceptance of this new teaching will encourage them to "honor gods and ancestors and not take lightly their friendship with each other" (*Republic* 386a). Through the description of the fictional guardians' education, Socrates has encouraged the interlocutors to become pious and slow to anger. And it is upon this theological foundation that Socrates builds the virtues of moderation, courage and obedience.

### Death, Demons and Heroes

Socrates begins the part of his argument that will foster courage, moderation, and obedience by citing a series of seven quotes from both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* that speak disparagingly about death and Hades. It is through these quotes that the interlocutors are encouraged to examine the meaning of courage and re-evaluate the fictional accomplishments of both Odysseus and Achilles. Simply stated by Socrates, courage is tantamount to being "fearless in the face of death and choos[ing] death in battles above defeat and slavery" (*Republic* 386b). As this concept is developed through the use of Homeric allusions, courage comes to mean more than a willingness to sacrifice one's life in battle. It becomes a quality that



belongs to the good and happy man.

The first of the seven citations regarding courage to be excised is Achilles' statement "I would rather be on the soil, a serf to another, to a man without lot whose means of life are not great, than rule over all the dead who have perished [*Odyssey* IX 489-91]" (*Republic* 368c). This statement is the response given to Odysseus' praise of Achilles when the two heroes meet in Hades. For the guardians, the purpose of censoring this statement is quite clear. The greatest hero should not be heard to say that the life of a slave is preferable to a heroic death. But for the interlocutors who know Homer's tales, the meaning is more complex. The conversation between the two heroes is occasioned by Odysseus' journey to the underworld. Odysseus goes to Hades at the command of Circe so that he finally might return home. In this context we find Odysseus living up to two of the models being suggested for the guardians. He obeys the gods by adhering to Circe's commands, and he displays courage in facing the dead. He conquers his fears for the good of returning home. Again Odysseus proves to be more worthy of emulation than Achilles.

The second and third citations come from the *Iliad*. The second citation is a reference to Aidoneus, the lord of the dead. Socrates quotes Homer describing Aidoneus' fear, "lest his house appear to mortals and immortals dreadful, moldy, and the gods hate it" [*Iliad* XX 64-5] (*Republic* 386d). Aidoneus fears that when the gods enter the battle between the Trojans and the Achaians, the violence of their actions might open the gates of Hades, revealing the place where souls go after death to be a horrible place. In addition to showing life at any cost is preferable to death, this quote refers again to Zeus' encouragement of the gods to join in the battle among men. If this element of the *Iliad* remains a part of the communal memory, supporting the belief that gods join in mortal battles, men not only will lose respect for the gods, but they will shy away from battles as well. This cowardice will be supported not only by the fear that men cannot fight against the gods, but by the belief that the soul enters a dreadful place after death. If men are to be encouraged to risk their lives in defense of their political communities, such statements obviously must be rejected.

The third citation is another example of Achilles saying something unbecoming a hero. In his response to a visit by the phantom of Patroklos, Achilles cries out, "Oh woe so there is in Hades' house, too, both soul and phantom, but no mind at all" [*Iliad* XXIII 103-4] (*Republic* 386d). Socrates chooses this citation, because Patroklos' visit is occasioned by Achilles' excessive lamentation and his refusal to bury Patroklos. Achilles displays a lack of self control and a disregard for human custom. Both responses are unseemly in a man who would be good and just in his community. And once again Achilles proves to be a less than perfect model of courage and moderation. Not only is he immoderate in giving over to lamenting his friend who should be praised for having died defending the Achaians in battle, but his disparaging comments about the condition of the soul after death imply that sacrificing one's life for a cause is a futile gesture.



The fourth citation returns to the *Odyssey* and Odysseus' journey to the underworld. Socrates quotes Circe telling Odysseus of Teiresias that "he alone possesses understanding; the others are fluttering shadows" [*Odyssey* X 495] (*Republic* 386d). Circe is explaining to Odysseus what he must do to win passage home, and advises him to heed the word of Teiresias. Odysseus rises to this challenge, displaying the moderation of obedience and the moderation of self-mastery. He not only adheres to the commands of the goddess and the dead seer, but conquers the mortal fear of facing the dead. The proof that this is Socrates' meaning in choosing this citation is found when Teiresias' advice is remembered. He tells Odysseus, "you might come back after much suffering, / if you can contain your own desire, and contain your companions'" (*Odyssey* XI 105-6). In addition, Odysseus is told that if he adheres to this advice he also will be able to punish the suitors. Ostensibly, the quote chosen by Socrates shows the condition of the dead to be unpleasant at best. But when the quote is examined in its original context, it once again reveals Odysseus displaying the qualities of moderation and courage incident to the nature of good men.

