

Eastwood's *Unforgiven* as a Reading of the *Odyssey*

Previous interpretations (Blundell and Ormand, Rabel) of Homeric influences on Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven* have focused on the parallels between Achilles and William Munny, the hero/villain of the film. Achilles and Munny can be seen as warriors whose *aristeiai* occur after a period of long withdrawal from the field of battle during which they lose a close friend, but their stories do not otherwise intersect. As his name indicates, Munny strives for money, once to pay for whisky, now to support his two children; he cares not at all for *kleos aphthiton*—indeed, for most of the film he is determined to put his old reputation behind him. Munny abandoned his life of violence because of the positive influence of his wife, not over a bitter quarrel with another bandit. Munny does not receive an embassy, nor does he welcome his enemy's father into his camp. Rather, he bears a much closer resemblance to Odysseus, and his story becomes much more meaningful if read against the backdrop of the *Odyssey*.

Leaving aside the fact that Munny has a daughter named "Penny" eagerly awaiting his return to the family's hog farm, we can detect more subtle references to the *Odyssey* elsewhere in the film. If the *Odyssey* is the story of a return, then Munny may be seen to return to his former life as "a man of notoriously vicious and intemperate disposition" when he arrives in the rough town of Big Whiskey, Wyoming. Like Odysseus, Munny does not reveal his identity immediately upon his arrival, but instead gives a false name and appears sickly, old, and unable to defend himself. When he enters his "home," Greely's Saloon, he finds a band of arrogant, but cowardly young men, led by a corrupt sheriff and entertained by a bunch of whores. The sheriff beats Munny

savagely and suggests that he ought to leave the “hospitality of Big Whiskey” behind him. Munny eventually returns, reveals his true identity, and then kills the lot of them. Just as Odysseus spares the singer Phemios, Munny spares W.W. Beauchamp, the freelance writer who happened to be there to preserve the whole episode for posterity. Finally, the last frames of the film show Munny, having returned to his home in Kansas, standing under the tree that marks his wife’s grave, a subtle reference to Odysseus’ unique bedstead.

After discussing these points of contact with the *Odyssey*, I shall argue that *Unforgiven*, as an exploration of Odysseus’ dark side, compels us to consider the dual nature of the Homeric hero as both “a man of notoriously vicious and intemperate disposition” and as a father who longs to return to his family.

Works cited

Blundell, Mary Whitlock and Kirk Ormand, “Western Values, or the Peoples’ Homer:

Unforgiven as a Reading of the Iliad.” Poetics Today 18.4 (1997): 533–69.

Rabel, Robert J. “*Unforgiven (1992): A Postmodern Iliad.*” Delivered at the 104th annual meeting of the Classical Association of the Middle West and South in Tucson, AZ,

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