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“The Greek gods don’t exactly show up for their kids’ basketball games”: Adapting Epic Convention through Family Dramas in Rick Riordan’s *The Last Olympian*

Rick Riordan’s Percy Jackson and the Olympians saga adopts Greek stories crafted from ancient myth and converts them to suit the style of a group of 21st-century American children and teenagers. In doing so, his method is to break down and then rebuild these stories so as to establish his own themes and symbols from their remains. The act of deconstruction and repurposing of such mythic and classical conventions as heroism, prophecy, and communing with the gods, to name a few, speaks to the long-standing tradition of attempting to define the knowledge of the past in one’s own terms through literature. Many Renaissance and Enlightenment philosophers believed, and some today would still agree, that the poetry of Homer “contained the complete learning of their time” and that he “deliberately crafted his epics as vehicles for the encyclopedic knowledge he apparently possessed” (Rudy 413-414). Such a legacy is pursued by writers such as Riordan, whose popularized versions of antiquity have managed to resonate almost universally among young readers and become something of a modern epic for their generation.

Holding *The Last Olympian* in the light of the familial discourses of Homer’s *Odyssey*, this analysis of Riordan’s novel will contextualize his uses of classical conventions within the spheres of American culture and the culture of the new generation. Consequently, such an analysis reveals that the concept of time – incarnate in *The Last Olympian* through the titan

antagonist, Kronos – persists as a foundation for the bulk of the novel’s family dramas, with an emphasis on the family of the god Hades. Recurrent conflicts between the ancient-yet-ageless gods and their significantly younger, mortal counterparts frequently end in a victory for youth. These triumphs are made characteristically profound by provoking changes to the “old ways” of ancient myth, changes which are catalyzed by young or more youthful characters. Thus, time in its various manifestations ultimately shows that Riordan’s depiction of contemporary Western culture rejects the desire to repeat the mythic past and instead aims to adapt it, looking to the new generation for guidance into the ways of the future.

The complications within various familial and other interpersonal relationships, as well as the adaptation of such epic conventions as godly prophecy and the martial hero, serve to outline the discourse between “new” and “old” in which Riordan situates Percy’s tale. In reading the *Odyssey*’s perceptions of family and uses of these conventions, one can observe how the ancient author deals with such complications which arise during the time of Odysseus’s extensive absence, and in what ways his resolutions succeed or fail to be upheld in modern society. Thus, the conflicts between past, present, and a vision for the future are grappled with on multiple narrative levels in *The Last Olympian* in order to reconcile Percy’s disillusionment with the antiquated concept of classic heroism.

In the modern perspective, there was never a single author who comprised the persona of “Homer,” but rather a plethora of storytellers who kept the oral tradition of the poem moving through Greek culture. In this sense, the complexity of the *Odyssey* arises from its being an accumulation of innumerable minds who together weave the tale of Odysseus and his family. Riordan, on the other hand, is just one man; thus, of course, this analysis does not aim to match the writings of one author with what is essentially a picture of the whole of Greek culture and

tradition. Rather, in the logic which Meg Harris Williams proposes, this study intends to prove that Riordan has done as she urges audiences – to engage in internal, implicit conversations with Homer which strike a chord in the modern reader (Williams 233). Whereas a historical approach to the classics requires interpretation within the ancient perspective of the Greeks, this adaptive analysis seeks to focus on the new audience who inherently brings new expectations and experiences to their reading. As such, a critical reading of the *Odyssey* serves to elucidate the interpersonal relationships in the *Odyssey* and how they motivate the familial connections which are pervasive in *The Last Olympian*.

American culture, in all its faults and glories, persists at the heart of Riordan's series and thus encompasses an important understanding here. Glasner's analysis of the Percy Jackson and the Olympians saga takes an allegorical approach to this concept, gathering its many witty allusions and references to American pop culture in order to piece together the picture which Riordan has painted. Beneath this humor she finds a critique of the fast-paced "hyperreality" that is Western culture, more specifically embodied in the American capitalist ideal (Glasner 158). Her theory holds water when a certain level of Percy's childish naïveté is translated to be read as Riordan's adult sarcasm and cynicism. Such an analysis of the text as directly allegorical is controversial in the same way that the ancient criticism of Heraclitus on the Homeric epics had been in his time (Glasner 156). Nevertheless, her general premise stands; if we are to read Percy's story, we must read it within the context of American culture. In this case, such context relies on the idea that America is inherently new in nearly all understandings of the word. As such, despite being based on ancient mythology, the creations of Riordan's world are to be read as representations of a new culture. The juxtaposition of the two often creates a sense of dissonance within the story, such as when the god Morpheus places the residents of the normally

