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Stupid, Pointless Wars*

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IN *ILIAD* 3, AS HELEN ARRIVES AT THE WALLS OF TROY, THE TROJAN ELDERS ON the walls speak among themselves:

οὐ νέμεσις Τρῶας καὶ ἑὺκνήμιδας Ἀχαιοὺς
τοιγᾷδ' ἄμφι γυναικὶ πολὺν χρόνον ἄλγεα πάσχειν·
αἰνῶς ἀθανάτησι θεῆς εἰς ὧπα ἔοικεν· (*Il.* 3.156–58)

It is not wrong for the Trojans and Achaeans who wear fine shin armor to suffer pains for a long time for a woman like this—she terribly resembles the immortal goddesses in appearance.

Nemesis is the justified indignation people feel at a violation of social norms, or, as here, behavior that gives rise to such indignation. This is a shifty thing for the Trojan elders to say, since by treating one moral issue—whether Helen is worth fighting over—they obscure a simpler one on which there can be no real doubt. Taking Helen was wrong, and it will soon be revealed to be even more decisively wrong after the violation of the truce. So considering whether she is, in herself, worth fighting over, if one had some legitimate claim to her, is an evasion. This may be a real question for the Achaeans, but not for the Trojans. But even if we take the remark at face value, it invites criticism. It is possible for a character to say that something is not *nemesis* or *nemesseton* as a litotes, where the speaker means that it is absolutely the correct thing to

* In revising this address for publication, I have removed some colloquialisms and added some basic annotation, but have left much that belongs to the original oral performance. The address obviously reflects my views of the war in Iraq, but I hope that my reflections on antiheroic hexameter poetry will be relevant outside the context that prompted them. All translations are mine.

do, as Odysseus says at *Il.* 19.182 that it is not *nemesseton* for a king to pay compensation when he has started a quarrel. Fighting over Helen, however, is clearly not a positively good thing to do. The elders' statement is more like Agamemnon's assertion at *Il.* 14.80 that it is not *nemesis* to flee evil, even by night, or Telemachus's insistence at *Od.* 1.350 that it is not *nemesis* for the singer to perform the return of the Achaeans, as Penelope has just asked him not to do. Generally, one does not insist that something is acceptable unless there is reason to think someone else would think that it is not.

That is, I think that the *Iliad* is aware of the anti-Trojan War tradition. In the *Iliad*, the Trojan War is a great heroic enterprise—sad, ambiguous, but impressive. In the alternate view, it is stupid. This strand of tradition finds its strongest expression in the versions that place Helen in Egypt, so that the war and all its sufferings are the result of a mistake. Herodotus's version (2.115–16), in which the Trojans insist that Helen is not in Troy, but the Greeks refuse to believe them, has a touch of nineteenth-century French boulevard comedy—is Helen in the closet? Under the bed? Behind the screen? Yet even without this twist, the war for Helen can easily seem not worth it, indeed, so obviously not worth it that the Greeks, or their leaders, seem reckless. This is the view of the angry citizens whose mutterings the chorus reports in Aeschylus's *Agamemnon* (448–49): ἀλλοτρίας διαὶ γυναικός (“because of someone else's wife”). This is the view of the Persians in Herodotus:

Τὸ μὲν νυν ἀρπάζειν γυναῖκας ἀνδρῶν ἀδίκων νομίζειν ἔργον εἶναι, τὸ δὲ ἀρπασθεισέων σπουδὴν ποιήσασθαι τιμωρέειν ἀνοήτων, τὸ δὲ μηδεμίαν ὥρην ἔχειν ἀρπασθεισέων σωφρόνων. (1.4.4–7)

For they believe that abducting women is the action of unjust men, but making a serious effort at getting vengeance when they have been abducted is that of fools, while not caring about abducted women is that of the moderate.

This view seems to be as old as the heroic version of the story, its invariable shadow. I am going to argue that this tradition is important for the Cyclic epic *Cypria*, even if the poem's meager remains do not permit an argument that it was consistently or coherently hostile to the war. Indeed, the evidence does not indicate that it was consistent in any way. Still, I have also come to suspect that the *Cypria* was, if not exactly funny or a parody—and I am not in this context interested in defining generic boundaries—permeated by a certain black humor about its subject. Then I shall turn to another hexameter text about a stupid war, the *Batrachomyomachia*.

