The Mice of Ithaca: Homeric Models in the *Batrachomyomachia*

The *Batrachomyomachia* (*BM*), although generally identified as a ‘Homeric parody’,1 does not follow the plot of either of the Homeric epics. Its characters do not map securely onto those of the *Iliad* or *Odyssey*: there is no single mouse Achilles or frog Hector. Instead, it draws on multiple Homeric models for inspiration, and rewards the reader for knowledge of the source texts by presenting a range of more or less concealed equivalences between its scenes and those of Homer.2

Some of these equivalences are straightforward. When the poem begins, the exhausted mouse hero Psicharpax stops to drink at a pond, only to be greeted with an offer of hospitality by the frog king Physignathus. The latter is introduced, before we learn his name, as λιμνοχάρης πολύφημος, ‘a much-renowned pond-lover’ (12).3 The choice of epithet immediately suggests the Homeric Polyphemus, and this identification is developed when the frog begins to speak: his first words are ξεῖνε, τίς εἶ; πόθεν ἦλθες ἐπ’ ᾗϊόνας; (13), echoing the Cyclops’ ὦ ξεῖνοι, τίνες ἐστέ; πόθεν πλεῖθ’ ύγρὰ κέλευθα; (Od. 9.252). The alert reader will at once realise that this character’s hospitality is likely to be unsatisfactory, and so it proves: his invitation to visit his home ends up resulting in his guest’s death by drowning. The resemblance between these two scenes has

1 The *Neue Pauly*, for example, calls it ‘die einzige vollständig erhaltene und zugleich bedeutendste Homer-P[arodie]’ (*DNP* s.v. ‘Parodie’, 347). Olson and Sens (1999, 12) offer it as a particularly important example of the genre of epic parody. There are several ways in which it fails to line up neatly with other ancient parodic texts, however: most obviously, its frequent attribution to Homer himself.

2 In this article I follow a welcome trend in modern scholarship, and consider the *BM* as a complex and sophisticated text interacting both with the Homeric epics and with their reception in Hellenistic scholarship, rather than as a ‘subliterary’ comic curio. The rehabilitation of the *BM* arguably began with Vine 1986; since then it has been continued in a series of excellent articles—Most 1993, Sens 2006, and Kelly 2009 are all crucial, and I am indebted to them here.

3 All discussion of allusion and verbal play in the *BM* is hampered by the condition of the text. In this instance I adopt λιμνοχάρης over the majority reading λιμνόχαρις. See Wölke 1978, 258-259.
been noted at least since Lycius’ edition of 1566, and has been discussed by more recent scholars as well.4

Yet there is already a warning that the BM has a goal in mind more complex than simple one-to-one correspondence between its characters and Homer’s. Introducing himself, the frog king gives his parentage: καί με πατὴρ Πηλεὺς ἀνεθρέψατο, Ὑδρομεδούσῃ | μιχθεὶς ἐν φιλότητι . . . Behind the playful humour of ‘Peleus’ (‘Muddy’, as in πηλός) as a name for a heroic frog, there is a more serious Homeric model at work: Physignathus, like Achilles, is the son of a Peleus and a ‘Water-queen’. We are encouraged to look beyond the obvious Physignathus–Polyphemus equivalence, and consider the character also as a potential Achilles. Little of the king’s behaviour in the rest of the poem will be Achillean, but the poet is making a very specific allusion here. Further guidance arrives with Psicharpax’ first speech, which begins τίπτε γένος τοῦμον ζητεῖς; ‘why do you ask after my birth?’. This echoes the question τίη γενεὴν ἐρεείνεις; asked by two characters in the Iliad: Glaucus to Diomedes (Il. 6.145), and Asteropaeus to Achilles (Il. 21.153).

The first of these intertexts has been discussed before;5 it is the second on which I wish to concentrate. Asteropaeus’ exact question is Πηλεΐδη μεγάθυμε, τίη γενεὴν ἐρεείνεις, which, as we have seen, could be as well addressed to Physignathus—another ‘son of Peleus’—as to Achilles. The connection is not coincidental. Asteropaeus’ encounter with Achilles has one particularly notable feature: it takes place on the edge of a body of water. When the Paeonian hero is killed, his body is left partially immersed in the river for the eels and fish to feed on (Il. 21.202-204). Later in the BM, it is the sight of the dead Psicharpax floating on the surface of the pond (99ff.) which stirs the mice to declare war on the frogs. The two episodes can be summarised as follows:

Iliad:
the kingly son of Peleus [A]  
confronts a young warrior [B]  
on the bank of a river [C].  
He asks: “who are you, [D]  
and where are you from? [E]  
Unhappy are they whose children  
fight against me.”
Asteropaeus replies:
“Why do you ask about my descent?” [F]

BM:
the kingly son of Peleus [A]  
confronts a young warrior [B]  
on the shore of a pond [C].  
He asks: “who are you? [D]  
Where are you from? [E]  
Who is your father?”
Psicharpax replies:
“Why do you ask about my descent?” [F]

4 E.g. Glei 1984, 118ff.
5 E.g. Glei 1984, 124.