buzzing island of Manhattan under a deep sleep, so that the Titan army of Kronos can invade the island and take over Olympus, which is naturally situated overtop of the Empire State building (Riordan 163). In this scene, the growing threat of war comes to a climax as the clash between magical mythic power and the fast-paced normalcy of humanity ignites. Throughout the series, mythical figures exist only in the background of American culture, encircling the landmarks of said culture in hidden meanings and origins from Greek myth. When these secrets are revealed publicly, when the conflict between new and old becomes overtly real, it is almost always disastrous. Therefore, an allegorical existence is implicit in the text, wherein the genre of fantasy allows the author to create a representation of the abstract concept of culture which simultaneously paints a realistic picture of that concept and keeps the fantastical world at a distance from the real world which it represents.

Another key understanding in this analysis is the complex usage of time as a motif. Between the *Odyssey*'s manifold storylines and *The Last Olympian*'s extensive timeline of characters, the span of time is itself a factor in their narrative structure. One such element under the umbrella of 'time' is the nuanced idea of age. Age factors within Odysseus' characterization at many points in the poem, being highlighted in contrast to his opponents in battle, his son Telemachus, and to his younger self. Likewise, characters' age and/or appearance of age in *The Last Olympian* is especially important in their positioning within the novel's familial conflicts. Categorically, there are many general clusters of age groups present within these relationships, such as: the immortal gods and monsters who take on an adult appearance; those gods who choose to appear youthful and even childlike through the power of their immortality; demigod and mortal children and teenagers; and mortal adult figures, to name a few. Members of these groups constitute each familial relationship in varying combinations from family to family.

Through such pairings Riordan is able to emphasize representations of old and new culture in the resolutions of their different conflicts, effectively asserting the power of youth and of the new generation.

Time is also relevant in the conceptions of culture and how myth-based literature has changed throughout history. This is demonstrated conceptually in *The Last Olympian* through its premise: that the Olympian gods live on eternally, manifesting and changing their appearances and actions based upon where the idea of Western culture is at its strongest. Kronos, having the ability to control time, is placed in direct opposition to the gods' free movement alongside the progression of time. As the novel's most volatile representation of familial conflict, the outcome of this titan-god war shows that "such flexibility, metatextually embodied in the series' desire to create anew rather than merely to recapitulate the old, is represented as crucial to the saving of Western society" (Morey and Nelson 236). While Kronos and his titan army use their power to alter time and stop action, the Olympian gods and their allied heroes maintain the ability to adapt themselves to the ever-changing representations of Western culture. Thus, the constant and simultaneous parent-child conflicts between titans/gods and gods/demigods are representations of such cultural conflicts, and it is then the work of Riordan's adaptation to reconcile the two.

Within parent-child relationships such as that of Poseidon and Percy, there arises the problem of the incomprehensibly broad gap between the ages of these characters. These relationships serve a purpose not only within the context of the story, but also in the grander scheme of adaptation as a type of genre. Adaptation of Greek myth for modern audiences, and specifically for children, is no new concept even in the American tradition. For example, Nathaniel Hawthorne's collection *A Wonder Book for Boys and Girls* took up the twofold goal of entertaining and educating his audience with witty, morally-centered stories about the Greek

gods and their shenanigans. Instead of simply repeating myths and classic stories to a new audience and expecting children to resonate with them, authors such as Hawthorne popularize them with the style of contemporary literature in contradiction to their “traditional, scholarly, adult-oriented, straitjacketed, emotionally tepid, high cultural” counterpart versions (Murnaghan 345). In doing so, he asserts “the superior value of the popular over the canonical” in literature by highlighting the fact that in antiquity, these classics were themselves the peak of popular literature (Murnaghan 343). Despite the broad span of time making the classics seem out-of-touch, the myth-stories at their core still undoubtedly remain within that popular view even to modern audiences, thus keeping them relevant and useful for the repurposing of adaptation. Likewise, Riordan crafts his characters within this understanding and utilizes the relationships between immortal parents and mortal children to demonstrate that even the oldest of ideas can be emulated and restructured in the modern day. Riordan’s child-heroes therefore represent the essence of literary adaptation in the sense that while they repeat certain key elements of their parent-stories from the past, their heroic successes commonly emerge from some deviation or modernization of the old ways.