In the *Cypria*, Nemesis was Helen's mother, born after Zeus raped the goddess, who had done her best to escape him:

τοὺς δὲ μετὰ τριτάτην Ἑλένην τέκε θαῦμα βροτοῖσι·
 τήν ποτε καλλίκομος Νέμεσις φιλότῃ μιγείσα
 Ζηνὶ θεῶν βασιλῇ τέκε κρατερῆς ὑπ' ἀνάγκης·
 φεῦγε γὰρ οὐδ' ἔθελεν μιχθήμεναι ἐν φιλότῃ
 πατρὶ Διὶ Κρονίῳ· ἐτείρετο γὰρ φρένας αἰδοῖ
 καὶ νεμέσει· κατὰ γῆν δὲ καὶ ἀτρύγετον μέλαν ὕδωρ
 φεῦγε, Ζεὺς δ' ἐδίωκε—λαβεῖν δ' ἐλιλαίετο θυμῷ—
 ἄλλοτε μὲν κατὰ κύμα πολυφλοίσβοιο θαλάσσης
 ἰχθύϊ εἰδομένην πόντον πολὺν ἐξοροθύνων,
 ἄλλοτ' ἂν' Ὀκεανὸν ποταμὸν καὶ πείρατα γαίης,
 ἄλλοτ' ἂν' ἥπειρον πολυβῶλακα· γίγνετο δ' αἰνὰ
 θηρί', ὅσ' ἥπειρος πολλὰ τρέφει, ὄφρα φύγοι νιν. (fr. 9 Bernabé 1987; fr. 7
 Davies 1988)

Third, after them, she bore Helen, a wonder for mortals. Whom beautiful-haired Nemesis bore to Zeus, king of the gods, having joined in love, under mighty compulsion. For she fled and did not wish to join in love with father Zeus son of Cronus. For she was worn in her mind with shame and indignation. She was fleeing over earth and barren black water, and Zeus was pursuing—he was eager to catch her—sometimes in the wave of the resounding sea, as a fish, and he was stirring up the great sea, sometimes along the Ocean river and the limits of earth, sometimes through the fertile mainland. She became terrible beasts, as many as the earth rears, to escape him.

The *nemesis* Nemesis feels, closely linked to *aidos*, is clearly prospective. Whether it is directed at the sexual relationship itself, or at its consequences, Nemesis can imagine how others would judge her acquiescence, and she allies herself with that judgment.

According to all the rules of Greek poetic genealogy, Helen's birth from Nemesis must be meaningful. Helen, unlike her mother however, shows an inability to act in accordance with prospective *nemesis* and *aidos*. She tells Aphrodite that it would be *nemesseton* for her to go to Alexander's bed at *Il.* 3.410, but threats from Aphrodite bring her there a few moments later anyway. If Helen had been more responsive to the prospect of *nemesis*, there would have been no Trojan War. So she must embody some other aspect of her mother, and the obvious one is retrospective *nemesis*: Helen moves in a cloud of justified criticism, and everyone who becomes involved with her is tainted by it. If Nemesis is her mother, Nemesis acts through her. We may compare Andromache's argument at Euripides *Tro.* 768–69 that Helen is the child not of Zeus, but of Alastor, Phthonos, Phonos, Thanatos, and all the evils that the earth nourishes: these are her parents because she produces them.

Once we have Nemesis, though, it is not a very long distance to Momus, personified blame. *Momus* is criticism, whether of social misbehavior or aes-

thetic impropriety, and, unlike *nemesis*, it is often applied unjustly. Still, the two often go together. Nausicaa, anyway, compares the blame (μωμεύη) she would receive if she were seen with Odysseus with her own *nemesis* for girls who sneak around with men (νεμεσῶ, *Od.* 6.273–88). The author known to the happy few who have dealings with him as the *Mythographus Homericus*, whose work is preserved in the D-scholia to Homer and in a number of papyri, says on *Iliad* 1.5:

φασὶ γὰρ τὴν γῆν βαρουμένην ὑπὸ ἀνθρώπων πολυπληθείας, μηδεμιᾶς ἀνθρώπων οὔσης εὐσεβείας, αἰτῆσαι τὸν Δία κουφισθῆναι τοῦ ἄχθους. τὸν δὲ Δία, πρῶτον μὲν εὐθὺς ποιῆσαι τὸν Θηβαϊκὸν πόλεμον, δι’ οὗ πολλοὺς πάνυ ἀπώλεσεν. ὕστερον δὲ πάλιν συμβούλῳ τῷ Μώμῳ ἐχρήσατο. ἦν Διὸς βουλὴν Ὀμηρὸς φησιν. ἐπειδὴ οἶός τε ἦν κεραυνοῖς ἢ κατακλυσμοῖς πάντας διαφθεῖραι, τοῦτο τοῦ Μώμου κωλύσαντος, ὑποθέμενου δὲ αὐτῷ γνώμας δύο, τὴν Θέτιδος θνητογαμίαν, καὶ θυγατρὸς καλὴν γένναν, ἐξ ὧν ἀμφοτέρων πόλεμος Ἑλλήσι τε καὶ Βαρβάροις ἐγένετο, οὕτω συμβῆναι κουφισθῆναι τὴν γῆν, πολλῶν ἀναιρεθέντων.¹

They say that the Earth, weighed down by humanity’s great number, especially since there was no piety among humans, asked Zeus to be lightened of her burden. Zeus first caused the Theban war, and thereby killed many. Later, he took Momus as his advisor—what Homer calls the “Plan of Zeus.” He would have destroyed everybody with thunderbolts or floods, but Momus stopped him, and suggested two ideas, the mortal marriage of Thetis, and the birth of a beautiful daughter, which together would cause a war between Greeks and barbarians, so that the outcome would be a lightening of the Earth, since many would perish.

