A HERACLITEAN ALLUSION TO THE *ODYSSEY**

ABSTRACT

This article applies and defends an intertextual approach to Heraclitus B51 DK, the 'bow-lyre fragment'. It argues that the fragment alludes to the climactic scene of the Odyssey *in which the hero strings the bow and is likened to an expert lyre-player (*Od. *21.404–11). It then explores some implications of this point for our understanding of the significance of the fragment, of the sixth-century reception of the* Odyssey *and of Parmenides' reception of Heraclitus.*

Keywords: Heraclitus; Homer; *Odyssey*; Parmenides; Apollo; intertextuality; allusion

Among Heraclitus' dense and richly allusive fragments,[1] one significant detail that so far appears to have gone unnoticed by scholars is the relationship between B51, the 'bow-lyre fragment', and the *Odyssey*.

οὐ ξυνιᾶσιν ὅκως διαφερόμενον ἑωυτῶι ὁμολογέει· παλίντροπος[2] ἁρμονίη ὅκωσπερ τόξου καὶ λύρης.

They do not understand how in differing it agrees with itself; a backwards-turning fastening, just as that of a bow or a lyre.

It is unclear precisely what Heraclitus refers to as 'differing' and agreeing 'with itself', but the image of the 'backwards-turning fastening' is an example of a Heraclitean 'unity of opposites', the doctrine that ostensibly contrary properties (in this instance, 'difference' and 'agreement') have an underlying connection:[3] a bow is a piece of wood which is bent back upon itself and kept bent by the taut string; the ancient λύρα featured two wooden

---

[1] On the linguistic density and allusiveness of Heraclitus' style, see C.H. Kahn, 'A new look at Heraclitus', *American Philosophical Quarterly* 1 (1964), 189–203 and his commentary on the fragments, *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus* (Cambridge, 1979), especially 87–95.

[2] Following D.W. Graham, 'Heraclitus and Parmenides', in V. Caston and D.W. Graham (edd.), *Presocratic Philosophy. Essays in Honour of Alexander Mourelatos* (Aldershot and Burlington, 2002), 27–44 (relevant discussion at 31 n. 22), I prefer this reading to παλίντονος, the alternative. παλίντροπος is the reading found in the best source, Hippolytus (*Haer.* 9.9.2), who in fact is the only source who gives the full citation and who gives it in a context where it is clear that he has a copy of the book before him. Moreover, since παλίντονος is a more common epithet for a bow, παλίντροπος is the *lectio difficilior*. παλίντροπος is also found at Plut. 473F (all manuscripts apart from D), 1026B; παλίντονος at Plut. 369B, 473F (MS D) and Porph. *De antro* 29. As the anonymous reader points out to me, Heraclitus would not have been alone among archaic authors in playing with the -τροπος suffix, given Sappho, fr. 71.4 Voigt, κα[κό]τροπος, occurring in a passage which, like the Heraclitus fragment, ostensibly concerns invective and musicality.

[3] On this doctrine, see D.W. Graham, *Explaining the Cosmos: The Ionian Tradition of Scientific Philosophy* (Princeton, 2006), 122–9 and his entry on Heraclitus in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, online at https://plato.stanford.edu/.

or horn arms that emerge at vertical angles from opposing sides of a box or shell, but turn back towards one another and are joined at the top by a cross-bar.[4] Both instruments thus have opposite ends that are united by being bent back towards one another and physically joined. But, given Heraclitus' self-consciously riddling style, we are also encouraged to identify further senses of ἁρμονίη, especially since, elsewhere, he states that 'unapparent ἁρμονίη is better than apparent' (B54). With this principle in mind, the lyre's 'backwards-turning joining' may also refer to the strings turning back upon themselves around the crossbar, whilst that of the bow suggests the manner in which the arrow is joined to the string, but flies in the opposite direction to that in which the string is pulled. In addition to these physical 'joinings', the ἁρμονίη of the lyre refers to a musical scale (see LSJ s.v.), which is 'backwards-turning' in that it can be played ascendingly or descendingly.[5] Furthermore, the statement may have a metatextual significance: the fragment itself enacts the 'backwards-turning joining' it describes, since it conjoins the two opposed images of the musically harmonious lyre and the bow, the death-dealing instrument of warfare.[6] Finally, the conjunction of these two objects also has a further significance: they are the two characteristic instruments of Apollo. Thus, in his *Homeric Hymn*, Apollo's first words after being born are to request a lyre and a bow (*Hymn. Hom. Ap.* 131). An Apolline significance is appropriate here, since Apollo is the god who, in Heraclitus B93, 'neither speaks nor conceals but gives a sign', thereby providing a model for Heraclitus' own riddling, multilayered style.[7]

