

Pouring Shame or Pouring Fluids?

Telemachus is ordered by his father during the clean-up scenes of *Odyssey* Book 22 to kill the disloyal slave women with a long-edged sword. Once he has gathered them in the courtyard, however, Telemachus at no point justifies or explains his decision to hang them instead. Rather, he tells the women that they have poured shame (ὀνείδεα χεῦαν) onto him and his mother (*Od.* 22.463). This paper looks to add nuance to understanding how Homer viewed the connection between shame, sex, and bodily fluids by analyzing this moment through Telemachus's use of the verb χέω in describing how the women brought ὀνείδεα onto his and his mother's head.

Telemachus's accusation employs a seemingly unique usage of χέω. The verb is used by Homer for a variety of actions and tends to be a standard word for pouring; it appears eighty times in the *Iliad* and seventy-two times in the *Odyssey*. Its use ranges from describing bodily actions to natural events; even within the single passage analyzed in this study the narrator also uses it to describe the crying of the slave women as they carry out the bodies of the suitors (*Od.* 22.447). It is only here, however, that the verb takes such an abstract direct object like ὀνείδεα. But how abstract is it actually? The nature of the verb, expressly physical in usage (at least for Homer) may work to extend beyond the explicit reference to ὀνείδεα and suggest additionally a pouring of corporal liquid. The inexperienced Telemachus, in this case, may be demonstrating a desire to avoid the sexual fluids and sexualized bodies of the women with his own "weapon." As Emily Wilson writes (2021, 33), hanging keeps the blood (and by extension other fluids) inside the body and avoids the "public, masculine glory of death by sharp metal instrument". Killing the "maids by rope rather than by sword may reflect a desire to punish them for their sexuality"

(Fulkerson 2002, 343). Additionally, Telemachus does not explain what degree of control the slave women had over this pouring of shame. Are the women's actions simply a result of their status as slaves—an inadvertent corollary to their duties and position within the household—or is the scenario conceived by Telemachus to have been a deliberate choice? $\chi\acute{\epsilon}\omega$ seems always to acknowledge the agent of the verb's actions, and this is to be kept in mind when Telemachus speaks it. Ultimately, this paper will demonstrate that while the verb's usage here is distinct, it fits into an understanding of the word's implications and expected objects.

The method of execution also lends insight into Telemachus's (and perhaps Homer's) understanding of shame, sex, and bodily fluids. Hanging occurs only one other time in Homer, but as a method of suicide; in Book 11 Odysseus relays how he saw Epicaste in the Underworld who, after realizing the true identity of Oedipus, killed herself with a noose from a high beam (*Od.* 11.277–80). There are other hangings, especially in tragedy, by women who use it as a way to avoid intercourse, and according to Helen King (2002, 77), strangulation can be “culturally opposed to unwanted sex.” This is an additional connection which will be briefly explored, although primarily post-Homeric sources will be analyzed, in order to understand better ancient ideas around hanging.

Overall, the paper examines the nature of Homer's use of $\chi\acute{\epsilon}\omega$ here and elsewhere in order to understand better both his and a broader Greek mindset regarding shame, sex, and bodily fluids and the physical actions and agency behind each. This is to be accomplished by building on the work done by Wilson and Fulkerson and through careful analysis of the specific word to add nuance to the sexual nature of Telemachus's actions and accusations.

Bibliography

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