The subscription attributes this tale to the *Cypria*: ἡ ἱστορία παρὰ Στασίνῳ τῷ τὰ Κύπρια πεποιηκότι (“The Story is found in Stasinus, composer of the *Cypria*”). The reliability of the subscriptions of *MH*, his sources and the nature of his work, have been a topic of intense discussion.² Not everything in one of his *historiae* comes from the source he cites. Yet that source is always relevant. It appears that the process of turning what would once have been discussion of variant versions in a learned mythological commentary into the single stories of the scholia has caused distortion. In this instance, since the scholium continues by quoting a few lines (fr. 1 Bernabé 1987; Davies 1988), we know that Zeus

¹ The text of the scholium is that of Heyne 1834. There is also a text with commentary (in Catalán) in Pagès Cebrían 2007: 133–34, 193–95.

² Schwartz 1881 argues that they are unreliable, but Lünstedt 1961 shows that, while the author cited is not to be taken as the sole source of the material *MH* provides, the authors cited treated the story told and are relevant to the ἱστορία.

in this poem did begin the Trojan War as part of a plan to reduce the human population. So some of the *historia*'s material was surely in the *Cypria*, but we cannot be confident that all of it was.³ The detail that Zeus planned to use either flood or fire to destroy humanity seems to show the influence of Stoic thought, for example. Some scholars, since it is not entirely easy to reconcile everything in this scholium with other sources, have argued that the scholium is almost worthless and that Momus is unlikely to have been a character in the *Cypria*.⁴ How could Momus have suggested the marriage of Thetis to a mortal in the *Cypria*, since Philodemus cites the *Cypria* and secondarily Hesiod (fr. 210 M-W) for the version that Zeus swore she would marry a mortal because he was angry that she rejected him (Severyns 1965: 9)? Sophocles' *Momus* was a satyr-play (fr. 421 TGrF, ἀναστῦσαι, is not a possible tragic word), and Momus would be more at home there than in high epic.

Still, in Hesiod, *Theog.* 211–25, Momus is, like Nemesis and Eris, one of the offspring of Night. Nemesis and Eris were both characters, and Nemesis, at least, was fully personified. So Momus seems not inappropriate in a poem that used other personified abstractions as characters. Furthermore, there is no reason to think that the merging of various sources into the scholium's narrative took place in discrete chunks. Even if Momus in the *Cypria* did not give exactly the advice that he gives in the scholium, he could have been an advisor. (Perhaps, for example, Momus proposed that Zeus fulfill his vow now and arrange for the Judgment to take place at Thetis's wedding). Burkert has suggested that he goes back to the Babylonian divinity Mummu, who discusses killing the noisy younger gods with Apsu in *Enuma Elish* (Burkert 1992: 102–3). But even if Momus was there originally because a Babylonian god with a similar function had a similar name, no Greek poet could keep Momus as a character unless Momus criticized someone or something. Maybe he is there not only because he criticizes Zeus's original plan, but because he offers positive reflections on its nature, too. Zeus's ultimate method for reducing the human population has several advantages. Unlike a flood, it allows animals to survive; it kills many people, but not the whole world's population; and it makes people's own stupidity the cause of their destruction. It does not make the gods look very good, either, if we consider the quarrel of the goddesses at the wedding of Peleus and Thetis.

Zeus planned the war in order to relive the overburdened Earth of excessive human population. If *MH* is accurate that the poem, or Earth, said that

³ On the sources of *MH*, see Montanari 1995. On the transition from learned work to mythography and the citations in *MH*, see Cameron 2004: 104–6.

⁴ Welcker 1865: 86–87 already doubted Momus; also Kullmann 1960: 180–84. Defended by Bethe 228 and Jouan 1966: 46.

people were impious, we have an unusually negative view of the heroic world; if not, we have a Zeus who apparently kills very large numbers of innocent people. It is not a pleasant thought, and it is not surprising that Euripides mentions the theme three times, never including human wickedness—near the beginning of the *Helen* (38–41), and near the ends of the *Orestes* 1639–42) and *Electra* (1282–83)—in plays in which Greek glory is not exactly shining (Jouan 1966: 41–54).

Much of our “knowledge” of the Epic Cycle, if we can call it knowledge, comes from Proclus’s epitome, which is surely not based directly on the poems. Some scholars have thought, not without reason, that it has been distorted to provide a mythographic introduction to the *Iliad* instead of an accurate list of the events of each poem.⁵ It is clearly closely related to pseudo-Apollodorus (Bethe 1966: 50–63). The epitome begins with the consultation between Zeus and, probably, Themis—a conjecture for Thetis—about the Trojan War. We do not know how to adapt this to our other information. The summary does not explain Zeus’s initial decision to start a great war, although the fragment confirms that he had a motive. Themis perhaps suggested the apple of Eris and Judgment of Paris as a way of beginning the war. Still, the epitome includes material that has little to do with the *Iliad*, like the deaths of the Dioscouri. So I am going to go forward, cautiously, on the assumption that it reflects the actual poem most of the time.

