
Magical Practices in the Works of Homer

Homeric Epic has become a staple of the modern evaluation of the ancient Greco-Roman world. It is among the great literary works of history, having withstood the tests of time and remaining so widely popular. Whether we believe Homer was an individual, a group, or an evolution of oral tradition, it cannot be argued that any assessment of ancient Greek culture that does not include Homer's works is incomplete. They reflect not only the culture of the time period, but also the specific viewpoints of those who lived during that time. In terms of magical practices, in the works of Homer it seems that magic is used as a device to portray the belief that Gods control the mortal world in terms of physical attributes as well as power, yet when it comes to nonphysical aspects of the world, the Gods leave control in the hands of those who dwell in it. Magic is used as a means of depicting what mortals can control - when it comes to the physical world, war, strength, and power, the Gods decide what outcomes will occur and how they come to be - humans do not practice magic pertaining to such areas. But when magic is practiced, it relates to nonphysical areas of the mortal world, showing that mortals have control of this part of the world they live in. By illustrating this idea, magic is an invaluable element in Homer's works, as it makes the duality of these spheres of control apparent.

However, before one can evaluate magical practices in a literary work, history, or any other paradigm, it is essential to establish some criteria to differentiate magical practices from similar actions or ideas. For the purposes of analyzing magical practices in the works of Homer, the criteria presented by Sir James Frazer in his essentialist approach (also known as the "etic" perspective) seem to be well suited to distinguishing magic from things such as religion or science. Frazer purports other ideas in the essentialist approach, such as taking an outsider's perspective of cultural practices, as well as the relation between magic, religion and science. For the purposes of this analysis, those ideas will be set aside, and only Frazer's ideas regarding what indicates magic will be used. Frazer claims that magic is coercive in nature, meaning that the practitioner controls the forces involved in magic. He also claims that magical forces are impersonal - that there are no personal characteristics or attributes associated with the forces controlled in magic. Compare this to religion, for example, which is supplicative (the practitioner asks for the forces involved to perform something, rather than forcing or controlling them to do it) and personal (the forces have names and personal characteristics, rather than being anonymous).

Specifically in the Iliad and the Odyssey, there are cases that show the difference between magic and religion or other ideas. For example, Chryses prays to Apollo after his daughter is taken by the Achaeans, and Apollo responds by unleashing a plague upon the Achaeans' armies (Iliad, book 1). This is not magic, since the practitioner (Chryses) is acting supplicatively

Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

GET HELP

by praying to Apollo, who may not answer, as opposed to acting coercively. He also is summoning a personal force (Apollo) rather than an impersonal one. Another example is Machaon, one of the healers (along with his brother Podalirius) who uses scientific methods to heal wounds, such as surgery or poison removal (Iliad, book 11). The difference between science and magic, according to Frazer, is that science is correct, while magic is not. Yet another instance of non-magical practices is disguise, used repeatedly by Odysseus in the Odyssey. Toward the end of the story he infiltrates his own palace disguised as a beggar (Odyssey, book 17). Though disguise is an impersonal force, the practitioner is not wielding a force coercively; he is simply using his own faculties to disguise himself.

Having established the difference between magic and other forces, we can search the Iliad for examples of human magical practice. The only two characters that can even be considered something close to magical practitioners are Machaon and Calchas. Machaon, as has already been explained, does not practice magic so much as use scientific methods to heal the wounded. Calchas is a prophet of the Achaeans who is proficient in reading bird signs (auspicy) and revealing the will of the Gods (Iliad, book 1). However, auspicy is a form of divination, which at best is arguably a form of magic. It focuses on time, communication, reflection, and intervention - basically terms that reveal that it is focused on time and the gods, meaning that it puts little power in the hands of the practitioner or humans at all. Additionally, auspicy in specific is meant to reveal the will of the Gods. As such, it furthers the idea presented in the Iliad that Gods are in control of the physical world, since the humans are limited to simply trying to divine their will in the outcome of the war. In that sense, there is an utter lack of human magical practice in the Iliad, and those characters closely resembling magical practitioners are simply tools furthering the idea that Gods control physical aspects of the mortal world.

The fact that there is a lack of magical practice in the Iliad indicates that whatever the focal point of the story may be, it involves the Gods' control over that given area. It is simple to see that this focal point is strength and power. The Iliad is a story centered on the importance of raw strength and power. The opening lines of the story invoke the muses to sing of Achilles' rage, thereby making the spotlight of the story one man's wrath and showing that the story centers on physical power (Iliad, book 1). If that does not make it obvious enough that the story centers on physical strength, the fact that the story is about a war should make it apparent that physical power is important in this work. After all, the story is named the Iliad, indicating that it is the story of the war of Ilium, or Troy. Additionally, lengthy descriptions of combat and death are pervasive throughout the poem. Yet another telltale sign of the focus on strength is that the epic piece in this poem is Achilles' shield, representative of close combat (Iliad, book 18). Close combat is, of course, a symbol of strength and raw, physical power. The final sign that the Iliad is a story based around strength is that the victor in the end is Achilles, the strongest of all the warriors. All of these examples prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that the Iliad is focused on the importance of strength.

Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

GET HELP

Keeping in mind that strength is the underlying motif of the Iliad, we can assume that Homer intends to show that there is little human control over physical aspects of the world (mainly strength and power, and additionally life and death). This is strongly supported by the severe lack of magic practiced by humans in the Iliad, especially when contrasted with the Odyssey. Not only is there no magic practiced by humans, all of the power exhibited over life, death, war, and strength seems to be that of the Gods. They (mainly Zeus, Hera, and Athena) are constantly shifting the tides of battle, such as Poseidon's empowerment of the Achaeans (Iliad, book 13), and Hera distracting Zeus to turn the tides of battle in favor of the Achaeans (Iliad, book 14). Another example is Apollo's plague being unleashed on the Achaeans (Iliad, book 1) or his role in the death of Patroclus (Iliad, book 16). Additionally, it should be noted that the strongest mortals, and indeed the strongest one of all, Achilles, are all somehow descendants of the Gods.

All of these point out not only that strength is the focus of the Iliad, but that the Gods are the force that controls that strength. The lack of human influence in this sphere is marked by the lack of magical practice done pertaining to these physical areas, and the immense activity the Gods engage in relating to physical aspects of the world - they change the tides of battle, affect life and death, and decide the fates of the warriors (e.g. Achilles fate to die by Paris' arrow to his heel, Hector's fate to die by Achilles' sword, etc). Perhaps the example most directly exemplifying this message is that Homer writes of how Apollo and Poseidon will destroy the walls erected by the Achaeans in the years following the war (Iliad, book 12). This shows exactly the point that the Gods are in control of the physical aspects of the mortal world - creation, destruction, life, death, strength, and power.

The Odyssey, on the other hand, is a story focusing on an opposing quality - that of cunning. It is filled with disguise, trickery, and clever plans, rather than the combat and feats of strength that are omnipresent in the Iliad. The poem is rife with characters in disguise, such as Athena appearing to Telemachus as Mentos (Odyssey, book 1) or Odysseus dressing as a beggar to avoid recognition (Odyssey, book 17). Cunning often prevails over strength, such as Odysseus' clever tricks defeating the Cyclops Polyphemus' superior strength (Odyssey, book 9). Additionally, the epic piece in this poem is Odysseus' bow, representative of ranged combat (Odyssey, book 21). Close combat, at the time, represented more "cowardly" forms of combat, which of course can be related to cunning and trickery. And just as the strongest man is the victor in the Iliad, the Odyssey's victor is Odysseus, the most cunning man in the story. All of these signs signify that cunning and more cerebral issues are the focus of the Odyssey.

We can connect the focus on cunning in the Odyssey to the constant appearance of human and mortal magic. In contrast to the Iliad and its lack of magic in relation to the physical dominion, the Odyssey is full of magic, directly in relation to the mental, nonphysical dominion. For example, the Siren's song lures sailors to their death by tempting them to approach the rock on

Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

GET HELP

which the deadly temptresses live (Odyssey, book 12). This is a perfect example of magic being performed by those within the mortal world, and it is magic that affects the mind, instilling great temptation in the men. Another example is in the land of the lotus-eaters, where the men fall asleep against their will by eating the lotus flowers (Odyssey, book 9), yet another example of magic that indeed affects the mind. Odysseus and his crew travel to the land of the dead by performing certain magical rites (Odyssey, book 11), once again using magic for nonphysical means, in this case to figure out how to make their journey lead them home. One of the most famous female practitioners of magic, Circe, is found in the Odyssey, and she uses magic to transform men into animals, and Odysseus himself uses a substance, moly, to avoid transformation (Odyssey, book 10). This type of magic, though it seems physical in nature, affects the being of these men, and in that sense is a mental force. However, not all of the magic is found in the distant, exotic lands of Odysseus' voyage. On Telemachus' initial journey in the poem, he is in Menelaus' court discussing his father and Helen gives the characters a magical drug to wash away their sadness, named nepenthe (Odyssey, book 4). This is yet another case of magic affecting the mind in the Odyssey.

All of these examples point out two things - first, that the Odyssey is focused on cunning and the mind, and second, that the magical practice found throughout the poem are all related to this same area. It is undeniable that these two are linked, especially since the few situations in which strength prevails in the Odyssey are somehow connected back to the gods. For example, when the souls of the suitors go to the underworld after Odysseus defeats them, the ghosts of Odysseus' heroic comrades all make reference to how the Gods have fated Odysseus' victory (Odyssey, book 24). Additionally, when Odysseus fights the suitors' kin, it is said in the poem that the Gods have fated Odysseus' victory (Odyssey, book 24). Anytime that strength prevails, it is referred to somehow as part of the Gods' plan, and even Poseidon's superior strength prevailing in sending Odysseus all over the seas can be thought of in this same sense.

Therefore it can be said that the Odyssey contains a great deal of magic practice, which contributes to its focus on the importance of cunning and the mind. As such, it shows that humans and the mortal world itself are in control of issues of the mind. This is in direct contrast with the Iliad, which focuses a great deal on strength and physical aspects of the world; as a result its utter lack of magical practices represents the idea that humans do not have control of the physical world and that it is under the powers of the Gods. The rift between the Iliad and Odyssey shows the belief that the physical world is the dominion of the Gods and that the mental world is under the control of mortals. Magical practices are key in distinguishing this important message in the works of Homer, since their presence helps indicate what was believed to be under the control of mortals themselves. Through analysis of magic, we are able to recognize that this was a belief of that time period, and that it is a clear theme in Homeric Epic.

Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

[GET HELP](#)