The heroes in Percy Jackson’s world appeal to young audiences because not only are their opponents just the escapist fantasy-villains which are expected from such stories, but they also must contend with real-life conflicts that children experience in everyday life. For example, the titular demigod himself has an encounter with his godly step-family in which he feels jealous, out-of-place, and just plain “awkward,” a feeling that many children of divorce are familiar with (Riordan 36). *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* is decidedly successful in its ability to portray realistic issues like struggling in school, dealing with learning disabilities, and feeling like an outsider because of these difficulties. As such, it is expected that this would hold true in terms of

at-home conflicts as well. Though Percy's relationship with his father is explored in less detail in this final book, we do see a significant presence of the positive relationship between him and his mortal step-father, Paul, who is "a pretty cool guy" by Percy's standards, and even helps fight in the final battle at the end of the novel (Riordan 105). Yet, these positive family experiences are not always in the cards for other demigods.

A common feeling among demigod children in the Percy Jackson series is that of being ignored or abandoned by their godly parent. While some are able to reconcile with their parents, like Percy and Nico, others have relationships which are beyond mending, and often these children are "adopted" by a surrogate godly figure. Thalia, whose mother is dead and whose father, Zeus, is effectively absent, decides to leave behind her life as a demigod hero and joins a group of hunters led by the maiden goddess Artemis. This decision gives Thalia a new family as well as the power of immortality, and she retains the supernatural powers gifted to her by her father (Riordan 231). In the *Odyssey*, a similar sense of neglect is experienced by Telemachus, who feels abandoned by his father Odysseus. However, in the classic model, Telemachus goes out in search of this same figure who had abandoned him as a child. Lineage and blood-relations were of great importance to the people of Homer's time, thus Telemachus must pursue a way to reclaim that lost bond despite feeling disconnected from Odysseus, unsure if he really is his father (Homer 1.216-217). In Riordan's tale, the more modern idea of a "found family" allows family values like mutual respect and care to outweigh the importance of blood-relations in qualifying a family as such. By emphasizing that there are different kinds of families, he again appeals successfully to contemporary audiences and simultaneously affirms that stories from the past can be adapted to fit modern values.

Nevertheless, the outcome is not always good for “adopted” demigods like Thalia. Another such half-blood, Luke, is a son of the god Hermes (by whom he feels personally abandoned) and a mortal woman who has been driven insane by an encounter with godly magic (Riordan 239). As a result, Luke turns to the titan Kronos as a pseudo-father figure to help him overthrow the gods and avenge his childhood trauma (Riordan 353). Hermes, following the gods’ rule of not interfering too much in the lives of mortals (even their own children), left Luke to fend for himself: growing up on the streets, running from monsters, and eventually seeing a similar pattern reflected in the experiences of his friends. The gods’ hands-off parenting reflects Hoyme’s idea of ambivalence in “human” parents, that the “immediate interests of the self are often at odds with the requirements of caring for the young” (Hoyme 32). In beings such as immortal gods, self-interest always seems to be primary, and so it is no wonder that Hermes and the other Olympians give into this abandoning urge. Hermes tries to justify this to Luke once using his own childhood neglect story, saying “I knew you had the ability. When I was only a baby, I crawled from my cradle...” but is cut off by Luke’s defense: “I’m not a god!” (Riordan 223). Here, the disparity between the ages and experiences of gods and mortals is made comically clear. Hermes expects his son to be able to emulate his own childhood abilities, ignoring the fundamental differences between them. Such a discrepancy between the two also reflects the implausible notion that the ways of the past could somehow operate, soundly and unaffected, in the present day despite centuries of growth and change in our culture.

Yet, if Luke recognizes this pattern and seeks to change the ancient ways of the gods, we may then ask: why does he become an antagonist of the story? The key difference between Luke and Percy is each hero’s allied force: Percy is sided with the gods, and Luke with the titans. The titans’ goal in this story is essentially to revert progress, to go back to an era before the already

ancient gods where the titans had ruled over humanity. Luke's personal goal is to smite the gods, but also to stand in their place himself. These ambitions both reflect changes to society which are regressive and only surface-level, being exchanges of power rather than progressive or systemic changes. Percy, however, wants to see progressive change in the way the gods operate. His request of the gods in the end is not to become an immortal god himself, though the opportunity is offered; instead, he asks that the gods begin to recognize their children and not allow demigods like Luke to feel "abandoned" any longer (Riordan 353). Thus, Percy's goal is synonymous with Riordan's in writing *The Last Olympian*: to assert the value of changing old traditions, such as classical literature, to reflect a new contemporary reality instead of trying to emulate what has already been done and has lost relevance. His request not only emphasizes his progressive mindset, but also confirms the novel's focus on the importance of family. Luke's relationship with Kronos is entirely one-sided and reminiscent of abuse, wherein Luke receives none of the fatherly care he so desired and instead sacrifices his life to satisfy the titan. Without healthy familial relationships, it somewhat hyperbolically suggests, the effects on a child's life can be catastrophic.