Remembering the old men on the walls of Troy, we have to pause when Proclus’s summary says:

καὶ μετὰ ταῦτα Ἀχιλλεὺς Ἑλένην ἐπιθυμεῖ θεάσασθαι, καὶ συνήγαγεν αὐτοὺς εἰς τὸ αὐτὸ Ἀφροδίτη καὶ Θέτις. εἶτα ἀπονοστεῖν ὠρμημένους τοὺς Ἀχαιοὺς Ἀχιλλεὺς κατέχει. (59–61 Bernabé 1987; 77–78 Davies 1988)

And after this Achilles desires to behold Helen, and Aphrodite and Thetis brought them together in the same place. Then, when the Achaeans were rushing to go home, Achilles restrains them.

So this is a narrative in which Helen’s mother is Nemesis, Zeus’s advisor is Momus, and the Greeks are starting to go home, until Achilles sees Helen and stops them. Some scholars have assumed that Thersites must have aroused the Greeks to want to give up, imagining Achilles here in the role of Odysseus in *Iliad* 2, where going home is clearly the wrong choice. But the sequence here looks rather different. If this episode directly follows Achilles’ viewing of Helen, it is hard to avoid a causal link. Odysseus in the *Iliad* stops the Greeks from fleeing homeward because he has confidence in their final victory and

⁵ I am not convinced by the argument of Burgess 2001: 15–40, that the *Cypria* is likely to have narrated the entire Trojan War; but I do not see this as impossible, either.

does not want the shame of giving up. Achilles, apparently, stops them because he has seen Helen. This poem does not seem to think the Trojan War is fought for good reason.

Once we assume that the poet is capable of an ironic attitude to his material, many details make better sense. Jasper Griffin has pointed out that there is some remarkable nastiness in the Cycle (Griffin 1977). While the post-Iliadic poems beat the *Cypria* for pure brutality, when it comes to sleaze, the *Cypria* wins. For example: Odysseus tries to get around his oath to defend Helen's husband by pretending to be crazy. Caught out by Palamedes, he and Diomedes murder Palamedes—they drown him while he is fishing, not a typical activity of the epic hero. The whole episode seems to be designed to be as unheroic as possible.

Others incidents also look as if they could put an ironic light on the heroic world. When Menelaus comes to Nestor after the abduction of Helen, Nestor tells him how Epopeus was ruined after he raped the daughter of Lycurgus. This is a perfectly good exemplum. But he then goes on to tell him the story of Oedipus, the madness of Heracles, and the doings of Theseus and Ariadne, all excellent stories deserving some narrative attention on some occasion, but not especially relevant, as far as I can tell, to the situation of Menelaus. Heracles' madness is not even about sex. I suppose Menelaus might contemplate the stories of Heracles and Oedipus and recognize that his situation could be a great deal worse. But we have to consider the possibility that our poet lacks respect for Nestor. While I would argue that all Nestor's speeches in the *Iliad* are significant, when Telemachus at *Od.* 15.194–201 seeks to avoid having to stay with him, the poet seems to hint that Nestor likes the sound of his own voice too much. The *Cypria* seems to have developed this possibility by having him tell irrelevant stories.

Again, somebody, maybe Nestor, advised Menelaus that wine was the best thing the gods gave mortals for scattering their worries (fr.17 Bernabé 1987; fr.15 Davies 1988). The heroes certainly enjoy wine. Still, using it to ease your pain after your wife has left you, while certainly understandable, is not particularly heroic.

The Cycle is famous for its repetitions. For example, Helenus delivers a prophecy while Alexander's ship is being built, apparently; then Aphrodite tells Aeneas to sail too; then Cassandra prophesies. A real poem would presumably have handled this with more subtlety than is left in this epitomized state, but it still makes me wonder about all these prophecies. A prophecy delivered over the ship of Paris has to be bad news. Perhaps Cassandra is already fated to be disbelieved, but Helenus should be respected. So we have two prophecies, and Paris sails off anyway. The Trojans do not look very clever. Aeneas presumably goes along because that way both branches of the Trojan royal family are implicated; the *Iliad* puts as much blame as possible on Paris alone.

On the other hand, the Greeks do not display much intelligence, either. They land in Theuthrania and attack it instead of Troy. The story of Telephus is familiar to us, so that its strangeness is not salient, but this is absurd. When Apollonius does something similar at Cyzicus, where the Argonauts fight and kill the king who just entertained them, it is a little easier—they are in unfamiliar territory, and they are driven back at night (*Arg.* 1.953–1077). The *Cypria*'s Greeks are within what should be the known world. Apparently, they are incompetent at navigation, conduct no reconnaissance, have no way of knowing where they are, and make no attempt at finding out. They just attack. Then they are scattered by a storm. Then Telephus comes to Argos and is healed by Achilles, so that he can find Troy for them. They gather at Aulis again. In other words, they set out on a military campaign without knowing how to reach their enemy and without any Plan B in case they were split up, because storms on the Aegean are presumably not to be expected. This really seems incredibly dumb. Not that it is unbelievable—for an American in 2008, it is only too credible. But it is realistic rather than heroic.