The fifth and sixth citations are from the *Iliad* and reveal poetic images of the horrors of death. The fifth citation reads, "the soul flew from his limbs and went to Hades wailing his fate, leaving manliness and the bloom of youth" [*Iliad* XVI 856-7], while the sixth citation reads, "under the earth like smoke went the gibbering soul" [*Iliad* XXIII 100-1] (*Republic* 386d-387a). Both citations are references to the soul of Patroklos, and both citations portray death as a lamentable experience. Yet, once again, the importance of the citations is revealed only when they are examined in their original context. The two quotes reveal not only the immoderation of the best men in the *Iliad*, they also remind us of the unjust intervention in human affairs by the gods. The first quote describes Patroklos at the moment of his death, disguised as Achilles and killed by Apollo, Euphorbus, and Hektor. Patroklos dons Achilles' armor and joins the battle, because he no longer can sit idly by witnessing the Achaians' heavy losses at the hands of the Trojans. Achilles permits Patroklos to wear his armor and aid the Achaians, with one stipulation: "but obey to the end this word I put upon your attention so that you can win, for me, great honor and glory in the sight of all the Danaans, so they will bring back to me the lovely girl, and give me shining gifts in addition. When you have driven them from the ships, come back" (*Iliad* XVI 83-87). With Patroklos disguised as Achilles, the Achaians rally and drive the Trojans from their ships. Patroklos disobeys Achilles' command and leads the Argives further into battle. Zeus permits Apollo to strike Patroklos in order that the death of Sarpedon, one of Zeus' mortal children, will be avenged. Apollo strikes Patroklos from behind leaving him stunned. Euphorbus hits Patroklos with a spear, and then Hektor rushes in to finish him off. This death could have been avoided had Patroklos heeded the command of Achilles, or had Achilles taken pity on his companions and joined in the battle. In either case, the citation shows examples of human immoderation. Neither Achilles nor Patroklos seem to possess the moderation of



self-mastery, and Patroklos, in turn, possesses the immoderation of disobedience. Moreover, the gods bring destruction to mortals not out of justice, but out of nepotism. Not only do the events surrounding Patroklos' death in this context destroy the credibility of two of the great heroes of Homer's epic, but this citation shows suffering to be distributed randomly and wantonly by the gods. Neither case encourages the belief that human beings should risk their lives in defense of their own community. In fact, it discourages men from entering battle if they believe they might be struck down by gods as well as by mortals.

The sixth citation, as stated above, is again a reference to the *Iliad*. It refers specifically to the visit to Achilles by Patroklos' shade. Ostensibly, the reprehensible nature of the citation is that the description of the condition of the soul after death strikes terror in the hearts of men who should be encouraged to fear death more than slavery. However, on closer examination by those who are familiar with Homer's works, Achilles' immoderation once again is seen to be the issue. Achilles has given himself over to excessive lamentation and as a result is chastised by Patroklos' shade: "you sleep, Achilles; you have forgotten me; but you were not careless of me when I lived, but only in death. Bury me as quickly as may be" (*Iliad* XXIII 69-71). Achilles, in giving over to lamentation, has neglected the customs of men, and in doing so harms the soul of Patroklos.

The seventh citation concerning courage and moderation turns once more to the *Odyssey*. Socrates claims that the following should be excised from Homer's poetry:

Like bats who in a corner of an enchanted cave  
Fly gibbering when one falls off  
The cluster hanging from the rock, and  
Rise holding on to each other,  
So they went together gibbering [*Odyssey* XXIV 6-10] (*Republic* 387a).

The souls referred to are those of the suitors who are killed by Odysseus after he returns to Ithaka. The description of the migration of the souls of the suitors immediately precedes a discussion between Agamemnon and Achilles concerning the nature of their deaths. Achilles' death in battle is praised, while Agamemnon's death at the hands of his wife is lamented. The suitors, in describing their own deaths, lay the blame for their destruction at the feet of Penelope and not as a consequence of their own injustice. Their unwillingness to accept culpability in their own destruction supports the severe punishment meted out by Odysseus. The lack of remorse shown by the suitors for their actions reveals that they were unreformable. It reveals that Odysseus' judgement and execution of justice were correct, and it supports the idea that human beings should be punished by other human beings for their unjust actions. Odysseus' obedience to both Circe and Teiresias and the ability to moderate his own desires enabled him to punish the suitors justly. It is the possession of the virtues that Socrates praises that enabled Odysseus to risk his life in defense of his household even though he was grossly

outnumbered by unjust men. To those who are familiar with Homer's works, Odysseus becomes the model to embrace, not Achilles.