The familial conflicts within the so-called House of Hades also constitute a significant portion of the family dramas in *The Last Olympian*. Nico, son of the god of the underworld, holds a central place in the plot of the novel primarily for his attempts to rally Hades' forces for battle as well as to learn the truth about his mortal mother and his own mysterious origins. His family issues begin with a strenuous relationship with his father, which is exacerbated by the god's cold and domineering nature. Nico is notably respectful toward him compared with how some other demigods interact with a godly parent or parental figure, kneeling in front of Hades and referring to him chiefly as "Father" (Riordan 121-125). Nico also trusts him at his word and

betrays Percy's trust in order to gain the favor of his father. As the only remaining mortal in his family, his sister and mother now being dead, Nico gravitates toward the supernatural side of himself. This is shown in his god-given abilities to control armies of dead souls and use a power called shadow-travel, as well as in his overall personality. He is vengeful and apt to hold a grudge, just as Hades is typically described in mythology. He is also manipulative like his father, which is how he manages to betray Percy to Hades in the aforementioned scene. Further conflict arises when Nico learns that at his father's command, he and his sister were kept hidden immortally among the Lotus-eaters – a familiar episode for *Odyssey* readers – for decades in order for one of them to “reach sixteen against all odds” and fulfill the Great Prophecy, a piece which I will discuss at length later in this analysis (Riordan 55). This family drama is resolved for the most part in the final battle of the novel, in which Hades comes to the aid of his Olympian siblings and, most importantly here, his demigod son in order to defeat Kronos.

The parent-child relationship displayed here by Hades and Nico serves at first to replicate a traditional familial conflict, but at its resolution accomplishes just the opposite. In Hoyme's psychoanalytic theory of the “abandoning impulse” in parents, he suggests that fantastical stories such as “Hansel and Gretel” and “Beauty and the Beast” as well as Greek myths reflect an unspoken conflict of human existence between the inherent “selfish” and “self-sacrificing” desires of said parents (Hoyme 32). His observations suggest that the extreme situations of fantasy in which children are abandoned or lost and return in the end as a hero-figure to their parent(s) translate to such taboo and irrational desires in more realistic parent-child relationships. This theory is reflected in Nico's initial experience with his father, wherein Hades essentially uses his son as a pawn to further his own vengeance scheme. Their subplot being rooted in such

selfish parental desire also likens it to the traditions of Greek myth, wherein the gods tend to embody a more tyrannical and manipulative parental image and are apt to neglect them as such.

Yet, their resolution partially inverts this idea when it is Hades who shows up to protect his son and the other mortals from his own father, Kronos. This scene is presented as an overtly familial conflict, wherein Hades critiques the titan for being a “TERRIBLE father” and claims the forthcoming victory in his family’s name: “For today the House of Hades will be called the saviors of Olympus” (Riordan 317; emphasis in original). While he does this out of love for his family, he also retains the selfish motivation of wanting the glory of battle, albeit shared amongst the members of the family rather than reserved just for himself. Hades therefore comes to the rescue in a manner which is both self-serving and –sacrificing at the same time, essentially overcoming the paradox of parenthood which Hoyme proposes. The scene also resolves some of his own shortcomings as a father in his collaboration with Nico, wherein the demigod son fights in a sub-battle alongside his father while Nico’s friends are off fighting a separate battle (Riordan 319). Though he is not a perfect image of a father (spoiler alert: none of the gods are), Hades makes an independent effort to somewhat repair their broken relationship, which brings them closer. In one of their final scenes after the battle is won, Nico is seated quite literally at Hades’ right hand, looking the happiest his friends have ever seen him (Riordan 346). Through their ability to overcome their conflict and somewhat heal their broken relationship, Nico and Hades exemplify the potential for connection between godly and mortal parents and children.