The most famous Apolline conjunction of the bow and the lyre in Greek literature occurs in Book 21 of the *Odyssey*, in the climactic scene in which Odysseus strings the bow (21.404–11):

<div style="text-align:center">

αὐτὰρ πολύμητις Ὀδυσσεύς,
αὐτίκ᾿ ἐπεὶ μέγα τόξον ἐβάστασε καὶ ἴδε πάντη,
ὡς ὅτ᾿ ἀνὴρ φόρμιγγος ἐπιστάμενος καὶ ἀοιδῆς
ῥηϊδίως ἐτάνυσσε νέῳ περὶ κόλλοπι χορδήν,
ἅψας ἀμφοτέρωθεν ἐϋστρεφὲς ἔντερον οἰός,
ὣς ἄρ᾿ ἄτερ σπουδῆς τάνυσεν μέγα τόξον Ὀδυσσεύς.
δεξιτερῇ ἄρα χειρὶ λαβὼν πειρήσατο νευρῆς·
ἡ δ᾿ ὑπὸ καλὸν ἄεισε, χελιδόνι εἰκέλη αὐδήν.

</div>

<div style="text-align:center">

And very-wily Odysseus
Then immediately lifted the great bow and looked all around it
Just as when a man who is expert in lyre and song
Easily stretches a string around a new peg,
Fastening on both sides the twisted sheep-gut,
Just so without effort Odysseus stretched out the great bow.
Then taking it in his right hand he tried out the string:
And it sang beautifully, like the voice of the nightingale.

</div>

---

[4] M.L. West, *Ancient Greek Music* (Oxford, 1992), 56–7.

[5] G.S. Kirk, *Heraclitus: The Cosmic Fragments* (Cambridge, 1954), 203–21 ruled out the possibility that the musical sense of the word is operative here, 'for this would be totally unsuitable to … the bow' (208), but this is unduly restrictive, especially given the characteristically polysemous nature of Heraclitus' writing. Cf. Arist. *Eth. Eud.* 7.1.1235a25 = A22, where Heraclitus is reported as seeing the coexistence of high and low notes as necessary for ἁρμονίη.

[6] Cf. B48, τῶι οὖν τόξωι ὄνομα βίος, ἔργον δὲ θάνατος, 'And so the name of the bow is life (βίος) but its function is death', punning upon two different senses of the same word (albeit differently accentuated). For these interpretations of B51, see C.H. Kahn (n. 1 [1979]), 195–200.

[7] On this fragment, see S. Tor, 'Heraclitus on Apollo's signs and his own', in E. Eidinow, J. Kindt and R. Osborne (edd.), *Theologies of Ancient Greek Religion* (Cambridge, 2016), 89–116.

We are primed to regard this association of the bow and the lyre as Apolline by the detail that this event takes place on a feast-day for Apollo (20.276–8; cf. 21.258–9), by Antinous' demand that they sacrifice goats to him before conducting the contest (21.267–8) and by the fact that it is Apollo who will grant victory (21.338, 21.364–5).[8] Apollo thus oversees the proceedings and Odysseus comes to embody the god by acting as expert in both archery and, figuratively, lyre-playing.[9]