Taken altogether, the seven citations used by Socrates to establish what would encourage the guardians to be courageous and moderate reveal a clear preference for Homer's latter work. According to the close examination of the citations used, the *Odyssey* is to be preferred because its hero conquers his fears, and justly avenges himself against his enemies. He is able to accomplish this because he obeys the gods and controls his own desires. At this point it would seem that the *Odyssey* is more conducive than the *Iliad* to establishment of the idea that joy and suffering are not distributed randomly by the gods, but are the direct consequences of human action.

Moreover, the above citations reveal why courage should be preferred to honor. As exemplified by Achilles, a life motivated by the pursuit of honor is fundamentally a selfish and unsatisfying pursuit. Honor is dependent upon inferior people in the community offering the only thing they can to the best man in the community, praise. Bestowing honor upon an individual requires that those doing the praising understand their own inferiority and recognize someone else's superiority. In addition, the pursuit of honor demands that an individual excel beyond everyone else. Cooperation between two men to accomplish the same goal only diminishes the amount of honor each one individually receives. And because honor depends upon recognition from others, honor is fundamentally a quality that is beyond the control of the person who wants to be honored.

Courage, on the other hand, depends upon an individual overcoming his own fears. The ultimate courageous act is when a man is willing to face the greatest fear -- the fear of death -- in order that a greater good, such as that of the community, may be advanced. The willingness to sacrifice one's life in defense of a greater cause implies that the man who sacrifices his life understands that without the community his life is not worth living. Socrates' definition of courage as the willingness to face death before succumbing either to defeat or slavery can be valid only if it is understood that a man's life is worth living only in the context of a community. Courageous acts are marked by selfless acts, while honorable acts are marked by the selfish desire to stand alone. Achilles' response to Odysseus in Hades exemplifies the difference. Odysseus praises Achilles' death, telling him "when you were alive, we Argives honored you as we did the gods, and now in this place you have great authority over the dead. Do not grieve, even in death" (*Odyssey* IX 485-6). Achilles' response is the one cited by Socrates as an example that discourages men from becoming courageous. Achilles understands that he still is honored by the living, but his disgust with his death is the result of his understanding that he has lost the opportunity to enjoy the honor that will be bestowed on him by other men. He takes no joy in having helped to destroy Troy and to save the Achaian league. Being a courageous man, Odysseus assumes that if one gives over one's life for a good cause, there would be no regrets in death. A courageous man sees the good in his actions, while the honored man only sees



the good in the manifestation of the honor he receives. The discussion between Agamemnon and Achilles, referred to in the seventh citation concerning courage, says as much. Achilles' dissatisfaction in death is the result of his own selfish attachment to honor. In fact, it seems clear that honor is motivated selfishly while courage can be exercised only in defense of the common good.

Socrates continues his argument concerning courage by telling Adeimantus, "we surely say that a decent man will believe that for the decent man -- who happens to be his comrade -- being dead is not a terrible thing" (*Republic* 387c). He supports this statement by citing six examples from the *Iliad* that should be excised.

Now lying on his [Achilles'] side, now again  
On his belly, and now on his side,  
Then standing upright, roaming distraught along the shore  
of the unharvested sea [*Iliad* XXIV 10-12]

nor taking black ashes in both hands and pouring them over his head [*Iliad* XVIII 23-24], nor crying and lamenting as much as, or in the ways, Homer made him do; nor Priam, a near offspring of the gods, entreating and

Rolling around in dung,  
Calling out to each man by name [*Iliad* XXII 414-15]

And yet far more than this, we'll ask them under no condition to make gods who lament and say,

Ah me, wretched me, ah me, unhappy mother of the best  
man [*Iliad* XVII 54]

But if they do make the gods so, at least they shouldn't dare to make so unlikely an imitation of the greatest of the gods as when he says,

Ah woe, dear is the man I see with my own eyes being  
Chased around the town, and my heart is grieved [*Iliad*  
XXII 168-9]

and,

Oh, oh Sarpedon, dearest of men to me, is fated to be  
vanquished by Patroklos, Menoitios' son [*Iliad* XVI  
433-4] (*Republic* 388a-d).

All six citations marked for censure are references to the *Iliad*. The first three reveal Achilles behaving inappropriately, the fourth shows Priam behaving in a like manner, while the fifth, and sixth, show gods from the *Iliad* wailing the fate of mortals. Socrates claims that the display of the change in soul that accompanies wailing on the part of heroes and gods in poetry encourages men to give themselves over to emotion immoderately. Every example listed of heroes or gods who are weeping over the fate of another encourages men to believe that death is lamentable. Moreover, the belief that death is lamentable implies that an individual's life is more important than the good of the community. Even if the weeping found in stories provides some vicarious utility for mortals who later hear these stories, the untimeliness of the deaths referred to in these citations encourages men to believe that death is distributed randomly, inconsistent with the idea of a well-ordered and just universe. If it is accepted that death and suffering are

visited upon men randomly, it becomes difficult to accept the idea that a man's life can be sacrificed in defense of a noble cause.

