

ODYSSEUS AND THEMISTOCLES

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The stories of Odysseus, as told in Homer's *The Odyssey* and that of Themistocles, as told by Plutarch have a number of parallels and differences. These began with the birth of the two heroes, continued through to the ends of their journeys and can be seen as demonstrating the differences in what constituted a hero. These also reflect the changes in the nature of society between Ithaca and Athens.

The birth and upbringing of Odysseus and Themistocles contrasted sharply. Odysseus was the son of Laertes, King of Ithaca. From birth, his rank meant he knew great privilege and high expectations. Homer emphasizes this in *The Odyssey*, frequently referring to Odysseus' royal origin. In contrast, Themistocles had a relatively "humble" birth, his family "too obscure" to aid him. Although his father was of the aristocratic class, his mother was an "alien."¹ Thus, Themistocles had to rely upon his own natural skills alone to fulfill his ambitions.

Although Ithaca was a kingdom and, by that period, Athens was a burgeoning democracy, heredity and membership in the right aristocratic families was clearly important in both societies. Nevertheless, it would have been more difficult for someone of low birth to succeed in the society of Homer's Ithaca than in Themistocles' Athens. Homer portrays Ithaca as a society in which class is important and where many of the nobility have little sympathy for those beneath them in status. When Odysseus disguised himself as a beggar, Antinous showed little concern about assaulting his social inferior.² In contrast, Themistocles' rise demonstrates that in Athens, ability could overcome poor birth.

Whatever their situation at birth, it is clear that ambition and a craving for glory drove both Odysseus and Themistocles. However, the nature of the glory they desired differed somewhat from each other. In the case of Odysseus, he focused upon a more personal glory that would reflect well upon him in his peer group and with the Gods. He needed to be the ideal *agathos*, a courageous and daring leader in battle. Despite his initial reluctance to fight in the Trojan War, he could not bear the shame among his peers of not fighting and became one of the most important leaders among the Greeks. During his long voyage, his individual heroism and daring frequently saved his crew. In their encounter with Circe, it is Odysseus who faced the enchantress alone, as his companions and kinsmen remained in the boat.³ Odysseus also bore all the physical characteristics of the classical hero. When Odysseus met Nausicaa, he was "radiant with handsomeness and grace" and Homer described Odysseus' bulging muscles and fine physique more than once.⁴ Clearly, the physical ideal was important in Ithaca. However, Odysseus' desire for glory sent him into unnecessary battles. Odysseus led the sack of Ismarus, which in turn led to "death and doom" as he lost men at the hands of the Cicones.⁵

Themistocles' desire for glory goes alongside his deep personal ambition, his quest for personal power within the *polis* of Attica. Plutarch writes, "Themistocles' longing for fame laid an irresistible hold on him" and yet Themistocles sought to satisfy this yearning through political power as well as individual glory.⁶ He was not the classical hero like Odysseus. Plutarch does not describe Themistocles' physical characteristics, for they did not

¹ Plutarch, *The Rise and Fall of Athens: Nine Greek Lives*, trans. Ian Scott-Kilvert (London: Penguin, 1960) 77

² Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Walter Shewring (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980) 212

³ Ibid 120

⁴ Ibid 72

⁵ Ibid 100

⁶ Plutarch, *The Rise and Fall of Athens*, 79

matter, and his personal skills lay more with the word and the manipulation of others than with the sword or bow. Indeed, he eschewed the “pleasing and graceful accomplishment” of noble life, in a way inconceivable in a Homeric hero, in favor of learning practical skills.⁷ Themistocles’ daring was as a politician; his courage was in recognizing the dangers that Athens faced and convincing the people to follow his plans despite fierce opposition. When he persuaded the *polis* to use the newly found silver to build the triremes, he risked shame and ostracism, as well as the downfall of his city, should he have failed.⁸ In many ways, he was playing for far higher stakes than Odysseus ever did. Themistocles aimed not only to make himself great – although this was undoubtedly his intent – but also to make great his city of Athens. His life and fame were inextricably linked to the survival and success of his state. This reflects the abiding loyalty that men of his time had for their *polis*, a loyalty that went beyond immediate family and peer group to embrace broader concept of community. The individual *agathos* of Ithaca had become an intrinsic member of a community in Themistocles’ Athens.