The conjunction of bow and lyre, together with the earlier references to Apollo, brings this passage into contact with the Heraclitean fragment. Moreover, Heraclitus' use of παλίντροπος recalls the epic epithet for the bow, παλίντονος, which explains how the latter arose as an alternative reading in the fragment.[10] παλίντονος is used twice of Odysseus' bow (*Od.* 21.11, 21.59) and nowhere else in the *Odyssey*. These features, I propose, mark a connection between the Heraclitean and Homeric passages. One might object that the connection is merely a generic one: both passages make use of the same topos, the typical association of Apollo with the bow and the lyre, so that Heraclitus need not have drawn specifically on the Homeric passage. But this was one of the most famous scenes in the *Odyssey*,[11] and one which would have been particularly memorable in rhapsodic performance, since it unites the figures of hero, poet and performer, collapsing the distinction between the two worlds of the poem and the audience at the climax of the narrative.[12] It is therefore highly plausible that Heraclitus—who knew the Homeric poems as performed rhapsodically (cf. B42 quoted below)—had the passage in mind when composing the fragment, and undoubtable that many of his readers or listeners could have drawn the comparison.[13] The fact that some of the shared features are generic does not rule out the possibility that this is a specific allusion.[14]

The relationship is also meaningful. The simile, when read through the lens of the Heraclitean fragment, appears as a 'unity of opposites'. As Thalmann writes of the *Odyssey* passage, 'Song and battle should properly be kept distinct. Their mixture characterizes the ensuing action as well. Song typically accompanies the meal; but now while the suitors eat, the bow will replace the phorminx.'[15] Recollection of the Odyssean scene thus illustrates Heraclitus' doctrine that a unity underlies such ostensibly conflicting oppositions, but this unity, like Odysseus' stringing of the bow, results in 'war', hence, for Heraclitus, 'war is father of all and king of all' (B53; cf. B80).[16] Moreover, the emphasis of the Homeric passage falls upon Odysseus' expertise:

---

[8] E.J. Bakker, *The Meaning of Meat and the Structure of the* Odyssey (Cambridge, 2013), 98–100. The D scholia at 20.155 (Dindorf 2.690, who refers to them as 'V' scholia) identify this as the festival of Apollo νουμήνιος.

[9] W.G. Thalmann, *Conventions of Form and Thought in Early Greek Epic Poetry* (Baltimore, 1984), 175–6 notes the resemblance to the *Homeric Hymn to Apollo* at this point and also comments on how this is the point at which Odysseus' words and deeds, after his disguise on Ithaca, finally unite.

[10] As Kahn (n. 1 [1979]), 199 argues.

[11] Plato's Socrates sees this as the climax of Odysseus' narrative (*Ion* 535b–c).

[12] For this latter point I am indebted to the anonymous reader, who draws my attention to the discussion of the simile by B. Graziosi, *Homer* (Oxford, 2016), 54–6.

[13] For the fixity and reputation of the Homeric epics by this stage, see A.C. Cassio, 'Early editions of the Greek epics and Homeric textual criticism in the sixth and fifth centuries B.C.', in F. Montanari (ed.), *Omero tremila anni dopo* (Rome, 2002), 105–36.

[14] B. Currie, *Homer's Allusive Art* (Oxford, 2016), 9–11 notes this methodological principle.

[15] Thalmann (n. 9), 176.

[16] Following here the standard interpretation of Heraclitean War, as represented by Graham (n. 3), 144.

he picks up and looks at the bow like someone who knows what he is doing (ἐπιστάμενος). Before he has strung the bow, he has handled it this way and that, checking that it has not been eaten by worms (*Od.* 21.393–5), so that the onlookers comment on his knowledge (21.397–400). This contrasts with the suitors who have singularly failed to string the bow (21.144–255), even after warming it up (21.184, 21.245–6). Their lack of understanding is manifest in Antinous' mistaken explanation for their failure, that it is because it is a holy feast-day (21.257–9). In not knowing how to put the bow together, they are like Heraclitus' masses who do not 'understand'—or, more literally, 'put together' (ξυνιᾶσιν)—the backwards-turning fastening of the bow or the lyre. Heraclitus thus casts the ignorant masses as the Odyssean suitors. Heraclitus himself, in understanding how this ἁρμονίη works, may be valorized as the heroic Odysseus.