This argument holds true for excessive laughter, as well. Socrates cites the *Iliad* to illustrate this point when he claims:

we won't accept from Homer such things about the gods as,  
Unquenchable laughter rose among the immortal gods,  
When they saw Hephaistos hastening breathlessly  
through the halls [*Iliad* I 599-600] (*Republic* 389a).

This refers to a section cited previously by Socrates. In addition to showing that the gods should not be considered as a source of laughter, Socrates subtly has reminded his readers of his first comments concerning piety. The citation he has chosen to illustrate what should not be said about laughter was previously shown to be damaging to men's piety. The gods are said to laugh at Hephaistos after he tries to prevent Hera from arguing with Zeus over his decision to grant Achilles' request. In this section of Socrates' argument, the gods are presented as laughing at Hephaistos' deformity. Hephaistos was born deformed. The mere existence of a deformed god implies that there is something awry in the order of the universe. Deformity implies an inability to meet a minimum standard. For the gods, that minimum standard would be strength, beauty and understanding. Compared to the other gods in both beauty and strength, Hephaistos is comic. However, Hephaistos compensates for his deformity with his great mechanical talents. His strength lies in his talented hands and exceptional mind, because with his creations he is capable of overcoming stronger gods such as Ares. Socrates already had stated that this scene should be excised because the gods should not be shown to quarrel over the affairs of men. However, he did not say that it should be excised because it encouraged laughter. Laughing at a deformity implies that the person who finds the deformity funny feels superior to the deformed. It implies a community standard of excellence separate and distinct from the standard of the individual. Laughing at a deformity also implies that the amused person discounts any possible worth on the part of the deformed. Hephaistos proves that this assumption is wrong. Using Hephaistos as an example is especially pointed since, despite his deformity, he conquers the physically superior Ares. Add to this the point that Odysseus is known for conquering those who have superior numbers and/or superior physical strength, and it is apparent that once again Socrates is chipping away at the idea that the rule of the strongest is not a sound means of assigning rule. The importance of this will be discussed later, when Odysseus' talents are examined in greater detail.

Once again, all of the negative examples concerning what should not be said to the guardians come from the *Iliad*. And once again a number of the citations refer directly to Achilles. It is at this point in Socrates' argument that he interrupts the discussion of what qualities are sought through this education with a brief



discussion of the utility of lies.

After stating that it must not be accepted that “noteworthy human beings” or gods are said to be overcome by laughter, Socrates adds that

truth must be taken seriously too. For if what we were just saying was correct, and a lie is really useless to gods and useful to human beings as a form of remedy, it's plain that anything of the sort must be assigned to doctors while private men must not put their hands to it . . . . Then it's appropriate for the rulers, if for anyone at all to lie for the benefit of the city in cases involving enemies or citizens (*Republic* 389b).

Having discussed already the importance of the human lie in the previous section, Socrates' intent should be clear. The lies told to men as remedies are those lies that will take away the lie in their souls, or more precisely their ignorance of what is good. As we discovered before, the most powerful lies are the ones that speak with the greatest authority. Those are the tales that have been handed down for generations and seemingly possess truth. This is why Socrates again quotes Homer listing who should not be able to tell tales. Moreover, he claims that anyone caught lying in the city should be punished. Particularly, “anyone of those who are craftsmen, / Whether diviner or doctor of sickness or carpenter of wood” [*Odyssey* XVII 383-4] (*Republic* 389d).

Yet, even here we find a deeper meaning when we consider what the interlocutors would know from their understanding of Homer. The line in Homer continues, “or inspired singer, one who can give delight by his singing” (*Odyssey* XVII 385). Socrates deliberately omits the storyteller, because it is the story teller who through his occupation is capable of discouraging the lies that are possessed in the souls of men, provided, of course, one tells the right tales. Furthermore, the citation quotes Eumaios, Odysseus' loyal servant, chastising Antinoos, the leader of the suitors, for verbally assaulting the beggar, the disguised Odysseus. The irony of the suitors abusing Odysseus in his own household is comic except for the underlying tones that already have been discussed, in the section on piety, concerning how Odysseus overcomes the limits of human knowledge. As the scene to which Socrates alludes is brought forth in the minds of those familiar with Homer, the interlocutors cannot help but reflect on how Odysseus, treated as a laughable figure, overcomes superior numbers and force to punish the suitors.