For these reasons, it is clear that family and the home are thematically crucial to the entirety of *The Last Olympian*. The title refers to the goddess Hestia who, in an embodiment of these themes, gave up her Olympian status and became a minor god to prevent a “civil war” within the family of the gods (Riordan 102). She is the goddess of the hearth, representing the

burning fires of domestic unity in the private space, the *oikos*, as well as collective harmony in public spheres (Glasner 171). Hestia is Percy's constant reminder of the power of yielding to protect these paradigms, an ideal which affects his perception of his own heroism. She is an often forgotten deity, one whom "no one will ever write epic poems about," and she notably chooses to appear physically in the form of a young child, which further distances her from most of her Olympian siblings (Riordan 102). It is this position in the narrative which makes Hestia central to its underlying allegorical representations. She functions here in a similar manner as Athena to Odysseus, a patron goddess whose principles reflect those which help the hero to succeed. Athena reflects Odysseus' intelligence and battle-readiness, being a goddess of wisdom and war strategy. But Hestia shapes Percy to be a very different hero than his predecessors. As his patron, she does encourage him to go to war for the gods' as well as his own benefit, but she does so only because there is no longer another option. As stated above, the goddess wanted to *prevent* a war amongst the gods a long time before Percy's journey began, and her same ideal still stands in the present situation. Through her guidance and wisdom, Hestia reminds Percy that home and family are central to the battle being fought, keeping his eye on the metaphorical prize rather than leading him to focus on violence and war. This in turn will affect Percy's perception of heroism, eventually leading him to a decidedly non-traditional heroic conclusion.

One of the most fascinating aspects of *The Last Olympian* is Riordan's critique of the classical hero. Despite situating this narrative amongst centuries of literary tradition in which the hero is central, and even with countless references to the protagonists of the story as literal "heroes," at its core the text does not comply with the traditional model of the hero as it is shown in classical literature. Throughout the novel, Percy contends with fate in the form of a prophecy that speaks of a "half-blood of the eldest gods," presumably Percy, and a "hero's soul," which is

also assumed to be in reference to him (Riordan 55). Yet, it is revealed in a secondary prophecy that he is “not the hero,” leading Percy first into something of an identity crisis and eventually to the decision which saves Olympus (Riordan 278). Further still, Percy’s denial of heroism goes deeper than being outwardly defined by such a title. The exact definition of a real “hero” in Archaic Greek culture is a bit tricky to place, as many men would have been called as such throughout their history for their own acts of valor. In early “hero cults,” men who had done a moral or civic service to their community might have been honored by the polis as heroes in death to promote civic values, honor powerful families, or simply to ward against the possibility of any unhappy shades from returning in their afterlives (“Neither Human” 11). One subset which grew with the imperialist Greek mindset were warrior heroes, those who made a career of their heroism and earned their status through acts of war. This is the man who is emulated in the epic tradition, he who upheld the morals of the Greek culture through colonialist ideals and proudly sought life-threatening situations in order to earn his title. Yet, despite his moral rightness, at the end of the day, “the Archaic martial hero championed family, piety, and hospitality because these customs and practices were the underpinnings of his honor and fame” (“Of arms” 17). Essentially, gaining such acclaim was the true ambition of these heroes, not some selfless desire for peace and goodness.

Such a martial hero is who Percy and Odysseus alike would aim to emulate, should they follow the model of the classical hero. In the case of Odysseus, we can see that this is true. His goal throughout the epic is to return home to Ithaca and reclaim what is his: wife, throne, and legacy. His final battle is more of a slaughter, one in which his own son and eventually the gods must interfere in order to keep the king from being too brutal (Homer 22.356, 24.532-545). Odysseus is primarily concerned with himself and his honor as a warrior king. Percy too is a

powerful warrior. He proves himself a worthy opponent in battle often and denies any solution to the conflict between the gods and the titans except for a violent war. His journey also mimics those of countless other mythic heroes. In his exposition as a hero, he is to be viewed in accordance with heroic ideals of violence. Yet, his motivations and resolutions of the conflicts in which he participates do not reflect the image of a martial hero. In his final standoff with Kronos he chooses a distinctly passive solution which denies him the artificial title of “hero” from the prophecy, and he later declines the opportunity to become a god himself when it is offered to him (Riordan 336, 351). Further, when his story seems to follow a mythic hero’s pattern, such as when he pursues invulnerability like Achilles, Percy’s resolution of the myth’s storyline avoids allegorical tragedy (and in a later installment in Riordan’s universe the power is stripped away harmlessly). That he is allowed to survive despite taking a path which led to the demise of a hero before him suggests that the young hero is rewarded for not falling into the trappings of self-serving classic heroism. By adapting the final outcomes from what readers of original myth might have come to expect, Riordan more accurately appeals to the “concerns of the adolescent audience” (Leighton 66). Though Percy Jackson may well fit in with the militant, guardian-like archetype of the modern hero found in a comic book or action movie, his character represents a denial of the core ideal of the classic heroes which form his narrative: veneration. Thus, his story expresses a movement away from ancient interpretations of the classics and toward their repurposing within a modern context, wherein motivation rather than action primarily comprises a hero.