And Proclus's summary of the abduction of Helen is particularly sordid: μετὰ τὴν μίξιν τὰ πλείστα κτήματα ἐνθήμενοι νυκτὸς ἀποπλέουσι ("after sex, stowing most of the possessions, by night they sail away," 17–18 Bernabé 1987). They have sex, grab Menelaus's stuff, and sneak out in the dark. While we cannot build too much on the wording of the epitome, this does not sound as if Helen picks up a few favorite *tochtchkes* as she leaves, or packs up the gifts Paris gave her at his welcoming banquet (13–14 Bernabé 1987; 19–20 Davies 1988). They practically strip the place.

Not everything we know about the *Cypria* offers itself so easily to an ironic reading. The death of Protesilaus is hard to see as a joke. But quite a bit could be. Philoctetes is abandoned because his wound smells so bad (52 Bernabé 1987; 65–66 Davies 1988). This reminds me of the ordeal Menelaus undergoes in the *Odyssey*, when he and his men have to hide under sealskins, which smell really, really bad (*Od.* 4.441–42). I imagine they would, from my limited experience with seals, but since the parallel episode has Odysseus and his men hiding under the Cyclops's sheep, where they are liable to be eaten, I cannot take Menelaus's suffering too seriously. Philoctetes' agony is not amusing, but a stinking injury could be. None of the major characters seems to behave well. Achilles and Agamemnon quarrel because Achilles is invited late to a feast. Of course this can be explained in terms of the importance of feasting in heroic honor.⁶ Yet it can also look very petty.

⁶Nagy, for example, argues that Achilles is especially associated with the feast/quarrel/honor nexus, 1979: 128–35.

Nobody in antiquity seems to have thought the *Cypria* was funny or anything less than a respectful account of the origins and early course of the Trojan War. Many entirely serious tragedies were based on its stories. But I do not see much evidence that ancient audiences thought Euripides was funny, either. Although critics argue about whether particular scenes in Euripides are supposed to be funny, the contemporary consensus is certainly that some passages are.⁷ Euripides was evidently very fond of the *Cypria*, and I suspect he appreciated its tone as well as its stories.

The *Batrachomyomachia* is a very different kind of text. I am going to summarize it, in a way that I hope will bring out its peculiar qualities, since most of us do not read it very often, though it was very popular in the early modern period. Jasper Griffin in the *Cambridge History of Greek Literature* calls it “unfunny” (Griffin 1985: 39), while Ken Dowden (1980) speaks of its “irredeemable mediocrity.” Nobody, however, doubts that it tries to be amusing. It is also learned.

It begins with an aggressive and confusing display of its own literariness:

Ἀρχόμενος πρώτης σελίδος χορὸν ἐξ Ἑλικῶνος⁸
 ἔλθειν εἰς ἔμὸν ἦτορ ἐπεύχομαι εἴνεκ' αἰοιδῆς,
 ἦν νέον ἐν δέλτοισιν ἑμοῖς ἐπὶ γούνασι θῆκα
 δῆριν ἀπειρεσίην, πολεμόκλονον ἔργον Ἄρης,
 εὐχόμενος μερόπεσσιν ἐς οὐατα πᾶσι βαλέσθαι (1–5)

As I begin my first column, I pray that the chorus come from Helicon into my heart for the sake of the song that I just put in tablets upon my knees—a boundless battle, a work of Ares full of the noise of war—and I pray that they throw it into the ears of all mortals

The image of an entire chorus in his heart is disconcerting. Also, it is a little peculiar that he calls on the Heliconian Muses, Hesiod's Muses, for what is most emphatically a poem of *reges et proelia*. The opening lines apparently mean that he is beginning the recitation of a text that he has just recently composed with the aid of writing, and that the Muses are asked only to make it popular, as he says in line 5.⁹ But how are they going to do that from inside his heart? And by emphasizing that he is beginning, even though the

⁷The decisive article was probably Knox 1979, and since Seidensticker 1982 issues of humor in tragedy, especially Euripides, have been salient.

⁸Allen's OCT here follows the unique reading of the oldest manuscript, Codex Barocc. 50. Other mss. have πρῶτον Μουσῶν, which is unquestionably *facilior*.

⁹Wölke 1978: 258; Glei 1984: 113; Fusillo 1988: 88–89. Ludwig conjectured θῆσω. It may be a parody of Apollonius' infamous request to the Muses to be his ὑποφῆτορες, *Arg.* 1.22.

poem is already composed, he seems to be speaking in a situation of public performance in which he is reading his own text. (I suspect, however, that the performance is entirely fictive).

The image of the poet with the tablet on his knees echoes the famous scene in Callimachus's *Aetia*, but instead of a god's warning against a fat Muse, we have the promise of a grandiose topic, δῆριν ἀπειρεσίην, πολέμοκλονον ἔργον Ἄρηος. The mice imitated the Giants:

πῶς μύες ἐν βατράχοισιν ἀριστεύσαντες ἔβησαν,
 γηγενέων ἀνδρῶν μιμούμενοι ἔργα Γιγάντων (6–7)

How the mice, showing heroic valor, attacked the frogs, imitating the deeds of the earthborn men, the Giants.