More speculatively, a further piece of ancient evidence evinces a connection between Heraclitus, Odysseus and the word παλίντροπος: Sophocles' *Philoctetes*.[17] Recently, Simon Goldhill has argued that Odysseus' use of the term in the tragedy responds to the Homeric Odysseus' epithet, πολύτροπος. 'The programmatic use of *polutropos* in Homer announces the return of Odysseus from his wanderings thanks to his powers of guile. The use of *palintropos* here [*sc.* Soph. *Phil.* 1222–3], the re-writing of *polutropos*, signals the failure of Odysseus' guile and a new crisis in the narrative of return.'[18] Goldhill also entertains the possibility that Sophocles' use of the adjective was influenced by Heraclitus B51.[19] If Goldhill's reading is accepted, it lends further support to the possibility that Heraclitus alludes to the *Odyssey* in B51: the Heraclitean fragment could have provided Sophocles with a precedent for the combination of Odysseus with the term παλίντροπος.

Now, it could be objected that Heraclitus would not allude in this manner to a poet whom he elsewhere criticizes (B42) and lampoons (B56). But the appropriation of a motif need not be taken as a sign of admiration. The criticism of Homer in B42 has itself been seen to appropriate Homeric language:

τόν τε Ὅμηρον ἔφασκεν ἄξιον ἐκ τῶν ἀγώνων ἐκβάλλεσθαι καὶ ῥαπίζεσθαι καὶ Ἀρχίλοχον ὁμοίως

He said that Homer should be thrown out of the contests and beaten—and Archilochus too.

The verb ῥαπίζεσθαι plays upon the traditional etymology of ῥαψῳδός—instead of performing their work as rhapsodes with sticks, Homer and Archilochus should be beaten with them—but Graziosi has argued that there is also a wordplay on the verb ἐκβάλλεσθαι: it evokes ἀναβάλλεσθαι in the characteristically epic sense of 'to strike up a song' (see LSJ s.v. ἀναβάλλω B.I.; for example *Od.* 1.155, 8.266). Thus, she writes, 'Heraclitus' statement could then be paraphrased as "strike them out, do not let them strike up the song!"'.[20] We could read B51 as similarly turning a Homeric image against Homer: on the basis of B42 and especially of B56 (which depicts the poet as failing to understand riddles), we can assume that Homer is one of the masses

---

[17] On (possible) engagements with Heraclitus in the play, see M.J. Arp, 'Pre-Socratic thought in Sophoclean tragedy' (Diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2006), 14–50. Sophocles at *Phil.* 931 makes the same pun on βίος as occurs at Heraclitus B48 (see n. 6 above).

[18] S. Goldhill, *Sophocles and the Language of Tragedy* (Oxford, 2012), 34.

[19] Goldhill (n. 18), 34 n. 45, reading παλίντονος.

[20] B. Graziosi, *Inventing Homer* (Cambridge, 2002), 29.

who do not understand 'how in differing it agrees with itself'. He therefore does not understand an image he himself uses, of the collocation of the bow and the lyre. Indeed, the rhapsode who is beaten with his own staff seems a suitable metaphor for this form of critical literary appropriation.

The fact that such an 'allusion' can be read in this meaningful manner renders plausible the hypothesis that Heraclitus intended it and expected it to be identified by at least some of his readers.[21] This conclusion, if accepted, enhances our understanding both of Heraclitus' artistry and of the reception of the *Odyssey* during this period. Heraclitus B51 could be added to the list of sixth-century texts that allude to what would become well-known episodes in the Homeric epics, increasing the likelihood that the latter had attained a broad level of textual fixity at this stage.[22] It could also affect our interpretation of the relationship between Parmenides and Heraclitus. Parmenides B6.9 has often been seen as a critical allusion to Heraclitus B51.[23] Additionally, Parmenides' poem as a whole has long been seen to engage with the *Odyssey*.[24] We might then read Parmenides B6.9 as a 'window' or 'two-tier' allusion to both Heraclitus and the *Odyssey*:[25] Heraclitus appropriates a Homeric image to criticize Homer, casting ignorant mortals (including Homer) as the foolish suitors; Parmenides appropriates both Heraclitean and Homeric imagery, casting Heraclitus as one of the ignorant masses whilst presenting his primary narrator as an Odysseus-like figure.

