

Real Monsters: Credibility and Verisimilitude in Odysseus' *Apologoi*

In this paper, I propose a reading of Odysseus' story (*Odyssey* IX-XII) that takes into consideration the reception of the ancient audience. Although scholars have already studied the monsters encountered by Odysseus (Moignard 1998, Hopman 2012) and the conventions of credibility in the Homeric text (Scodel 1999), a specific analysis of the verisimilitude and credibility of the monsters is still missing. I will argue that Odysseus' journey and the monsters he encounters, usually considered as fictional or fantastic elements by the modern audience, were perceived as real by the ancient audience.

First, I analyze the description of the monsters - the Cyclops, the Laestrygonians, the Sirens, Scylla, and Charybdis - noting how Odysseus fails to provide physical details for all of these. The only exception is the physical description of Scylla, that is nevertheless given by Circe, not by Odysseus. Odysseus is not able to see Scylla, although the text is very clear in emphasizing his strong will to have at least a glance at her (XII, 232-233). All the encounters with the monsters are marked by Odysseus' strong curiosity, which always remains unsatisfied, with the exception of the Cyclops, which Odysseus is able to see but of which he does not provide physical elements.

If the monsters are never fully described, and they are distinguished - at least in the case of the sirens, Scylla and Charybdis - by their elusiveness, Odysseus provides specific details not only of the environment in which the monsters live - like Polyphemus' cave (IX, 218-223) - but also of the consequences of their action on his comrades (IX, 288-290; IX, 247-249).

Therefore, the only elements fully described by Odysseus are the most verisimilar ones, which do not challenge the audience's sense of reality. The whole story told by Odysseus can be

considered credible because it does not explicitly feature anything that a common man could not see.

Then, I proceed to analyze the monsters as expressions of divine and supernatural forces. The Cyclopes are described as creatures who disregard the human and divine laws, are stronger than the gods (IX, 275-276) and live in a state of symbiosis with nature and its power (IX, 105-111). The sirens offer a knowledge which humans could not attain by themselves (XII, 189-191); Scylla is described as a monster whom not even a god would be happy to face (XII,87-88) and as immortal evil (XII,118), and not even Poseidon could save Odysseus from Charybdis (XII, 107). Fighting Scylla and Charybdis, Odysseus is fighting nothing less than immortal gods (XII, 117). The different monsters share therefore not only a supernatural or divine nature, but also a specific connection with primordial forces of nature, particularly the ones of earth and sea. Also in this case, these forces goes beyond human comprehension (Odysseus longs to see Scylla and Charybdis, but he cannot), and yet their mortal effects are clearly visible and not at all unfamiliar to an audience used to succumb to forces of nature of which it was not even able to understand the causes.

In conclusion, Odysseus' story is verisimilar and credible specifically because Odysseys does not provide the audience with physical details of the monsters, i.e. with something that they could have never experienced. The supernatural and the monstrous are not described but left to the imagination of the audience, while the effects of the supernatural - the death of men, the natural disasters - are always visible and well detailed, providing the audience with elements not only likely and credible, but that they could experience in their every day life.

Moreover, Odysseus experiences the mortal and concrete effects of forces that are both divine and primordial, even greater and stronger than the power of the Olympian gods, and

absolutely familiar to an audience of ancient Greek subjects to the forces of nature. Therefore, the monsters, far from being just fictional figures or a figment of the poet's imagination, are expressions of divine forces that an audience of ancient Greeks would have considered real and part of their actual world.

Bibliography

Hopman, Marianne Govers. *Scylla: Myth, Metaphor, Paradox*. Cambridge; New York:

Cambridge University Pr., 2012.

Moignard, E. "How to Make a Monster." *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies* 42, no. 1

(1998).

Scodel, Ruth. *Credible Impossibilities : Conventions and Strategies of Verisimilitude in Homer and Greek Tragedy*. Stuttgart: Teubner, 1999.