The Giants are not only very large, making the mice even smaller, but they are the archetypal enemies of the gods, the symbols of disorder and anarchy. The poem thus suggests that the war it narrates threatened the cosmos.

The narrative proper begins as a mouse, thirsty after escaping from a weasel, stops to drink at a pond. We have fragments in a Michigan papyrus of another Hellenistic hexameter parody about a war between a group of mice and, apparently, one weasel (*SSH* 1190)—if there were other weasels, they do not appear in this fragment. That may be yet another subtext of the *Batrachomyomachia*, but even if it was not yet in existence, it indicates what this poem is not. This mouse has not fought the weasel but fled it, γαλέης κίνδυνον ἀλύξας (“escaping danger from a weasel,” 9). He is lucky to have survived.

A parodic epic about a war between mice and weasels, as prey and predator, would be no more peculiar to antiquity than are Tom and Jerry, Tweetie Bird and Sylvester, Roadrunner and Wiley Coyote. Aesop 256 Perry (1952; 169 Hausrath/Hunger 1970–74) has the hares, at war with the eagles, trying to get the foxes on their side. The foxes, not surprisingly, do not like the odds. In 255 Perry (1952; 267 Hausrath/Hunger 1970–74), a mosquito successfully wages war on a lion, but then is eaten by a spider. Most of the other beast-mock epics we hear about—*Suda* gives a list (3.526.6, 527.8 Adler 1928–38)—represent groups who are for some reason natural enemies. Either they are predators and prey, or they share habitat and compete for resources. Such wars have a certain logic. In my own neighborhood in Ann Arbor, Michigan, there was a war about ten years ago for control of the storm drains between raccoons and skunks. (The skunks won a decisive victory).

But the whole point of frogs and mice is that they have nothing whatever to do with each other. The narrative adapts a fable preserved in the *Life of*

Aesop (384 Perry, 1952: 302; Hausrath/Hunger, 1970–74) in which a frog and mouse become friends. The mouse entertains the frog to a feast in a pantry—cheese, meat, bread, dried figs. The frog issues a counter-invitation. He leads the mouse to the pond and tells him to dive. The mouse does not know how, so the frog ties the mouse to his foot. The mouse cries that he is drowning, but the frog pulls him under; the mouse cries that even dead he will get revenge. Sure enough, when the frog comes to the surface, a crow flies down to eat the mouse and tears the frog apart. It is not entirely clear whether the frog is malicious or just really stupid.

The poem's narrative begins at the first encounter of frog and mouse. It moves immediately from the fabulistic to the mock-heroic mode. The frog initiates the relationship. He asks the mouse's genealogy—Ξεῖνε τίς εἶ; πόθεν ἦλθες ἐπ' ἡϊόνας; τίς ὁ φύσας; ("Stranger, who are you? From whence did you come to the shores? Who is your begetter?" 13), because he is impressed by the mouse's heroic appearance:

καὶ σὲ δ' ὁρῶ καλόν τε καὶ ἄλκιμον ἔξοχον ἄλλων,
σκηπτοῦχον βασιλῆα καὶ ἐν πολέμοισι μαχητὴν
ἔμμεναι· (21–23)

I see that you are noble-looking and valiant more than others, so as to be a scepter-bearing king and a fighter in wars.

And he promises that if the mouse proves a worthy friend, he will give him abundant *xeinia*, and announces his own noble origins:

εἰμὶ δ' ἐγὼ βασιλεὺς Φυσίγναθος, ὃς κατὰ λίμνην
τιμῶμαι βατράχων ἡγούμενος ἤματα πάντα·
καί με πατήρ Πηλεὺς ἀνεθρέψατο, Ὑδρομεδούσῃ
μιχθεὶς ἐν φιλότῃ παρ' ὄχθας Ἑριδανοῖο (17–20)

I am King Puffy-cheeks, who am honored in the swamp as leader over the frogs all my days. My father Muddy brought me up, having joined in love with Queen-in-water by the banks of Eridanus.

The mouse, Psicharpax, answers a bit oddly:

τίπτε γένος τοῦμόν ζητεῖς; δῆλον δ' ἐν ἅπασιν
ἀνθρώποις τε θεοῖς τε καὶ οὐρανίοις πετεηνοῖς. (25–26)

Why do you ask my race? It is clear among all humans, and gods, and those who have wings in the sky.

We expect, after the question, some deprecatory remark about the fragility of life, before the boastful genealogy, on the model of Glaucus at *Il.* 6.145–59. But we do not get one. Instead, he says it is “clear” to human beings, gods, and

birds. That seems to suggest that he has misunderstood the question, and is explaining not his parentage, but what species he is—hence he ignores other mice, who would care about his parents, and includes birds, some of whom have a vested interest in knowing a mouse when they spot one.