The different perspectives and representations of heroism presented by Odysseus, Telemachus, and Percy Jackson reflect the changing views of the associated culture about what a hero must represent. As such, the model of the hero changes in correlation with time to represent

the evolving ideals of moral rightness. Though the *Odyssey* is expected to be Odysseus' hero-story, in truth we learn more explicitly about his son's ideas of heroism in the text than those of the king. Telemachus hears about his father's heroic deeds from Menelaus, whom Odysseus had saved along with the other Greeks while inside the Trojan horse. Though Menelaus recounts the story with great reverence for Odysseus, Telemachus is less than heartened by the story, saying "all this makes it worse! My father's courage could not save his life, even if he had had a heart of iron" (Homer 4.291-293). In his view, in order to be a hero Odysseus must also be able to save himself from danger rather than sacrifice his life for the sake of his people. This perspective comes from the prince's own experiences at home in Ithaca. Being unable to rid his home of his mother's suitors, Telemachus feels he is incapable of becoming a man, and therefore he cannot be a hero either. From his first introduction, the prince reluctantly longs for Odysseus to come and take control of the suitors, while he himself merely sits among them daydreaming (Homer 1.113-118). Telemachus does not yet understand his need for his father, as he is even reluctant to claim Odysseus as such. Even later when faced with his father for the first time, Telemachus "resists the recognition until Odysseus acknowledges his failings as a father, insisting he is not a god and that, for better or worse, he is the only Odysseus Telemachos [sic] will ever know" (Williams 227). Yet, in meeting with the goddess Athena, he becomes aware of the goal which connects them and is empowered with the drive to take charge of the war within his home. His pursuit of Odysseus, sometimes referred to autonomously as the 'Telemachy,' shows his journey to becoming such a hero while quite literally following in his father's footsteps. Through this journey he must reconcile the stories of his father's past and the absent memory of Odysseus with the problems he faces in the present in order to protect the future of a kingdom he himself will someday rule. This journey emphasizes that family and legacy are important aspects of

heroism. The combination of legacy and heroic power creates Homer's final image of Telemachus in battle, wherein he pledges to "bring no shame onto [Odysseus'] family" with his ability to fight (Homer 24.512-513). Despite wrestling with his own conceptions of heroism, Telemachus finally resolves to follow his father's lead as a violent martial hero.

The model of the hero as it is perceived by Percy is similar to that of Telemachus in their somewhat naïve views of heroism. When Percy meets Hades' family in the underworld, Persephone remarks that the young hero is "awfully brave" and asks her husband, "are you sure we can't let this little hero go?" only to be denied and react "indifferently," immediately turning to flippant thoughts of her morning breakfast (Riordan 125-126). Persephone's perspective initially reflects the old view of the hero as a primarily courageous figure. Though the intention here is humorous, the sense of irony in her dismissive attitude is indicative of the inconsistent nature of the gods, who as direct representations of Western culture have purportedly spent hundreds of years changing their personalities to match it. The interaction also serves to prove Telemachus' earlier thought that courage alone cannot save the hero's life, despite the trait being so highly valued by older and supposedly wiser figures like gods and kings. Yet, Telemachus only briefly and in an outburst of hopelessness adheres to this thought, calling Odysseus his "heroic father" merely forty lines later (Homer 4.329). He is still a boy, not yet a hero in his own right, and thus he models his view of heroism after that which he is presented. Percy himself initially agrees with the idea that bravery equates to heroism by allowing himself to be hopeful that "brave, beautiful Persephone" would be his own hero in that moment, and to believe that his own bravery will be a sufficient qualifier for her to reward him with such grace (Riordan 126). While he doesn't outright deny the merit of bravery, the ironic

sense of the text suggests to the reader that perhaps the brave heroes of the past are not meant to be emulated by new-age heroes like Percy in order for the modern hero to succeed.

Still concerning epic conventions, the use of prophetic language plays a crucial part in the *Odyssey* and other epic poetry, though its expression is often more conceptual than literal. In Book I, Telemachus envisions his father coming in and clearing out the suitors from his home in an image which directly parallels how the true ending of the poem comes to fruition (Homer 1.114). This envisioning is notably framed by interactions with Athena, who serves as patron to both Telemachus and Odysseus throughout the epic. In fact, directly after the prince prophesies Odysseus' return, he immediately looks up to see his patron goddess, subconsciously recognizing her as Athena even though she appears in disguise (Homer 1.119). This scene is an example of conventional use of prophecy, wherein godly interactions endow characters with direct knowledge about the future. Though the realization of both the ending of the poem and the recognition of Athena are subconscious to Telemachus, they are presented to the reader in this way to provide clear expectations as to what will happen in this tale.

