

The Echo of Μῆνις: Contrasting the Wrath of Achilles and the Anger of Poseidon

The wrath of Achilles in the *Iliad* and the anger of Poseidon in the *Odyssey* demonstrate a remarkable continuity. They are both the subject of similar narrative structures, from their incitement and exacerbation to their ultimate redirection. There are, however, three key points at which this comparison begins to break down: the significance of the term μῆνις, the redirection, and the means of appeasement. C. Whitman offers valuable insight into these disparities by examining the significance of Achilles' mortality and his willing acceptance of death (Whitman 1958). In contrasting Achilles with Poseidon, Whitman's approach can be applied as a model to show that the anger of Poseidon is an echo of the wrath of Achilles in which all traces of humanity have been stripped away.

To nuance the relationship between Achilles' and Poseidon's respective angers, examples of their various similarities can be adduced. Initially, their wraths are incited by acts of injustice. Agamemnon refuses to return Chryseis to her father, while Odysseus blinds Polyphemus. However, the true, enduring anger is not called forth until the potential object makes a further display of hubris. Agamemnon goes on to steal Briseis, socially shaming Achilles and depriving him of his lawful war prize; Odysseus proceeds to taunt the blinded Cyclops by revealing his true name, allowing Polyphemus to identify him in his entreaty to Poseidon. The notion of redirection is particularly prevalent. Their wraths are not initially appeased, but simply transferred to another, more hateful object. For Achilles, this is Hector, and the Trojans at large; for Poseidon, it is the Phoenicians who have ignored his repeated warnings against granting any guest safe passage across his sea.

These similarities do not provide a holistic view of the topic, but they do lend a greater significance to the dissimilarities found. The first such distinction lies in the application of the word μῆνις. This is the term for cosmic, solemn wrath, used almost exclusively of divine agents (Considine 1966). Homer has chosen to describe the wrath of Achilles, a mortal man, as μῆνις, yet nowhere in the *Odyssey* does it appear describing the anger of the god Poseidon. Whitman's argument has shown that Achilles' unflinching acceptance of his mortality has put him above the plane of the purely human, allowing him to carry his wrath so far as to become "more like a god than a man" (Whitman 1958). At first glance, Poseidon's wrath might appear pale and petty when placed against this metric. However, Poseidon has no such need to transcend himself. He is already divine by his very nature, and his anger has never been entangled with human emotion. Instead, his anger is a quiet, malingering presence throughout the *Odyssey*, which finds its source not in personal indignity, but in blood ties and answered prayers for vengeance (Murgatroyd 2015).

In respect to the radical redirection of their respective wraths, both characters seek to carry their rage beyond reasonable proportions by means of total genocide. As Whitman has shown, Achilles is capable of following through with this murderous intention because he has accepted the ultimate consequence of his mortality (1958). Poseidon is an immortal deity and need not concern himself with any resulting death sentence. This grants a particular tension to his threat to destroy all of Phoenicia, especially given that Zeus himself supports Poseidon's divine right to gravely punish anyone who gives perceived offence.

The sharpest distinction between these wraths lies in the means of appeasement. Each character is approached by an aged king who entreats them to give up their wrath. Priam makes his appeal based on Achilles' inherent mortality, imploring him to remember his own father, and

to consider Peleus' distress upon the death of his son (*Iliad* 24.485-506). When King Alcinous appeals to Poseidon, however, it is based in impersonal, ritualistic sacrifice. But Poseidon is not a mortal, capable of unmerited forgiveness. Regardless of what fate befalls the Phoenicians, Odysseus still must make a propitiatory journey before the enduring anger against him can be conciliated.

While the progression of the wraths of Achilles and Poseidon may play out in similar fashion, they ultimately diverge on account of their respective natures. Homer's portrayal of Poseidon offers the reader a snapshot of a divine anger that has been divested of humanity and the consequences of a mortal existence. By a careful examination of these distinctions, one can gather not only a better appreciation of each character, but also a better understanding of the Greek perception of the human and divine.

Bibliography

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