We see in this section, which interrupts the flow of the argument, a reaffirmation of two of the most important elements of Socrates' presentation of the fictional guardian's education. By again drawing Adeimantus' attention to the importance of an appropriate lie for men who are to be just and by illustrating what he means with a reference to the disguised Odysseus, Socrates reinforces the ideas that the tales men are told in their youth inform their understanding of justice and that mere force is not a legitimate claim to rule. In both the allusion to Hephaistos and the allusion to Eumaios chastising Antinoos, Socrates encourages the interlocutors to examine the degree to which rule by force is undone by clever men.



Socrates returns to the main line of the argument when he asks, “won’t our youngsters need moderation? . . . [and] Aren’t these the most important elements of moderation for the multitude: being obedient to the rulers, and being themselves rulers of the pleasures of drink, sex, and eating?” (*Republic* 389d-e) By claiming that these virtues are for the multitude, Socrates implies that these are citizen virtues, or, more aptly, the virtues of men who are to live in community together. The first form of moderation is obedience to the laws and the second form is self control. The first form of moderation clearly is necessary for a political community and runs counter to the ideas of honor and superiority that Achilles embodies. The second form of moderation is the one most clearly exemplified by “long enduring” Odysseus.

To illustrate the kind of moderation he means, Socrates claims, “it’s fine to say the sort of thing Diomedes says in Homer, /Friend keep quiet and obey my word/ [*Iliad* IV 412] . . . [and] /Breathing might the Achaians went, /In silence, afraid of their leaders” [*Iliad* III 8] (*Republic* 389e). To clarify his understanding of immoderate disobedience, he cites Achilles’ insult of Agamemnon in the opening of the *Iliad*: “Heavy with wine, with eyes of a dog and heart of a deer” [*Iliad* I 225] (*Republic* 389e). The first citation quotes a noble man demanding obedience of the ruled for the good of the community, and the second citation shows men obeying their leaders in preparation for battle. Both are encouraging examples found within the *Iliad*. For this reason the third citation is that much more disgusting. Socrates does not attribute the third quote to Achilles, but anyone who knows the *Iliad* can not help but recognize that this is Achilles’ insult of Agamemnon. Achilles lashes out at Agamemnon for taking Briseis from him. Briseis was given to Achilles as a reward for having excelled in battle. She is more than a concubine. She is the manifestation of the honor that was awarded Achilles. Achilles’ immoderate response reveals an excessive attachment to the trophies of honor instead of an attachment to personal excellence or the good of the community. In this context the interlocutors are compelled to reflect on the importance of excellence. If they accept Achilles as their model, they are obliged to accept that power and honor should be sought for the sake of acquiring rewards. The problem with this approach already has been established in the distinction between courage and honor.

As a means of encouraging the moderation of self-mastery, Socrates claims that the young should not hear

the wisest of men [Odysseus] say that, in his opinion, the finest of all things is when:

The tables are full of bread and meat  
And the wine bearer draws wine from the bowl  
And brings it to pour in the goblets [*Odyssey* IX 8-10]  
(*Republic* 390 a-b).

On the surface this clearly would be an example of Odysseus praising a life lived



in pursuit of pleasure. But when it is examined in its original context, those familiar with Homer's works see a deeper meaning. In the *Odyssey*, the quote is preceded by, "O great Alkinoos, . . . it is a good thing to listen to a singer . . . when festivity holds sway among all the populace, and the feasters are sitting in order and listening to the singer" (*Odyssey* IX 2-8). Socrates cites Odysseus' prelude to the tale he tells to the Phaiakian people of how he came to their land ten years after he had set out for home from the Trojan war. Once again we see Socrates omitting a reference to storytellers. The story that follows this citation is Odysseus' tale to the Phaiakians, while the tale that preceded it was a story about the gods told by Demodokus, a blind singer. Demodokus' tale tells of the cuckolding of Hephaistos by Ares and Aphrodite. It also tells how Hephaistos avenges himself against his wife and her lover. The Phaiakians are amused by this tale of adultery and revenge among the gods, but they are moved by Odysseus' tale of overcoming adversity. All in all the tale Odysseus tells continually exemplifies how Odysseus was able to overcome adversity through courage and moderation. The difference between the lessons learned from Odysseus' tale and the lessons imparted from Demodokus' tale must spring immediately to the minds of the interlocutors, who could not help but notice that Socrates deliberately had not mentioned the singer of songs when he included references to a fine life among the things that young men should not hear. In fact, the omission seems to imply that it is a good thing for young men to hear tales from poets, provided they are the right tales.