In its own sense, the use of prophecy in *The Last Olympian* takes a multitude of forms within the narrative. It is used in its typical sense of depicting the will of some supernatural and insurmountable force, wherein though the specific words of the prophecy may be interpreted differently, there is a doubtless truth to them in the end. For this book, the Great Prophecy is used to create a sense of urgency and anxiety for both Percy and his readers. The prophecy tells that:

A half-blood of the eldest gods
shall reach sixteen against all odds.
And see the world in endless sleep,

The hero's soul, cursed blade shall reap.

A single choice shall end his days.

Olympus to preserve or raze. (Riordan 55)

Percy frets throughout his journey about this prophecy, questioning his own purpose, worthiness, and abilities after hearing its six lines. Other characters such as Annabeth also worry for him, claiming that he would have been better off not knowing his fate because “all it did was scare [him],” and he “runs away” when he is scared, so she is concerned that their mission may be jeopardized by Percy's knowing what will happen in the end (Riordan 75). It is not only mortals, but also the gods who have anxieties surrounding the prophecy, as their home of Mount Olympus is endangered by its final prediction. Hades takes it upon himself to attempt to change the prophecy from its focus on Percy and rather wants the demigod child it speaks of to be his own son, Nico. Even so, despite each character's own struggles with its meaning, the prophecy unfolds in an unexpected manner at the novel's end. Despite worrying about saving the lives of his friends and the whole world, Percy's most self-regarding concern about his fate lies in its fourth and fifth lines, “The hero's soul, cursed blade shall reap...A single choice shall end his days,” which is a sure sign that said hero must die for the prophecy to be completed (55). Though the prophecy remains unfailing, in the end it is Luke who fulfills these two lines and takes his own life to banish the spirit of Kronos which is possessing his body, making Luke the “hero” to be spoken of despite being a constant antagonist in the series.

Not only does Riordan deny the conventions of heroism by endowing such a character with the title of “hero”, but also shifts the classical use of prophecy to a more modern format. Whereas in antiquity prophecies created a sense of inevitability and guided expectations for what will happen at the end of a story, modern writing uses such a device to set up a twist in the

narrative's anticipated direction. The prophecy in *The Last Olympian* sets out to be a classical example, wherein the characters all have a literal and predictable interpretation of its predictions. Then, at the last minute, when a new detail or perspective shifts that interpretation, the convention becomes more modern. In addition to serving as an engaging narrative device, this usage creates an observable representation of the shift from traditional use of epic conventions to the adapted versions of modern fantasy.

It is also curious to note the role of the gods in relation to the prophesying of both the *Odyssey* and *The Last Olympian*. In the classic model, any form of foreshadowing that can be read as prophecy is commonly spoken by the gods as being fact. Even by other gods, it is said that "none can sway or check the will of Zeus," being the final say in all matters as the god of the highest power (Homer 5.103). The gods control the heroes and, as such, they have no real risk whether or not they succeed or fail. When Athena a few lines earlier had been ranting about the woes of poor Odysseus, Zeus simply smiles at her and reminds her that all of this had been planned by her and the other gods and calms her with prophecy (Homer 5.7-43). As such, for the gods (and by extension in the view of the reader), any anxieties which the gods do express about the fate of their favorite hero can be quelled using prophecy. In *The Last Olympian*, prophecy serves the opposite purpose: it creates anxiety which then drives characters to enact the will of the gods. Even so, the gods seem to have little to no control over what happens in the wake of a prophecy. They are mainly presented to the mortals who play a part in their resolutions, but the gods are also held captive by their premonitions. In Percy's world, as Dionysus reluctantly admits, being "manifestations of [Western] culture...the gods *need* heroes. They always have. Otherwise we would not keep you annoying little brats around" (Riordan 268-269; emphasis in

original). This detail further binds the immortal gods to their mortal children, and as such it inextricably connects them as representatives of ancient and modern culture.

