The Emotionally Honest Hero: Weeping in The Odyssey and The Aeneid

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30 April 2015

The noble Odysseus and pious Aeneas evidently hold the title for heroic hero in Homer’s The Odyssey and Virgil’s The Aeneid; though they exhibit qualities characteristic of heroes, they also display qualities characteristic of normal human beings, like Homer and Virgil’s readers. More explicitly, the text repeatedly reveals both Odysseus and Aeneas weeping deeply. These heroes do not cry in the face of physical pain; rather, they cry when strong emotional feelings provoke them. These instances of outward emotion do not make Odysseus and Aeneas appear weak. Instead, their display of feelings encourages both sympathy and relatability from readers. Their struggles are indeed excruciatingly troubling, not mere petty problems. With this in mind, readers feel sorry for a hero who seems to be slighted unjustly by the gods. Similarly, a reader feels more closely connected to a hero when they express sorrow or pain—something everyone can relate to. Rather than appearing weak, Homer’s Odysseus from The Odyssey and Virgil’s Aeneas from The Aeneid evoke sympathy and relatability from readers when they weep for their homeland and ones they have lost.

To begin to unfold how both characters can react in such an emotional way, one must first take note of how Odysseus and Aeneas weep for their homelands. Odysseus, having been kept captive on Calypso’s island, yearns to be home among his wife, son, and village. He passes his time “sitting on the rocks or sand, torturing himself with tears, groans and heartache, and looking out with streaming eyes across the watery wildness” (Homer 74). Rather than dishonorably fight the goddess who has imprisoned him, Odysseus gives himself time to grieve for the unfairness life has dealt him. In a dramatic line, the narrator depicts Odysseus’ obsession
with those at home whom he refuses to forget: “Life was ebbing away in tears he shed for his lost home” (74). This description specifies the importance of home to the Homeric hero. Though he resides alone on an island with a beautiful goddess, Odysseus is still consumed by the memories of his homeland. Such devotion to family and home reminds readers that Odysseus’ whole conscience does not solely involve battle, blood, and glory. Readers can more likely relate to feelings associated with home than with the preoccupations of a world of gods and goddesses. The text also shows that these feelings of sorrow for his home are consistent: “His eyes were wet with weeping, as they always were” (74). Consistency in these feelings indicates that the loss of his homeland cannot be easily mended. Additionally, Odysseus shows audiences he values home life when the Phaeacians hear the story of his tragic journey. A minstrel recounts the tale, and Odysseus is emotionally moved by his memories: “Odysseus’ heart was melting with grief and his cheeks were wet with the tears that ran down from his eyes” (121). Because the text specifically states that Odysseus “wept as a woman weeps” (122), one must assume that this description conveys a sense of magnitude, not a lessening in masculinity. Such a description evokes pity. The text offers no indication that weeping like a woman denounces Odysseus’ heroic characteristics; instead, by showing his emotions, Odysseus elicits emotions in the reader.

Aeneas likewise demonstrates how yearning for home and mourning the destruction that befell it during the Trojan War shows his continuation as a hero: the display of emotion results in a connection with the audience, not a misperception of his heroic qualities. When meditating on the happenings of the war, Aeneas experiences a sudden flood of emotions. Though a great warrior in battle, he shows even more strength by battling his emotions. The memory of such destruction on his homeland evokes “many tears and sighs” that his soul feeds on (Virgil 1.658-9). These many tears give Aeneas a pitiable backstory. To cry for one’s land or country
honorably reveals the dedication one has to that group of people; readers can see that Aeneas cries for those he loved in Troy, making him appear to be a noble leader and representative. Similarly, when recounting the happenings of his experiences to the doting Dido, Aeneas admits that “‘too terrible for the tongues the pain/ you ask me to renew’” (2.4-5). By intimating that such a topic exceeded the limitations of his willingness to talk, Aeneas implies that there exists another means of communicating this terror: through tears. Coincidently, Aeneas mentions that not even Odysseus’ soldiers could keep from crying while telling such a story as his (2.10-11). This reference supports the concept that strength does not come from an absence of crying. Lastly, Aeneas cries as he remembers how he sailed away from his homeland: “Weeping, I must give up the shores, the harbors/ that were my home, the plain that once was Troy” (3.14-5). By using the phrase “I must give up,” Aeneas promotes his sorrow as a forfeiting of his most precious joy. The sacrifice appears to be unfair, therefore justifying his outpour of emotion. These many cases of Odysseus and Aeneas weeping for their homeland evoke feelings of pity in the reader, while the following examples reveal how losing a loved one can provoke a similar response in the reader.

