

Vital Signs: Odysseus' Grazed Palms in *Odyssey* 5

Odysseus sustains only a single wound that breaks the skin within the *Odyssey*: before washing up on Scheria, he scrapes his hands grasping the nearby rocks (5.532-6). In this paper, I will argue that non-fatal wounds in the *Odyssey* confer a transformative vitality upon the body; by creating a visible trace upon their subject, Odysseus' grazed palms reaffirm that his body persists in the mortal world. The marking of the body counteracts the omnipresent threats of drowning and of immortality, both of which cause humans to vanish without material remains.

I begin by considering two interactions between Odysseus' body and "clingy" materials: the ball of wax he uses against the Sirens and Ino's veil. These objects emphasize the body as a material presence with which other objects can interact; once Odysseus touches them, the physical vivacity of his body is renewed, if temporarily. Similarly, the contact between Odysseus and the Scherian rocks, which Homer compares to pebbles dislodged by an octopus' clinging tentacles, achieves a more concrete result: a wound, marking the moment Odysseus finally escapes from the ocean and reenters the mortal realm. I reflect on how the lively potential of surface (and therefore non-heroic) wounds might reconfigure our understanding of Odysseus' scar, which stands as the mark of a decidedly heroic, but past, event.

I close by positing that an affinity between landscape and the body contributes to this vital potential within Odysseus' scraped palms. In particular, I argue that the insistent presence of the sea, along with the danger of drowning, transforms the range of events that can affect the body. Existing midway between the oblivion of drowning and the perfect but unnatural stasis of immortality, the damaged (and damageable) body becomes a newly powerful sign of heroic survival.