The tale told by Odysseus encompasses the central books of the *Odyssey*. Through these tales Odysseus recounts his journey home and the delays he has suffered, as briefly sketched herein. Odysseus loses a few men when they refuse to obey his orders on a pirate mission on the way home. Odysseus comes to the land of the lotus eaters and he must force his men to continue their journey home. They come to the land of the Cyclops and as a result of his curiosity, Odysseus and his men find themselves prisoners of Polyphemos, who eats them two at a time. Through the trick of naming himself nobody, Odysseus overcomes Polyphemos by blinding him. Odysseus learns too late that the Cyclops is the child of Poseidon. Polyphemos prays to his father for vengeance and Poseidon sets his powers against Odysseus. Odysseus enjoys the hospitality of Aiolos, the god of the winds who puts all the winds in a bag except the one that will push his ships home. After nine straight days of steady sailing, Odysseus falls asleep within sight of land. His companions think that the bag containing the winds actually contains treasure, so taking advantage of the sleeping Odysseus they open the bag, releasing the winds, and lose their homecoming. After losing more men to the Laistrygones, a race of carnivorous giants related to the Cyclops, Odysseus and the remainder of his men land on Circe's island. Half of his men are transformed into pigs. By following Hermes' advice, Odysseus is able to overcome Circe and get his men restored. After staying on her island for a year, his men persuade Odysseus to continue the journey home. Circe tells Odysseus that he can return home if he first visits Teiresias in Hades in order that he might receive instruction on how to overcome



Poseidon's wrath. They go to Hades where Odysseus learns from Teiresias that he must moderate his own desires and those of his men if ever he is to return home. Odysseus and his men successfully pass the Sirens, and Skylla and Charybdis, only to find themselves stuck on Helios' island. After a month the men no longer can take their hunger, and, against Odysseus' express order, slaughter Helios' immortal cattle. Everyone but Odysseus feasts upon them. The wind picks up. The men set sail. Poseidon wrecks the ship, killing everyone but Odysseus, who washes ashore on Kalypso's island, where he is kept as a love toy for several years until he finally is permitted to build a raft to sail home. His raft is wrecked and he washes ashore on the Phaiakians' island.

The story Odysseus recounts seems to impart that he was able to survive all of these trials only because he was obedient to the gods, courageous, and capable of moderating his own desires. The tale demonstrates all of the virtues that Socrates would have the guardians and the interlocutors possess. In addition we find repeated the idea that a clever man is capable of overcoming superior force every time. It encourages the idea that the qualities of the mind should be preferred to physical strength as a means of attaining a desired end. It also seems to encourage a preference for acquiring rule through the use of reason, not force. From what is said by Adeimantus, the common understanding of justice clearly equates ruling offices with happiness. Socrates' careful selection of allusions encourages the interlocutors to desire Odysseus' qualities over Achilles' because his intellectual talents are shown to prevail.

Continuing what should not be said to the guardians so they might achieve the moderation of self-mastery, Socrates censures the passage, "Hunger is the most pitiful way to die and find one's fate" [*Odyssey* XII 342] (*Republic* 390b). As we see from the sketch above, this is not a reference to Odysseus but to Eurylochos, Odysseus' immoderate companion. Eurylochos uses that reasoning to encourage the men to slaughter Helios' cattle and stave off hunger. In an attempt to persuade the other men to join him, he adds to this argument, "let us cut out the best of Helios' cattle and sacrifice them to the immortals . . . and if we ever come back to Ithaka, . . . we will build a rich temple to the sun God Helios" (*Odyssey* XII 342-6). Eurylochos combines two ideas that the interlocutors should find objectionable. The first is that life at any cost is preferable to death. This idea Socrates rejects because it prevents men from being courageous. The second idea is that the gods can be persuaded to overlook unjust actions if the proper sacrifices are made. Adeimantus had objected to this idea for two reasons. The first is that it encouraged men to become unjust, and the second is that the idea was supported by the poets. Thus we see the *Odyssey* as a possible source for the common ideas concerning justice, but like the lines about the transforming gods spoken by the unjust suitors, this citation supporting the vulgar understanding of justice is shown to come from an immoderate and ignoble man. When it is remembered that Odysseus does not succumb to Eurylochos' argument and refrains from eating Helios' cattle, we are more impressed by Odysseus' self-restraint and obedience.



These ideas only can be understood in the context Socrates intended if those people paying attention to the argument were educated through Homer's works. Consequently, Socrates is compelling his interlocutors to reinterpret their understanding of Homer's works by re-presenting these quotes in the context of what moral lessons these stories impart.