To elaborate, both Odysseus and Aeneas experience loss, reminding readers that the heroes’ crying is not a sign of weakness, but of human-like strength. Because they both possess heroic qualities, a reader can appreciate when either of their actions makes them more relatable. Odysseus, for example, expresses sorrow when his fellow comrade is dashed across the rocks by a Cyclops. They experience fear and “complete helplessness” (Homer 133). By weeping for their friend, rather than immediately retaliating against the cyclops, Odysseus and his men show audiences that their situation ought to be feared as well. When Odysseus encounters his comrade Elpenor in Hades who died without a proper burial, “tears started to [his] eyes and [he] was
Because the noble Odysseus is stirred with pity, the reader experiences pity for Odysseus’ tears. Similar to the idea that weeping for one’s homeland appears righteous and just, weeping for a loved one also incites feelings of pity and relatability. Another direct explanation of Odysseus’ feelings upon crying comes when he encounters his mother in Hades: “[His] eyes filled with tears when [he] saw her there, and [he] was stirred to compassion” (161). When Odysseus cries in Hades, the narrator articulates Odysseus’ specific emotional response: he is stirred with pity and he is stirred to compassion. By explicitly describing Odysseus’ reaction, the narrator implies how the reader should feel about Odysseus’ situation. The reader too should feel moved to pity and compassion.

Like Odysseus, Aeneas expresses loss in the form of tears; these tears show audiences how they can connect to this heroic character. Early in the story, Aeneas recounts his reaction to the death of his wife, Creüsa. Upon seeing her apparition, he “weep[s] and want[s] to say so many things” (Virgil 2.1065-6). As he previously explained to Dido, Aeneas makes it clear again that tears can replace words when feelings make it difficult to speak. Fascinatingly, Aeneas attempts to grasp his wife’s vision three times, just as Odysseus attempts to hold on to his mother’s apparition three times. These frantic attempts additionally reveal how desperate the two heroes are in their despair. The next soul Aeneas meets in Hades incites more tears from him: “when the Trojan hero recognized her dim shape [Dido] among the shadows … he wept” (4.595-9). By acknowledging Aeneas as “the Trojan hero,” the narrator reminds audiences that a hero can weep. Finally, Aeneas’ mourning of Minsenus complements this statement of a hero. The narrator explains that “all mourned aloud, especially the pious/ Aeneas” (6.241-2). The narrator, in naming Aeneas pious, implies that crying can be a pious act. These reminders to the audience prompt readers to redefine their idea of what it means to be a hero. Odysseus and Aeneas
contribute to this new definition, demonstrating how weeping and showing emotion can be a heroic way to behave.

Though Odysseus from Homer’s *The Odyssey* and Aeneas from Virgil’s *The Aeneid* tout heroic qualities, both outwardly express their emotions about home and loss and confirm that shedding tears is part of being a hero. If the two heroes had cried as a result of physical pain rather than emotional—like Dionysus’ shouts of agony in Aristophanes’ *The Frogs*, for example—Odysseus and Aeneas would have appeared as mock-heroes. Their frankness about emotional feelings results in an emotionally honest character; they are not afraid of what those around them will think, but they are intent on expressing how they really feel. Homer and Virgil also include various other characters who cry in their stories: men, women, citizens, warriors. These additional characters serve as an immediate juxtaposition between common people and heroes. All express emotions, even heroes who have been put on a pedestal for nobility and piety. If Odysseus or Aeneas pretended to be anything other than their emotionally honest selves, their heroic qualities would be clouded in dishonesty.
Works Cited