If Odysseus and Themistocles did not share physical characteristics, they did share a sharp intelligence, a plenitude of guile, and the will to use lies and deception to achieve their ends. As Menelaus relates to Telemachus, it was Odysseus who suggested and led the attack on the Trojans using the horse that finally led to the end of the long war.⁹ Later, during his voyages, Odysseus saved his men frequently through his guile, especially during the episode with the Cyclops. Trapped in the Cyclops’ cave and recognizing that they could not escape through brute force, Odysseus came up with the plan to trick Polyphemus that resulted in their escape.¹⁰ Odysseus also used disguise to good effect. As Helen relates, “in servile shape [Odysseus] passed into the city of the Trojans.”¹¹ Later, he

infiltrated Ithaca dressed as a beggar to evaluate the situation before revealing himself.¹² He also not averse to telling lies if necessary. Once in Ithaca, “wily” Odysseus lied to the swineherd to protect his identity.¹³

Themistocles used a supreme act of trickery to save Athens from the Persians. As the leaders of the Greek fleet considered withdrawal from their optimal position near Salamis, Themistocles had to act quickly. He tricked Xerxes, the Persian King into believing that he was on the side of the Persians and lured them into an attack during which the superior Greek triremes defeated the much larger Persian fleet.¹⁴ Later deceit further improved the situation for the Greeks and for the Athenians in particular. Firstly, he ensured that the Persian army retreated to Asia minor and did not remain to fight at the Battle of Plataea, then used guile to make certain that Athens could build a defensive wall against the strong objections of the Spartans.¹⁵ Themistocles did not only use his intelligence for deception, however. He was farsighted enough to recognize the danger of the Persians, to push the Athenians to the sea, to select Salamis as the ideal place for the sea battle.

In both Homer’s Ithaca and in Themistocles’ Athens, it would seem that guile and deception were accepted tactics to use against enemies. Even the upright Aristides did not object to Themistocles’ ploy during the battle of Salamis, and the Greeks acknowledged his part in the victory by honoring him with the most individual glory for wisdom.¹⁶ However, both societies also appreciated honesty and forthright behavior in due place. In *The Odyssey*, truth will eventually out, and the hero’s deceit was always for a good cause. Themistocles, despite being the consummate politician, also knew the value of being fair and honest, declaring once; “I should be a poor magistrate if I did people favors contrary to the law.”¹⁷ Perhaps Themistocles was only honest to achieve his ends,

⁷ Ibid 78

⁸ Ibid 80

⁹ Homer, *The Odyssey*, 41

¹⁰ Ibid 107–109

¹¹ Ibid 40

¹² Ibid 202

¹³ Ibid 169

¹⁴ Plutarch, *The Rise and Fall of Athens*, 90

¹⁵ Ibid 93, 95

¹⁶ Ibid 90, 94.

¹⁷ Ibid 82

but he judged the tenor of his society well enough to achieve popularity and political power based on this stance.

Despite their many attributes, both Odysseus and Themistocles had flaws that led them into disaster and danger. They both shared a weakness for luxury and a tendency to hubris, and while Odysseus made friends easily, Themistocles was rather better at making enemies. Odysseus' tendency to give into temptation caused him and his men problems and delay on their journey. Although he managed to resist the lure of the Lotus Eaters, he gave into the enticement of Circe and her luxurious home, remaining a year "feasting on plenteous meat and delicious wine".¹⁸ Themistocles similarly enjoyed the good things in life, making enemies with his extravagance at Olympia and earning a reputation as someone always keen to make and spend money.¹⁹ This reputation did not endear him to the powerful men in the city and played a part in creating the jealousy that led to his downfall. Wealth clearly existed in both Ithaca and Athens, yet while it was acceptable, even expected of a noble man to give and receive lavish hospitality in Ithaca, there seems to have been a more sober feeling in Athens. The principles of hospitality still stood, men still observed them, yet without the excesses apparently accepted in Ithaca.