To encourage further the moderation of obedience and self-mastery, Socrates decries three more scenes from Homer's works. The first two are:

Zeus, alone and awake, making plans while the other gods and men sleep, easily forgetting all of them because of sexual desire, and so struck when he sees Hera that he isn't even willing to go into the house, but wants to have intercourse right there on the ground, saying that he wasn't so full of desire even when they first went unto one another, 'unbeknownst to their dear parents' [*Iliad* XIV 294-351]. Nor is Hephaistos' binding of Ares and Aphrodite fit, for similar reasons [*Odyssey* VIII 266-ff] (*Republic* 390c).

These two negative examples should not be told because they present the gods as being unable to curb their sexual desires. In the first instance Zeus gives over the plans he is making for the Trojan war when he is seduced by Hera, who merely is trying to occupy Zeus while Athene descends to earth to help the Trojans. Clearly, this example shows that the gods succumb to desire, that they are not in agreement as to the good for themselves or mortals, and that they resort to low forms of treachery to accomplish their own selfish ends. The second story to which Socrates refers is the tale told to the Phaiakians by Demodokus, the blind singer. In that story Hephaistos' wife, Aphrodite, commits adultery with Ares. Hephaistos catches them in the act by devising a system of golden threads that bind the lovers when they go to bed together. Their indiscretion is made public by Hephaistos, who rejects his wife and demands back the gifts that he had given to win her hand. One of two possible lessons is learned from this. One is that the gods are no better than men, and since they give in to their desires, it should not be wondered at when men give in to theirs. The other is that a quick wit and deception can overcome the seemingly superior force. If the former lesson is learned, then the story should be censored immediately. However, if the latter lesson is learned, we can begin to see a movement in the argument that praises the qualities of the mind as superior to force and as a possible legitimation of the right to rule. After all, Hephaistos is weak and deformed while Ares is one of the most powerful gods. When Demodokus finishes his tale, as Homer narrates its effect upon the listeners, "Odysseus enjoyed it in his heart as he listened, as did the others there" (*Odyssey* VIII 365). It seems plausible that Odysseus enjoyed it because he recognized his own talent in Hephaistos' actions, while the Phaiakians enjoyed the story out of prurient interest. In either case the story supports the idea that those who wrong others should be obliged to pay the penalty. And clearly the story in the *Odyssey* is preferable to the one told in the *Iliad*.

The last citation concerning moderation that Socrates brings to the interlocu-



tors' attention is a quote from the *Odyssey* that the guardians supposedly should hear. It reads, "Smiting his breast, he reproached his heart with word.\ Endure, heart; you have endured worse before" [*Odyssey* XX 17-8] (*Republic* 390d). This is spoken by the disguised Odysseus, who is resisting the urge to punish the maids in his household who have taken the suitors as lovers. In order not to give himself away before the time for punishing the suitors is ripe, Odysseus must endure the insult to his household. The guardians would know only that the quote encourages moderation, but the interlocutors would realize that the quote supports the idea that deception can be used to accomplish justice.

If Socrates is trying to encourage the interlocutors to think more highly of the qualities of mind than of the qualities of force (as I persuade myself he is), the argument is sailing into dangerous waters. One of Adeimantus' complaints that occasioned the description of the guardians' education was that successful injustice is made possible by clever men, and that the poets supported this idea. By showing that Odysseus is preferable to Achilles as a model, Socrates reveals a poetically supported preference for intellect over force as a means of acquiring rule. The interlocutors have a tendency to equate ruling offices with personal happiness and the good. It is clear that it does not take much of an intellectual leap at this point to move from a preference for intellectual virtues to the idea that rule is best secured by those who can fool the greatest number of people. It is at this juncture that we see Socrates' intent in so blatantly making a case for Odysseus over Achilles. Being quick of mind is a morally neutral talent. Yet it also is a talent that lends itself to excess, because it enables men to overcome superior force and numbers. For this reason the moderation of self-mastery is most important for the man with the clever mind. He can use this talent to overcome just and unjust men alike. Therefore, a moderate man who happens to be clever is better suited to securing the good for himself and the community than a man who wields great power with impunity. This is why Odysseus is praised more highly than Achilles. The type of rule exemplified by Odysseus is founded in securing the good for himself and his community through the use of intellectual virtues, while Achilles' attachment to honor is selfishly motivated and dissatisfying, because his honor depends on the praise of others.

Having said all that is necessary to encourage the interlocutors to be moderate in their desires, moderate in obedience to their superiors, and courageous even in the face of death, the last references to the *Iliad* hardly seem worth mentioning. The last virtues that Socrates would impress upon the guardians, and through them upon the interlocutors as well, would be to prevent them from being either impious or illiberal. Again, Achilles is cited as possessing both of these undesirable qualities. Socrates claims that it should not be believed that Achilles, the son of a goddess, ever possessed these vices. Yet, just by mentioning these vices in connection with Achilles, Socrates has drawn his audience's attention to the fact that Achilles does possess these flaws.