Yet he goes on to give the names of his parents. Psicharpax mentions how his father reared him on “figs, nuts, and all kinds of food.” He then turns to this and the frog’s dissimilarity, but with a peculiar twist:

πῶς δὲ φίλον ποιῇ με, τὸν ἐς φύσιν οὐδὲν ὁμοῖον;
σοὶ μὲν γὰρ βίος ἐστὶν ἐν ὕδασιν· αὐτὰρ ἔμοιγε
ὅσσα παρ’ ἀνθρώποις τρώγειν ἔθος· (32–34)

How will you make me your friend, when I am not at all similar in nature?
For your life is in the water. But my habit is to munch on everything found
among humans.

He continues with an extended catalogue of what he eats, in contrast to what the frog eats. Physiganthus responds:

ξεῖνε, λίην αὐχεῖς ἐπὶ γαστέρι· ἔστι καὶ ἡμῖν
πολλὰ μάλ’ ἐν λίμνῃ καὶ ἐπὶ χθονὶ θαύματ’ ἰδέσθαι. (57–58)

Stranger, you boast too much about your belly. We too have many wonders to
behold in the swamp and on land.

The frog’s particular glory is his amphibious life, which he offers to show the mouse, who can ride on his back. So the poet has sharpened the contrast between frog and mouse: one cares mostly about food, the other about *thaumata*. He may also be setting his own form of mock-epic in contrast to other Hellenistic genres: he suggests that his poem will not be about food, like Matro of Pitane, but it may have affinities with paradoxography.¹⁰

Although the mouse begins enjoying the trip, he is soon overcome by terror: δεινὰ δ’ ὑπεστενάχιζε φόβου κρυόεντος ἀνάγκῃ (“He groaned terribly under the compulsion of chilling fear,” 73). He thrashes his tail around in the water, comparing the frog unfavorably with the bull that carried Europa. This looks very much like an allusion to Moschus’s *Europa*, since Moschus describes at length what a nice trip Europa has—Poseidon makes sure it goes smoothly, dolphins dance around, and Europa suspects right away that the bull is a god (115–40). Europa has three lines of lament (146–48), and they sound *pro forma*. This mouse may be so scared that his paws are curled up and he is tearing at his fur, but he has excellent control of the literary canon.

¹⁰ For Matro, see Olson and Sens 1999. On the importance of paradoxography in Hellenistic poetry, see Krevans 2004: 175–76; 2005: 89–90.

The irony seems to cut both ways—if a would-be warrior should not be in a panic at being out on the water, a girl should be at least a little nervous when kidnapped by a swimming bull.

Then, when a water snake appears, the frog dives underwater, and the mouse drowns:

οὐκ ἂν μου κατὰ γαῖαν ἀμείνων ἦσθα, κάκιστε,
παγκρατίῳ τε πάλῃ τε καὶ εἰς δρόμον· ἀλλὰ πλανήσας
εἰς ὕδωρ μ' ἔρριψας. ἔχει θεὸς ἔκδικον ὄμμα. (95–97)

You would not have been better than me on land, villain, in the pancration or wrestling or running. But leading me astray, you threw me in water. The god has an avenging eye!

Other fables are relevant here. The hares were all going to jump off a cliff because they were so depressed at being the most cowardly animal in the world. But the noise they made reached the frogs in a pond below, and they all dove for the bottom—whereupon the hares cheered up, having found an animal more pusillanimous than themselves (138 Perry 1952: 143; Hausrath/Hunger 1970–74). A water snake was angry that a viper came to drink in his spring, and they decided to fight, with the winner to take the loser's territory. The frogs offered their help to the viper, but all they did in the battle was croak—all they can do (90 Perry 1952; 92 Hausrath/Hunger 1970–74). On the other hand, fabulistic mice are also not heroic. The mice and weasels are at war. The mice decide that they need leadership, so they elect generals. The generals puts on horns to show off, but when the weasels, predictably, rout the mice, the other mice all escape into their holes, but the horns get stuck and all the mouse-generals are eaten (165 Perry; 174 Hausrath/Hunger 1970–74). Mice are not great warriors.

In this poem, both mouse and frog are cowards individually. These are prey animals, not predators. Once the mouse is out of his natural element, he is in utter panic. When the frog sees the snake, he does not think for an instant about the mouse, but flees to save himself. But except when they confront a predator, they do not seem to realize that they are, in fact, prey—they think of themselves as brave warriors, and they are intensely competitive. Their competitiveness makes them unable to understand each other. The frog does not consider how dangerous it will be for the mouse in the water because he is so eager to show off his realm; Psicharpax's death-cry assumes that the frog has killed him on purpose, and includes a boast of athletic superiority.

Unfortunately, individual cowardice does not deter aggression when group psychology intervenes. When a mouse reports the fate of Psicharpax, anger immediately overcomes them; they meet early the next morning at the house

of his father Troxartes. He has lost three sons: one to a weasel, one to a recent human invention, καινοτέραις τέχναις ξύλινον δόλον ἐξευρόντες—"they have discovered a wooden trick with new crafts" (116)—and now this. The recent invention is surely Molorchus's mousetrap, another allusion to Callimachus (fr. 177. 15–37 D'Alessio 1996), as well as an evocation of the Trojan Horse.

