

## Μῆνις and Μῆτις: The Meeting of Two Epics in *Iliad* IX

“So the one who voluntarily misses the mark and does what is shameful and unjust, Hippias – that is, if there is such a person – would be no other than the good man” (Plato, *Hippias Minor* 376b4-6, trans. Smith 1997)

One would not expect to find this statement in the mouth of Socrates, the erstwhile defender of justice, and much the less in a work of Homeric exegesis. Yet this conclusion, which Socrates is not sure he can uphold (376b8), results from a discussion of the relative merits of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* and those of the poems’ two heroes, Achilles and Odysseus. Socrates sets out to examine the opinion that the *Iliad* is a more beautiful poem than the *Odyssey* to the same degree that Achilles is a better man than Odysseus (363b3-6). In defense of this view Hippias cites the opening of Achilles’ reply to Odysseus’ speech in the embassy (*Il.* 9.308-311), explaining that Achilles is better because he tells the truth, while Odysseus is worse because he lies (365b3-6). Truth and lies are soon equated with justice and injustice, and Socrates argues that in fact the most just and wise individual will be the one to voluntarily commit injustice and tell lies, since the more ignorant person will not know what is just or what is true.

My paper develops Socrates and Hippias’ suggestion that Achilles’ speech to Odysseus (*Il.* 9.308-429) offers a rich point of comparison between the two heroes and thus the two epics. By focusing on this passage from the *Iliad*, I hope to build on Jenny Strauss Clay’s interpretation of a rivalry between the two heroes and epics based on evidence in the *Odyssey* (Clay 1983, 97).

The insight that truthfulness and justice are more readily associated with Achilles and lying and injustice with Odysseus is a valuable one. At the very end of his speech Achilles makes another contrast which is related to the first, this time between his μῆνις and Odysseus’ μῆτις.

Achilles juxtaposes the failed μῆτιν of the embassy (423), on whose behalf Odysseus just spoke, with his own wrath (426 ἐμεῦ ὀπομηγίσαντος). It goes without saying that from the first line of the *Iliad* μῆνις characterizes Achilles and that μῆτις is closely associated with Odysseus through his epithet πολύμητις, not to mention his identity with μῆτις in the *Odyssey* through the pun on μή τίς (9.410, 414), wordplay based on a “[verbal] accident made central to the poem” (Norman 1972, 15). Thus at the end of his speech Achilles sets up a contrast between the two men just as much as his earlier statement about his own truthfulness and Odysseus’ lying.

The two contrasts from the beginning and the end of Achilles’ speech suggest that μῆτις is linked with lying and injustice, while, perhaps less intuitively, μῆνις is linked with truthfulness and justice. Achilles’ wrath is intimately connected to his adherence to a certain conception of justice. Achilles withdraws from the war because he believes that Agamemnon has violated the reciprocity necessary for the coherence of the Achaean expedition. Yet his belief about what is right ultimately pushes him to do something most agree is not: he allows the Achaeans to be slaughtered *en masse*, including his best friend Patroclus. In this way Achilles privileges reciprocity at the exclusion of another important traditional standard of justice operative from Homer onward (Blundell 1989, 26), that of helping friends and harming enemies. Here Socrates’ focus on the difference between voluntary and involuntary injustice may be relevant: Achilles believes he is being most just while committing grave injustice, thus revealing his ignorance of right.

#### Bibliography

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