## Conclusion

One still might ask why Socrates does not just say directly that the *demos* vulgarly has misinterpreted Homer, and that Odysseus is the model upon which justice should be founded. The approach suggested by the question would be in effect literary criticism of Homer. By presenting the allusions to Homer's poetry while discussing the need for telling appropriate tales to young men who are learning about virtue, Socrates is not just criticizing Homer, he is establishing what virtues should be encouraged in men for the good of the city. Because the stories to which Socrates alludes never will be known by the guardians, the effect that the allusions should have on men clearly are intended for the interlocutors, who are obliged to ask themselves what they have learned from Homer's poetry. Forcing his audience into self-examination enables Socrates to overcome the persuasive power of the vulgar praise of injustice, because this new teaching is founded in the same source that the *demos* claims legitimizes their perverted understanding of the good -- Homer's poetry.

All of the examples that Socrates employs to illustrate what should and should not be said to the guardians in order that they might be pious, slow to anger, courageous, and moderate conspire both to confirm and rescind Adeimantus' accusation against the effect poetry has on men. As Homer's works had been read by men, they did support the idea that the unjust life is preferable to the just life. Read in that light, those works should be rejected. But when the interlocutors are compelled to examine what they have learned from Homer's works, the stories are made to have a very different effect. Prior to Socrates' discussion of an appropriate education for the fictional guardians of the city in speech, Achilles had represented the virtues of individual excellence. Once Socrates is finished with the education of the guardians, the life of honor that Achilles exemplifies is shown to be incapable of securing the good for either the individual or the community. And while Odysseus had represented quick wit and deception, talents which clearly can serve the unjust man, by the time Socrates finishes his description of what virtues should be instilled in the guardians, Odysseus is shown to possess all of the virtues that both the fictional guardians and the real interlocutors should possess. The tales told by Homer have not been altered, but the interlocutors have come to understand his poetry in a different light. Socrates, through his careful selection of Homeric allusions, has compelled the interlocutors to alter their understanding of Homer by encouraging them to examine the common understanding of Homer's poetry.

Consequently, instead of equating rule acquired by force or fraud with happiness, the interlocutors now see that a life spent pursuing the virtues of moderation, obedience, piety, and courage is better suited to enabling men to achieve happiness. This has become possible by juxtaposing Achilles' unhappiness in death with Odysseus' ultimate success in restoring order to Ithaka. According to the soul of Achilles, the pursuit of honor in the end proved to be unsatisfactory, while Odysseus' adherence to the virtues praised by Socrates



enabled Odysseus to accomplish his ends. Essential to this new understanding is the idea found in the *Odyssey* that man ultimately is accountable for his own actions.

For Socrates to encourage this idea it was necessary to destroy the poets' authority to communicate truth, and replace that authority with the idea that the epics are merely stories that encourage habituation in certain virtues. Once the poets' authority had been diminished, it became possible to treat the stories that spoke of ancient things as allegories that are useful for children, but oblige adults to re-examine justice and develop a comprehensive understanding of its qualities through the application of human reason. It is here that we find the importance of the preference for Odysseus over Achilles. Emulation of Odysseus encourages men to improve their intellectual faculties, while emulation of Achilles encourages men to improve their martial skills. If men inquire into the nature of justice, clearly Odyssean qualities are to be preferred.

Here we find that Socrates' subtle interpretation of Homer has encouraged men to question what they learned from Homer and prepared them for an honest inquiry into the nature of human justice. As Socrates himself states, "it has been stated how the gods must be spoken about, and demons and heroes, and Hades' domain . . . . [but what is lacking from the argument will become clear] . . . when we find out what sort of thing justice is and how it by nature profits the man who possesses it, whether he seems to be just or not" (*Republic* 392b-c).

The education described for the guardians does not provide us with a definition of justice, but it has shown the attentive reader how a careful examination of formative poetry is the first necessary step in leading men to a reasonable examination of justice. By honestly appraising what has been learned, it becomes possible to reject what has been accepted as truth because of poetry's charm, and objectively examine the very nature of justice. Clearly, the formative poetry of Homer and Hesiod has been shown to be a necessary step in coming to a mature and reasonable understanding of justice. But going beyond the poets' charming tales without abandoning them altogether would not have been possible for the interlocutors if Socrates had not, through his interpretation of Homer, transformed Odysseus from a crafty and wily man who conquers superior force through fraud into a wise and prudent man who accomplishes his ends by his adherence to the virtues that are the foundation of justice.

By the end of the section on what should be said to the guardians, Socrates not only has managed to defend the poets against Adeimantus' accusation, but has managed to instill in those men who were educated in Homer's poetry a new standard of human excellence.

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