But even if the hypothesis of an intentional allusion fails to convince, there is an important intertextual connection between the two passages that affects our understanding of Heraclitus' use of this topos. The Odyssean passage more fully develops the contrast between discordant violence and harmony that is implicit in the Apolline juxtaposition of bow and lyre; it also provides a more vivid image of the specialist expertise involved

---

[21] For meaningfulness supporting the hypothesis of allusion, see Currie (n. 14), 31–3, with further references.

[22] On this issue, see Cassio (n. 13) *contra* (e.g.) the development of the Homeric epics proposed by G. Nagy, *Homeric Questions* (Austin, 1996).

[23] First proposed by J. Bernays, 'Heraklitische Studien', *RhM* 7 (1851), 90–116, at 114–15 n. 2 = *Gesammelte Abhandlungen* (Berlin, 1885), 1.37–63, at 1.62–3 n. 1. Bernays has been followed most recently by Graham (n. 2) and (n. 3), 148–85, whose arguments I find convincing *contra* (e.g.) M.C. Stokes, *One and Many in Presocratic Philosophy* (Washington, DC, 1971), 111–27; A. Nehamas, 'Parmenidean being/Heraclitean fire', in V. Caston and D.W. Graham (edd.), *Presocratic Philosophy. Essays in Honour of Alexander Mourelatos* (Aldershot and Burlington, 2002), 45–64; J. Palmer, *Parmenides and Presocratic Philosophy* (Oxford, 2009), 341–5.

[24] The key study is E.A. Havelock, 'Parmenides and Odysseus', *HSPh* 63 (1958), 133–43. A.P.D. Mourelatos, *The Route of Parmenides: A Study of Word, Image, and Argument in the Fragments* (rev. edn, Las Vegas, 2008), 31–4 is more cautious, but the resemblances to the *Odyssey* are more specific than he allows. Parmenides' youthful narrator is taken on the path that 'bears the knowing mortal to every city' (B1.3), an expression that recalls the man who 'saw the cities and got to know the mind of many men' (*Od.* 1.3). He goes to a place where 'there are the gates of the paths of Night and Day' (B1.11 ἔνθα πύλαι Νυκτός τε καὶ Ἤματός εἰσι κελεύθων), a near-identical expression to *Od.* 10.86, 'near are the paths of Night and Day' (ἐγγὺς γὰρ νυκτός τε καὶ ἤματός εἰσι κέλευθοι), a description of the location of Laestrygonia. Parmenides' road is πολύφημον (B1.2), a word that recalls the name of the Cyclops, Odysseus' most famous adversary, who is also hinted at later on in the goddess' reference to 'the wandering works of the round-eyed (κύκλωπος) moon' (B10.4): κύκλωψ, before Parmenides, is only ever used in reference to one or more of the mythical monsters.

[25] For this sort of multiple reference, see R.F. Thomas, 'Virgil's *Georgics* and the art of reference', *HSPh* 90 (1986), 171–98, at 188–9 = *Reading Virgil and his Texts* (Ann Arbor, 1999), 114–41, at 130–2; D.P. Fowler, 'On the shoulders of giants: intertextuality and classical studies', *MD* 39 (1997), 13–34, at 16 = *Roman Constructions* (Oxford, 2000), 115–37, at 118–19; D.P. Nelis, *Vergil's Aeneid and the Argonautica of Apollonius Rhodius* (Leeds, 2001), 5.

in mastering both instruments, in contrast with ignorant masses. These themes are only latent in Heraclitus' succinct fragment, but the Odyssean passage suggests that the use of this topos connoted such jarring paradoxes. As Hinds writes, using a Heraclitean topos himself, '[w]ith *topoi*, and indeed with allusive discourse at large, one can never step into the same river twice':[26] a reader can never truly 'step into the same river' as the author and see exactly the same connotations in a particular topos (or allusion), but an exploration of its potential range of significance is nevertheless enriching.

University College London   TOM MACKENZIE
                                                     t.mackenzie@ucl.ac.uk

[26] S. Hinds, *Allusion and Intertext* (Cambridge, 1998), 47.