

The Monstrousness of Homeric Epic: Two Images from *Iliad* 2

Critics both ancient and modern have distanced the Homeric epics from monsters and monstrousness. Aristotle (*Poet.*) likens the well-structured unities that he perceives both in tragedies and in the Homeric poems, but not in the Epic Cycle, to the bodies of animals that can be viewed at a single glance and whose parts relate to one another in a natural fashion (a concept conveyed by the verb φύω). By contrast, an animal “of ten thousand stades,” whose unity cannot be appreciated in the same way, offers no pleasure to the viewer. And such huge size is typical of monsters in the Greek tradition. Aristotle also mentions an example of aesthetic failure, which he associates with a different kind of monstrousness. Chaeremon endowed his play *Centaur* with qualities to match its monstrous subject matter: it was “a rhapsody mixed from all sorts of meter.” For Griffin, while the Epic Cycle was characterized by monstrous forms and monstrous deeds, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* focus on realistic human actions and emotions.

Two images from *Iliad* 2, however, incorporate elements of monstrousness. And though listeners might associate these images with other kinds of verse, there are more compelling reasons to see them as illustrative of Homeric epic. At 301-32, Odysseus recalls a portent from nine years earlier, consisting of “terrible monstrosities [πέλωρα] from the gods”: a snake devoured a sparrow’s eight chicks and then the sparrow herself. Odysseus reminds the assembled troops of Calchas’ interpretation: they would fight for nine years at Troy but would be victorious in the tenth. We find a second monstrous image in the invocation to the Muses that precedes the catalogue of Achaean ships (484-93). The poet imagines a monstrous figure with ten mouths and ten tongues: only someone with such a physique could name all those who came to Troy.

These images offer some support to critics who would dissociate Homeric poetry from the monstrous. If we follow Calchas’ interpretation, the “terrible monstrosities” that Odysseus

recalls are connected with events that were related in the Epic Cycle, not the *Iliad*. This passage would thus support Griffin's association of the Cycle with monstrosity. But the prophecy also serves as an apt introduction to the themes of the *Iliad*. Its focus on the Trojan War matches the subject matter of the poem (cf. Nagy, who sees the snake as an image for Homeric poetry in general). Moreover, the battle scenes of the *Iliad* are no less gruesome than the phenomena described by Odysseus. More specifically, the epic imagines the possibility that human bodies might be consumed, a theme that becomes particularly prominent in the latter books of the *Iliad* (Neal; cf. Segal). And Odysseus, in his description of the portent from Book 2, describes the birds eaten by the snake in human terms: "infant children" (νήπια τέκνα) and their "mother" (μήτηρ).

Like the prophecy, the description of a figure with multiple mouths might not seem at first to be connected to the subject matter of the *Iliad*. After all, the poet does *not* go on to list the names of all those present at Troy. Nevertheless, the passage serves as a suitable image for the expansive aesthetic of the poem. The *Iliad*, in its grand scale, contrasts with an animal whose size and beauty can be appreciated at a glance (cf. Ford, Lowe): the sprawling epic, at over 15,000 lines, is more like Aristotle's animal "of ten thousand stades." And while the *Iliad* may not be a chaotic mixture like Chaeremon's *Centaur*, the allusion to multiple mouths offers a suitable introduction to the "many-voiced" complexity of the poem (Dio. Hal. *De comp. verb.* 16)—to the multiplicity of perspectives contained within it (de Jong), which in turn facilitate a plurality of interpretations on the part of the listener (cf. Ahl and Roisman).

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