Being inextricably tied to mortals, the gods naturally tend to interfere with their lives in order to assert their godly will upon humanity. While many of the gods are presently waging a losing battle against the unstoppable titan, Typhon, Hades refuses to join his siblings in the fight. Instead, he hides in his underworld palace, distracted with his own family drama amidst wife, sister/mother-in-law, demigod son, and the memory of a long-lost mortal love, Nico's mother. Maria di Angelo was killed by Zeus as punishment for Hades breaking their agreement to not have children with mortals anymore. This agreement in itself was a failed attempt to control the inevitable prophecy, as they knew that the child would be of the "eldest gods," Hades, Zeus, or Poseidon (Riordan 55). Hades' own desire to control the prophecy goes further still than this. His plan had been to kill Percy, who was nearly sixteen, and therefore delay the beginning of the Great Prophecy until Nico turned sixteen and, after "four more years of training," he could be the one to fulfill its lines (Riordan 125). As the father of the hero and orchestrator of the preservation of Olympus, he would become "king of the gods," thus avenging the death of Maria through his own veneration and superiority over his brothers (Riordan 125). And yet, even with such a cleverly orchestrated plan, he is bested by the young Percy and the prophecy proceeds as expected. Hades' preoccupation with the past and the grudge he holds against the other gods for hurting the mortals he loves hold him back from joining the fight for the future and instead keep him grounded in the past. His attempts to change and control fate are fruitless because the progression of time is inevitable, and therefore the only way for Hades to receive the veneration he desires is to team up with Nico and the other demigods and gods.

The many dream-visions through which Percy learns about Hades' backstory emphasize the god's disconnect from the present moment and its eminent danger. As such, the abstract conception of prophecy can also be seen in Percy's story as part of the motif of dreams. Dreams are used throughout the series as a narrative device, showing demigods visions of things happening elsewhere in the present, in the past, and sometimes glimpses of the future. This device alters the timeline of the story, supernaturally showing readers a perspective that they otherwise wouldn't be permitted to view. Arguably, *The Last Olympian* embodies the true American spirit in the sense that these dreams create a rushed sense of time, forming a persistent and seamless storyline throughout the action of the book (Glasner 160). As the saga is told strictly from Percy's perspective, this ensures that even while he sleeps there is never a moment of inaction. For instance, amidst the battle of New York City, being the quintessential American setting as well as Percy's hometown, the heroes are ordered to get some rest in a brief reprieve from the fighting (Riordan 205). Yet while Percy's body may rest, his mind cannot; he dreams of imperative plot developments involving his friend Nico's familial conflicts and history and their ties to the war. There is truly no rest for our young hero; once this final installment of his adventures begins – abruptly interrupting his summer vacation and his connection with a potential love interest – he is unable to stop until the war has been fought and won. These frequent dream interjections often serve the narrative structure as connections to the perspectives of other characters which otherwise would be inaccessible from the first person limited point-of-view. When they take the form of flashbacks, Percy's dream visions serve to elucidate the motivations of certain characters through crucial backstories, again complicating the sense of time within the story. While keeping within the prophetic convention of providing only specific

and plot-propelling details to our protagonist, the nature of these dreams also moves Percy's story into a modern use of prophecy as a form of cryptic enlightenment.

Thus, we are left with a final image of Percy and the world which the author shapes him within. This young hero has not quite escaped his mythic origins (and he likely never will, if Riordan has a say in the matter), yet he has created a new space for himself within that space. As half-god and half-mortal his identity is split between the ancient and the contemporary, and he is forced to reconcile those halves in order to stop the conflict between the even-more-ancient titans and the gods. He doesn't do it alone, of course; the personal journeys of his friends and allies within their families also work to set events in motion. The most profound of these allies is Hestia, to whom he returns in the final moments of the novel at Camp Half-Blood: "As I looked at the fire, I saw a little girl in a brown dress tending the flames. She winked at me with red glowing eyes. No one else seemed to notice her, but I realized maybe she preferred it that way" (Riordan 379). Hestia's sense of humility, projected onto Percy, is what truly establishes a victory for the new generation. She, like him, is both ancient and young all at once. As such, her example is inspiring for the young demigod, who learns to step back from the spotlight he has more or less enjoyed throughout the entire series and exercise the power of yielding.

The Greeks are often regarded as the fathers of Western culture; in that sense, we can aptly view America as their child whose new perspectives and experiences must shape their view of reality. In the case of literature, it is adaptation which bridges the gap between "father" and "child" in order to translate the idealized concepts and conventions of the past into the development of a less-than-ideal new age. Riordan's recreations of classic myth work by simultaneously "activating familiar archetype narratives...and placing them in contemporary cultural and social geography to deliver a message tailored for younger readers" (Leighton

71). His writing is not necessarily unique amongst a plethora of video games, movies, television shows, books, and so on which take as their source material the classic Greek myths – these stories are virtually embedded in our subconscious minds. Yet, there is a definite worth in Riordan’s accomplishments with *Percy Jackson and the Olympians*. Percy is, for all intents and purposes, an epic hero of a generation. Within his world of fantasy, we see a mirror of our own reality, and in his story and those of his friends we find pieces of our own childhood experiences that – perhaps someday – can serve to provoke and inspire us to change our own world.

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