So the mice arm themselves, and send a herald to the frogs. The herald simply declares war—there is no attempt at all at a diplomatic solution to the problem. At least the Achaeans sent an embassy to Troy to demand Helen's return. Herodotus has Mardonius comment that Greeks, who all speak the same language, should be able to settle their differences without fighting (7.9); the fable on which the poem is based begins ὅτε ἦν τὰ ζῷα ὁμόφωνα, "when the animals had the same language."

In the frogs' assembly, when the frogs blame him, Physignathos lies flat-out and says that the mouse must have drowned while playing by the water.

νῦν ἐμὲ μέμφονται τὸν ἀναίτιον· ἀλλ' ἄγε βουλὴν
ζητήσωμεν ὅπως δολίους μύας ἐξολέσωμεν. (150–51)

Now they blame me, the innocent. But now, let us look for a plan to destroy the sneaky mice.

He then suggests that the frogs arm themselves and stand where the shore is steep. When the mice attack, they will grab the helmets and throw them into the water. Having falsely accused the mice of being crafty, they plan a crafty response (which, however, they don't use, probably because the poem deliberately generates *problemata* as a "Homeric" feature). So the frogs, too, get an arming scene.

The poem then jumps to Olympus, where Zeus asks who will support each side. He assumes Athena will favor the mice, since they like her temple so much, but she turns out to detest them, because they nibble holes in her weaving (again a reminiscence of the mice who eat the clothes of Callimachus's Molorchus, 177.29–31 D'Alessio 1996). In fact, it turns out, although the passage is obscure, that Athena has been weaving for hire on borrowed materials, and now that she cannot sell the product she is in embarrassing debt. On the other hand, she does not like frogs much either, since on the day before yesterday she had a hard day of fighting and the frogs' croaking kept her from sleeping and gave her a headache. Furthermore, the gods might be wounded if they intervened. A mock-epic battle follows, with parodic versions of typical Homeric fights—the frogs do not actually follow the plan of pushing the mice into the water. Finally a mouse named Meridarpax, threatening to destroy the race of frogs, breaks a walnut into halves and puts them over his

paws. The frogs flee, and Zeus feels compelled to intervene. He suggests that Athena or Ares descend to stop the fighting—presumably as at the end of the *Odyssey*—but Ares does not think that will be enough. He suggests that all the gods go, or that Zeus use the thunderbolt:

οὕτω γὰρ ἀλώσεται ὅς τις ἄριστος, (284)
 ὥς ποτε καὶ Καπανῆα κατέκτανες ὄβριμον ἄνδρα (282)
 καὶ μέγαν Ἐγκελάδοντα καὶ ἄγρια φύλα Γιγάντων (283)

For thus whoever is best will be taken, as long ago you killed Capaneus, the powerful man, and great Enceladus and the wild tribes of Giants.

Zeus hurls his thunderbolt, but although frogs and mice flee, the mice are not dissuaded and resume the attack, so he sends helpers to the frogs—five full lines of obscure epithets finally culminate in the information that these are called “crabs.”¹¹ The crabs cut off the mice’s tails and limbs, while their spears are ineffectual against the crabs’ exoskeletons. The crabs terrify the mice, and war and poem end.

Much of the humor in this poem is the standard mock-epic fare—simply depicting small animals as warriors and giving them armor was apparently extremely entertaining to some readers in antiquity. It aims its humor at Hellenistic poetry as well as at Homer; if Callimachus can put the mousetrap into a story about Heracles, it too can mention mousetraps, but from the perspective of mice. Still, the poem goes beyond these basic jokes of incongruity. The view of the epic world in this text is, roughly: the war begins with a fatal accident. The accident happens because the frog and mouse do not observe the proper limits on habitat, and they fail to do that at least in part because they like to show off. The accident leads to war because the mice, though not especially brave as individuals, at least not if Psicharpax is exemplary, react violently to an apparent injury to the group, and are excessively moved by the sufferings of Trogartes, even though the deaths of his two older sons have nothing to do with the matter at hand. The frog leader lies to his people to evade his own responsibility, and the other frogs are completely gullible. Once they become warriors, they are like Capaneus or the Giants—that is, they completely ignore their proper boundaries, and do not stop fighting even when Zeus clearly shows his displeasure.

The antiheroic, then seems to be as old in Greek as the heroic, and it persistently reappears. The *Cypria* and the *Batrachomyomachia* were composed in very different circumstances, and belong to different genres, since the second

¹¹ This probably parodies the extreme allusiveness of some Hellenistic poetic style, cf. Fusillo 1988: 134.

is a parody written in a culture in which parody was a regular medium, while the *Cypria* was received as epic. Still, they have evident affinities. Wars are fought for trivial or fictional reasons, caused and continued by fools, liars, incompetents, and crooks. It is all depressingly familiar from non-literary history, except that in hexameter poetry, a war can arise from a plan of Zeus, and conclude because Zeus decides to intervene. Since we do not live in Greek hexameter poetry, we cannot blame our follies on the gods, and any hopes of a *deus ex machina* are unlikely to be realized.

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