If the temptations of luxury endangered Odysseus and Themistocles, then the perils of hubris almost destroyed them. After tricking and escaping the Cyclops, Odysseus could have made a clean escape, yet his desire for glory, for his deeds to be known pushed him to taunt Polyphemus and reveal his name. Not only did this almost result in the destruction of their ship by the enraged giant, but it also brought upon him the wrath of Poseidon, God of the Sea, who dogged his journey thereafter.²⁰ While not making any divine enemies, Themistocles made copious numbers of mortal enemies with his own arrogance in the aftermath of Salamis. He manipulated people to emphasize his position as "a person of great importance and power",

began extorting weaker island states, taking bribes and acting in a thoroughly high-handed manner.²¹ The pride of Odysseus seemed a natural extension of his quest for glory and, while unfortunate, went unpunished by mortal men. Perhaps his willingness to debase himself – as when he disguised himself as a beggar – mitigated his arrogance. Ultimately, while delayed and hurt by his arrogance, it did not destroy the Homeric hero. By the time of Themistocles, however, the state of Athens was unwilling to accept such behavior in any of its citizens, however deserved his pride might have been. The democracy allowed no man to become so powerful and so overbearing as had Themistocles and the people reacted poorly to him. Themistocles paid the price for his arrogance in lost friends and, ultimately, in his disgrace.

One of the most notable differences between Odysseus and Themistocles and, by extension between Ithaca and Athens, was their relationships to the Gods. In Homer, the Gods are omnipresent, as both allies and adversaries. Odysseus made an enemy of Poseidon but Athena directly aided him on multiple occasions, Hermes brought him advice and Zeus himself commanded Calypso to free Odysseus from her island.²² There were no such encounters for Themistocles. Although he appeared to accept portents and was careful to honor the Gods, his allies were mortal. Without the divine to rely upon, Themistocles befriended the common people of Athens and thus ensured his initial success.²³ This mirrors a shift in emphasis between Homer's Ithaca and the time of Themistocles. As Homer looked back to the time of Ithaca, he saw it as a time of heroes and Gods, a golden age when the divine was close to the mundane. However, gradually, the divine became more remote from the people. The Athenians still worshiped Goddesses such as Athena with elaborate ceremonies, but she was isolated in the Acropolis, in Olympia, not walking among the people. This sense of disconnection is not surprising in the wake of the Dark Ages that engulfed Greece, when it must have

¹⁸ Homer, *The Odyssey*, 125

¹⁹ Plutarch, *The Rise and Fall of Athens*, 81–82.

²⁰ Homer, *The Odyssey*, 111.

²¹ Plutarch, *The Rise and Fall of Athens*, 92–94.

²² Homer, *The Odyssey*, 57.

²³ Plutarch, *The Rise and Fall of Athens*, 82.

seemed to the Greeks as though their Gods had abandoned them, yet it seems to have resulted in a more independent spirit, a willingness to ponder the truths of the universe beyond the merely superstitious.

Whoever their allies and rivals, ultimately, the outcomes for Odysseus and Themistocles were very different. After Zeus' intervention, Calypso offered Odysseus a choice: immortality with her, or to return home.²⁴ Despite the temptations of the goddess, he realized he needed to go home. His loyalties to his wife and to his home made him risk the possible difficulties and leave. Although Poseidon delayed him and Penelope's suitors hindered him, he ultimately managed to return home and found some measure of peace.²⁵ Themistocles, however, lost his home. The angry Athenians exiled him from Athens and later tried to prosecute him for treason. The charges forced him to flee to Persia and make obeisance to the King.²⁶ He was able to live well there, but clearly never forgot his home. When the Persians once more looked to invade Athens and called upon Themistocles, he committed suicide rather than betray his old *polis*. Despite their rejection of him, Themistocles never lost his loyalty.²⁷ Once more, this demonstrates the devotion to the *polis* seen in Athenian times compared with the Ithacan loyalty to family and *oikos*.

Both the cultures of Ithaca and Athens honored glory, loyalty, intelligence and the principle of hospitality. In Ithaca, however, life revolved around family and the *oikos*. The individual hero showed idealized physical traits and personal courage in his quest for glory. The Gods watched the hero, aiding or hindering him as they wished. The nobility accepted extravagance and luxury as part of their lives and expected the *status quo* of social stratification. In Athens, however, loyalty was to the *polis*, and political excellence could be as effective a route to success as physical traits or personal daring. Social status was more flexible, yet more precarious. The people would not tolerate those who became too arrogant or who abused their power and used ostracism like a weapon, even against a man such as Themistocles. While Odysseus was able to return from his exile, Themistocles died in his exile, a different kind of hero for a different time.

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²⁴ Homer, *The Odyssey*, 59

²⁵ Ibid 298

²⁶ Plutarch, *The Rise and Fall of Athens*, 102.

²⁷ Ibid 107.